

*My
Brother's
Crown*

MINDY STARNS CLARK
and LESLIE GOULD



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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MY BROTHER'S CROWN

Copyright © 2015 Mindy Starns Clark and Leslie Gould

Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Clark, Mindy Starns.

My brother's crown / Mindy Starns Clark and Leslie Gould.

pages ; cm. — (Cousins of the Dove ; Book 1)

ISBN 978-0-7369-6288-9 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7369-6289-6 (eBook)

1. Family-owned business enterprises—Fiction. 2. France—History—17th century—Fiction.

I. Gould, Leslie, — II. Title.

PS3603.L366M9 2015

813'.6—dc23

2015015758

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Printed in the United States of America

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 /LB-JH/ 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Mindy

For the founders and many members
of the Starnes/Starns Triennial Association

You keep our history alive—
and our family connected.



Leslie

For Anaïs Edom,
a wonderful young woman of faith and strength

Thank you for your dear friendship
through these many years.



*Love and faithfulness meet together;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.*

PSALM 85:10



HISTORICAL NOTES

*A*s authors we always strive to make our stories accurate, but when it comes to three-hundred-year-old history, sometimes even the most reliable sources disagree on the facts. In those cases, we have been forced to choose which version of the facts to use. Thus, though some elements of the history presented in this novel may be questioned, these facts are, to the best of our knowledge, correct—or as correct as information from the seventeenth century can be.

There is no official record that King Louis XIV and Madame Maintenon ever married, but it's generally agreed upon that they did. However, speculation as to when they were married is varied and includes dates in 1683, 1685, and 1686. Our research has placed the date of their wedding in the fall of 1685.

All of the characters in our story are products of our imaginations except for Louis XIV, Madame Maintenon, and Duchesse de Navailles (Suzanne). In our tale, we have stated that Suzanne's mother, Madame de Neuillant, was the godmother of Madame Maintenon, though some sources indicate that Suzanne was the godmother instead.

The persecution of the Huguenots varied from region to region and from time to time. The essence of the persecution we depict in our story is true, although the exact locations and times are fictitious. Statistics vary, but it's believed that as many as 400,000 Huguenots fled the country, and though many were assisted in their escape by others, the network of sympathizers depicted in this story is fictional, as is the Persecution Pamphlet.

This novel deals with a period of history when French Huguenots,

also known as French Calvinists, were being persecuted for their faith. Though this was led by King Louis XIV in the name of the Catholic church, there is evidence that his true motives for this persecution were not so much about spiritual or denominational matters as they were about economics and power. We have striven to adhere to the facts of the period, which, while often brutal, also show that there were indeed acts of kindness and mercy by adherents to the Catholic faith, many of whom were sympathetic to the Huguenots' plight.



PROLOGUE

France
10 April 1685

The boy stuck his head out the side window of the carriage and peered back at his home as it grew ever smaller in the distance. When he could see it no more, he withdrew and plopped back against the seat beside his two older sisters. Though Maman had called this their grand adventure, he knew that was not true. It was an escape, which was quite a different matter.

The trip was miserable, almost from the beginning. They covered a good distance that first day, but the next morning it started to rain, and as they traveled along a steep mountain pass, their horse slipped and injured his leg. They left him with an understanding farmer and were forced to continue on foot, carrying what they could and leaving their carriage and the rest of their belongings behind.

Papa said they should avoid the roads as much as possible, but he had no knowledge of the local footpaths, and as time passed it felt to the boy as if they were wandering with no direction. Finally, they came upon a village where they were deeply relieved to find a small Huguenot temple, one where they might seek refuge.

The pastor was kind. He provided food and a place to sleep, and he and Papa talked late into the night. The next day, the family set off again.

Still doubtful of his father's navigational abilities, the boy was surprised as the morning wore on and Papa seemed to be doing much better than the day before. He had some sort of pamphlet with him, a little booklet that must have come from the pastor. It looked like a simple collection of poems and illustrations, but judging by how Papa kept referring to it, it had to be some sort of guide for their journey. When the boy asked Papa about it, he tucked it away, ignoring the question.

They walked for three more days, staying off the roads and sticking mostly to field tracks when available, where they were less likely to be spotted by dragoons or informers. Thanks to the mysterious pamphlet, Papa seemed to know which strangers along the way would be willing to feed and house them, as well as which roads and paths to take and where to go once they reached their destination.

When they finally got to Lyon, they made their way under cover of darkness through the city and across the river Saône to a warehouse. They knocked softly on the back door, just once, and after a moment were greeted by a tall, lean man who seemed to have been expecting them.

"Allons," he barked gruffly.

He led them through a dark passageway by candlelight to what looked like a storage room. As the family of five waited among the shelves, the man moved to a side wall and pushed some sort of lever near the floor. As he did, a panel at the far end of the room began to slide upward. To the boy's surprise, the opening revealed a tiny chamber—a "vault," as Papa had said—with a table, chairs, a single bed, a small bureau, and various stacks of supplies.

As they stepped forward into the space, the man pointed out that there was enough food and drink to sustain them for two days, extra bedding to make pallets on the floor, a chamber pot in the front corner, and an oil lamp on the table. There was also quills, ink, paper, and a Bible for their use, though he warned them that the lamp held just one hour's worth of fuel, and that they were to light it only when absolutely necessary. The warehouse was a place of business during the day, he told them sternly, and they could not risk anyone spotting a glow

along the floor seam of what was supposed to be the ordinary back wall of a supply room.

For the next two days, the family remained in hiding, spending most of their time in total darkness. All they could do was whisper and doze and try to stay strong for one another. With no windows, the only way for them to judge the hour was by the noises outside the panel door. When things seemed to spring to life, they knew it was morning. When, much later, the place grew quiet again, they felt sure it was evening.

They lit the lamp several times during the days, very briefly, just long enough to dole out food, and then they extinguished it again and ate in total darkness. The boy used those brief times of light to draw on the paper, one of his favorite pastimes. His hand moving from ink pot to the page and back again, he worked on a sketch of all they had left behind—their beautiful house, the stables out back, the big yard with his favorite tree, the one with a fat, knotted rope that hung down as a swing.

Papa lit the lamp and kept it on a bit longer in the evenings so he could read to them from the Bible. The boy found comfort in the words and in the soothing tones of his father's deep voice. He also appreciated that Maman did not stop him from drawing even during their worship time. He continued to embellish his picture, adding in a squirrel here, a bird there, until it was time again to extinguish the light and he was forced to put it away.

As the hours dragged by, all the boy could think of was getting out. He was so weary of this place, of its utter darkness. Of the constant need for silence. Of the stench from the chamber pot. Mostly, he was weary of wondering whether they were going to make it to freedom or end up imprisoned.

Or maybe dead.

He was also scared of the next phase of their escape. According to Papa, once they were released from this hiding place, they would be moved to another, even smaller one, stashed in narrow, hidden chambers under the floorboards of a special wagon, one designed for just this purpose. From the outside, it would look like a regular wagon, its

driver bound for Switzerland. Only once they were across the border, however, would they be safe to climb back out again.

Of course, that was if all went as planned. If the driver did as he promised. If the people here could actually be trusted, which seemed to be the biggest risk of all. The boy had heard his parents whispering about it deep in the night, when they thought the children were sleeping. They talked about how the bounties for fleeing Huguenots had grown quite high, and how sometimes these supposed helpers were actually traitors in the end, turning over the Huguenots in their care to dragoons for a handsome fee.

That possibility was all the boy could think about when, at the end of the second day, he heard a rustling and a *thunk*, and then suddenly a quiet *whoosh* as the wall panel began to rise. There on the other side, in the supply room, stood the same man who had put them here two days ago. Again he held a candle—which seemed so very bright this time—and all around him came a rush of fresh air, sweet and life giving and so tangible the boy could almost taste it.

Papa stood, and the rest of them followed suit.

The man began to speak, his brows furrowed. Had they had enough food? Were they ready to get out of the vault and get on with their trip? They all nodded eagerly.

The man said they had ten minutes to stretch their legs and gather their things and then he would return to retrieve them and it would be time to go. “But the pamphlet stays here,” he added sharply, pointing toward the small bureau. The boy watched as Papa pulled from his pocket the little booklet that seemed to have been their guide and set it there as directed.

Papa relit the lamp once the man left, and then the family went about straightening the vault and packing their belongings. Moving to the bureau, the boy slid open the top drawer and pulled out his sketch. Glancing down at the image of the house, the yard, the rope swing, it struck him that whether this next part of their journey brought them to prison or to freedom, one thing was certain: They would never be home again. That knowledge filled him with tremendous grief.

He folded the page and tucked it into his pocket. As he pushed

the drawer shut, the pamphlet atop the bureau caught his eye, and he could not resist taking a closer look. Titled *A Collection of Verse for the Encouragement of Young Men and Women*, it had been written by someone named Father Écoute. The boy flipped through the pages, looking for the maps and instructions and such it seemed to contain. Instead, it was just a simple collection of poems and drawings—and the drawings were not even that good. He was studying a poorly rendered image of a rooster, wondering why it looked so odd, when he heard the noise of someone coming. He quickly put it down again.

“Time to go,” the man said from the doorway.

Papa extinguished the lamp as he quietly addressed the children. “This last stretch will be the hardest,” he told them with fear in his eyes even as he tried to reassure them with his words, “but it will be worth it in the end.”

“*Allez!*” the man said impatiently. He led them back down the narrow passageway toward the door. As they went, the boy was intoxicated by the air. He wanted to run, to play, to yell. They were finally free! And they could see. The passageway was dark, yes, but not the kind of darkness they had endured for the past two days. This was a dark tempered by the moonlight streaming in through a high window, where he could actually see his hand in front of his face.

Spotting the exit up ahead, his joy began to fade. They were free now from the vault, yes, but for how long? What if this was, as his Maman had whispered to Papa late last night, only a trap?

When they reached the door to the outside, the man paused, one hand on the knob. Then he slowly pulled it open and waved them through, toward their future.

If, indeed, they had a future at all.



CHAPTER ONE

Renee

*M*y transformation took place in a gas station bathroom off I-64 about five miles east of Richmond. Despite the cracked mirror and dim lighting, the acts of putting on makeup and styling my hair were the easy parts. The hard part was trying not to let my bare feet touch the floor as I changed from jeans, T-shirt, and sneakers to a white wrap-style blouse, gray pencil skirt, and black pumps. The obedient granddaughter in me wanted to show up at the bank looking the best I could, but the scientist in me knew the floor was always the dirtiest part of a public bathroom and could be a veritable stew of *E. coli*, coliform, staph, strep, rotavirus, and even MRSA.

Stifling a shudder, I managed to wriggle out of one set of clothes and into another, one side at a time while balancing on the opposite still-shoed foot. It wasn't pretty, and I was practically out of breath by the time I was dressed, but somehow I managed. If I were ever in this situation again, I decided as I took one last look in the mirror and smoothed back an errant lock of dark brown hair, I would take the time to find somewhere a bit more upscale first.

Soon I was back on the interstate in my rental car, one glance at the

clock confirming I was still on schedule. Nana Talbot was a stickler for punctuality, whether the inevitable delays of travel were a part of the equation or not, so I was glad my flight from Seattle had arrived almost half an hour early. That bought me even more time to pick up the car and drive into town, including my stop for a quick lunch and a round of clothing gymnastics in that ceramic-tiled petri dish.

Now that I was back in Virginia, my mind inevitably went to thoughts of my grandfather, who passed away last November, just seven months ago. This was the first time I'd returned since the funeral, and though I was eager to see my grandmother, a big part of me hadn't been ready to come back just yet. My grief was still so strong, and I knew that being here in Granddad's world without him in it would only make things hurt more. At least I had a busy day ahead of me, which would provide a good distraction.

I'd been on a plane since eleven o'clock last night and had only managed to doze a little in transit, but there would be no rest for the weary. Between now and any hope of a bed, I had several important tasks that had to be accomplished, starting with this first one, a visit to the Richmond National Bank and Trust to meet up with my grandmother and some guy from her insurance company, a slick and weaselly type, no doubt. In this area, the Talbot name brought on an enormous amount of bowing and scraping—and attempted shystering—at least to those familiar with the family paper-and-printing empire.

Out in Seattle, on the other hand, even though I worked in a branch of the same company and was a member of the same family, my connection rarely registered. There, the Talbot name wasn't even enough to get me an extra shot in my latte at the company cafeteria. Not that I cared about that sort of thing—quite the opposite, in fact. I had a distinct aversion to being in the spotlight and was more than happy to fly under the radar whenever possible.

Traffic was heavy but moving, and in the end it took me less time to reach downtown than it did to find a parking place once there. At least I still had a good thirteen minutes to spare by the time I set out on foot, which meant I should arrive approximately ten minutes early. To me, that was an eon—though in Nana's world, of course, ten minutes

early *was* on time—unless going to a social event, in which case “on time” was twenty minutes late.

Passing the dark glass of a storefront as I walked, I caught sight of my reflection, though it took a moment for me to realize what I was seeing. That tall woman in the professional-looking outfit with her straight hair hanging smooth and loose to her shoulders, her features enhanced with the just right amount of makeup, was *me*. Back home, I lived in lab coats over jeans and casual tops, my hair ponytailed, my face bare save for the occasional dab of ChapStick on my lips. But I couldn't do that here, not around my grandmother.

The only reason I even owned cosmetics in the first place and knew how to use them was because of Nana, who had insisted on charm school for each of her grandchildren upon the occasion of their thirteenth birthdays to mold them into “proper young men and women”—whether they wanted to go or not. I was just a few months older than my cousin Danielle, so at least we'd been able to attend the month-long summer session together. She and I had always gotten along beautifully despite the differences in our personalities. Where I was all science and facts and don't-rock-the-boat, she was art and spontaneity and rock-the-boat-till-it-tips-so-we-can-go-swimming. I still remembered how, during the girls' beauty lessons, the ever-artistic Danielle had taken the application of eye shadow to a whole new level, combining ten colors or more before she was done. A true creative spirit, she was genuinely puzzled when scolded for having used the makeup to give herself “Jezebel eyes,” which was apparently worse than having no eyes at all.

My two brothers—one older, one younger—had each been forced to go as well, and though they had fought it, the lessons seemed to stick in the end as they were transformed from rowdy boys to polite young men. That made them a huge hit with the ladies, especially their eventual spouses. Though I, too, had emerged from the experience in a somewhat new and improved version—well, except for the cosmetics part, which only came into play when I was with Nana or had to do something very public, like present a paper—my good manners had not made me a hot commodity with the opposite sex, much less helped me land a mate.

Then again, even if proper etiquette had been for my brothers the behavioral equivalent of pheromones, it hadn't done a thing for me. I'd been a chemistry geek in high school, college, and grad school, and these days I spent more time flirting with leuco dyes or teasing out thermochromatic liquid crystals than I did with eligible men.

Correction. Quite a few of my colleagues were male, straight, and single, so technically they fit the term. But none of them were what might be considered viable options. On the rare occasion when I did actually cross paths with someone interesting, I was usually too inhibited to act on it. My job as a research chemist offered much in the way of intellectual stimulation and professional fulfillment, but it also gave me a good place to hide.

I reached the bank and again caught my reflection. Good thing the guys in the lab couldn't see me now, I decided as I broke the image by pushing open the door, or they might actually realize I was a girl.

Stepping inside, I spotted Nana right away, perfectly coiffed and dressed in a white linen suit, standing across the broad marble lobby and speaking with a brawny-looking fellow with neatly clipped sandy brown hair, wearing a suit and tie. Probably the head of bank security. As I advanced toward them, I was glad to have arrived ahead of the insurance man, as this would give my grandmother and me a few minutes alone. We hadn't been together since Granddad's funeral, and I wanted a minute to reconnect privately.

"Darling," Nana said, turning to greet me with a warm smile.

We embraced, and I closed my eyes as I breathed in the familiar woody-floral scent of her Calèche perfume. Though I had grown up on the other side of the country and spent only a few weeks here in Virginia every summer, somehow this was the smell of home.

We pulled apart, but before I could ask how she was doing, she turned and placed a hand on the security guard's muscular arm.

"Renee, I'd like to introduce Blake Keller of Eagleton Trust Insurance. Blake, this is my granddaughter, Renee Talbot."

I blinked, startled. *This* was the insurance agent? Whatever I'd been expecting, this mountain of a man was certainly not it. Trying not to let

my surprise show, I met his gaze, only to realize that he looked equally surprised in return.

"The scientist?" he said, his tone almost doubtful.

"Yes. Nice to meet you." I offered a hand, but it took a moment for him to respond.

"Sorry," he said as he gripped it and gave a firm shake. "I..." His arms dropping back to his sides, he added, "Never mind. Nice to meet you too."

"Is something wrong?" Nana asked him. "You seem startled."

He gave an embarrassed laugh. "No. It's just that when you told me about your granddaughter Renee, the brilliant research scientist only three years on the job and already such a rising star..." His voice trailed off as he turned back toward me and added, "Well, let's just say I envisioned a different sort of look. My apologies."

I suppose I should have been flattered by what he'd obviously intended as a compliment, but somehow his assumptions seemed more egregious than mine. Had it really been that much of a stretch to align the body with the brains? Couldn't a woman be smart *and* attractive? Granted, the mad scientist look he'd been expecting was probably closer to my day-to-day appearance than this was, but still. I doubted he would have drawn the same conclusions were I a man.

Feeling uncharacteristically emboldened, I met his eyes. "Don't worry about it. I left my test tubes, safety goggles, and frumpy clothes outside." Before he could respond, I couldn't help but add, "Right next to your snake oil, actuarial tables, and scare tactics."

"Renee!" Nana scolded.

Blake just laughed. "Touché. Though you're probably thinking of a different department than mine. I'm in Security and Recovery. We don't deal much in snake oil."

I hesitated, our repartee interrupted by his surprising words. "Security and Recovery? For an insurance company?"

"Eagleton Trust, dear," Nana said. "They're one of the world's leading underwriters of fine art, among other things. The Persecution Pamphlet is insured through them."

“Okay.” I turned back to Blake. “But what are you doing here?”

He shrugged. “Just providing a little extra security while the pamphlet’s out of the vault. Protecting our interests.”

I thought about that for a moment. Four years ago, the historical document Nana and I had come here today to retrieve had been appraised at more than a million dollars. I guess it made sense that the insurer might want to keep a close eye on it, especially when in transit.

The three of us were interrupted by the bank’s manager, a smartly dressed woman with silver hair, blue eyes, and a melodious Southern voice. “Mrs. Talbot? You folks are welcome to come on back now if you like.”

Glad to get things moving again, I took Nana’s arm and we followed the lady, Blake trailing behind. She led us past the vault of safety deposit boxes and down a labyrinth of hallways until we came to a separate section. This area was protected by a sophisticated digital entry system and housed a specific type of safety deposit box storage, the kind rated by insurance companies as HPR for “highly protected risk.” Climate- and humidity-controlled, with UV-safe lighting and extra security features, this art protection vault contained double-locked boxes that ranged from very small to quite huge, inside of which the wealthy of Richmond could safely keep their most valuable art, antiques, and documents when not in use.

Nana handed Blake her key, and then she and I watched as he and the manager attended to the locks. Moments later the small door was open, and Blake was sliding out a rectangular metal container.

The manager showed us to a viewing room and then excused herself as Nana and I took a seat at the table and set our purses on the floor. Blake moved into place across from us, leaning forward and holding out the container with both hands, as if he were a coachman presenting a glass slipper on a royal pillow to Cinderella. With a smile, Nana lifted the lid and removed from inside the two items that were its entire contents: a pair of white cotton gloves and a pale green, custom-made case about the size and shape of a VHS videotape holder.

“I’ll be right outside if you need me,” he said, and then he left the room, taking the metal container with him.

Glad to be alone at last, I ignored the case for a moment to speak softly to Nana.

“Are you doing okay? I know this must be emotional for you.”

She blinked, looking away for a moment. “It is, but I’m fine, dear. Really. And it does feel good to be finishing what your grandfather started.”

“Agreed.” I gave her a reassuring smile as I slipped an arm around her slender shoulders for a quick hug.

“As for this,” she said, the sparkle returning to her eye, “I’d just like to take a quick look to make sure it’s okay. You can examine it more closely once we’re home.”

“Oh, I will,” I said. There was something I wanted to look into, an idea that had come to me when I was thinking about the pamphlet late last night during my flight.

I pulled on the gloves as she carefully set the case on the table in front of me. Chemically stable inside and out, this preservation-grade polyethylene holder featured an alkaline buffer and a zeolite molecular trap, with a pH-appropriate, acid- and lignin-free interior. I only knew this because I was part of the team that designed it, four years ago, to hold one very special document. I’d still been in grad school, working on my doctorate at the time, but my grandfather had generously invited me to be a part of the process because of my field of study.

My gloved fingers were practically trembling now as I opened the case wide, reached inside for the familiar document, and held it up so both Nana and I could see it. Known as the Persecution Pamphlet, it was a mere eight pages long but contained a history beyond measure.

The cream-colored pamphlet had been created in 1685, and though it looked like a simple collection of French poems and drawings, it actually contained within its pages a coded guide that showed the way out of France for Huguenots fleeing the country in the face of religious persecution. At the time, multiple copies of the pamphlet had been printed and quietly distributed by a small group of Huguenot sympathizers to those in need, and the information it contained had helped dozens—perhaps even hundreds—of Huguenots make their way to safety. But in order to protect the identities of the Good Samaritans

identified within, all copies had ultimately been re-collected and destroyed—except for one, which had been intentionally saved and passed down to future generations through the Talbot family. That one copy was what I now held in my own hands. Preserved for several centuries, it was a tangible reminder of the struggles the Huguenots endured for the sake of their faith under the reign of King Louis XIV.

“Looks good,” I said.

“It does indeed,” Nana replied, her eyes glowing. “Your grandfather would have been so pleased.”

Though early details were sketchy, the pamphlet had ostensibly been created by one of our forebears or at least someone close to them and then passed down through the Talbot family, father to eldest son, for something like eleven generations over a span of more than three hundred years. It had become the property of my grandfather upon the death of his father back in the 1950s, but from the moment Granddad inherited it, he let it be known that the pattern would be broken upon his death. Rather than pass it down to my Uncle Finley, the eldest of his three sons and the father of my cousin Danielle, Granddad announced that he would be donating it to a museum instead. He felt that the time had come for the pamphlet to belong not just to one person at a time but to the whole world.

Uncle Finley agreed with the decision, and together he and Granddad chose the most appropriate recipient, the National Museum of American History, which was part of the Smithsonian in Washington, DC. Now the time had finally come to add the pamphlet to their collection.

In three days, at a Saturday ceremony during our annual Talbot family reunion, this priceless document was going to be handed over to the museum as a gift from the descendants of Emmanuel Talbot, the first of our male ancestors to come to America in 1704.

“What do you think, dear?” Nana asked. “Does it seem to have maintained its integrity since the last time you saw it?”

Before answering that question, I took a closer look, eyeing the front and back and then carefully opening it just a bit to turn the pages one by one till I reached the end. Its few small flaws had been there

before, and otherwise it looked great, exactly the same as when it was authenticated and locked away in this vault four years ago.

“Seems fine. There’s no degradation that I can tell. Between our custom, state-of-the-art casing and the controlled atmosphere of the storage vault, it looks like it’s held up really well.”

“I never doubted that it would.”

Finished with it for now, I returned the pamphlet to its casing and sealed it shut, and then we were on our way.

We found Blake standing not far from the wall of double-locked boxes, his stance wide and his hands clasped behind his back. Looking at him now, I supposed he was quite handsome. *If you went for that type.*

“Ready to go?” he asked, flashing us an absurdly perfect smile.

“Not so fast,” I said, for some reason feeling a surge of irritation. Who knew what kind of damage this behemoth’s ignorant carelessness might wreak on our priceless but incredibly fragile treasure? Maybe he could protect it from being stolen, but that still didn’t mean we could just toss it in the car and take off. There was the temperature problem, for starters, which I’d just begun to explain when he cut me off.

“Yes, ma’am. While you ladies were in the viewing room, I brought the car around and have it cooling to exactly sixty-four degrees. According to the portable hygrothermograph I brought along, the humidity’s running about thirty-nine percent, which is slightly higher than optimum but shouldn’t prevent us from moving forward, considering that we’ll be at the house in under an hour even with traffic. As for the UV issue, I assume that’s taken care of by the case itself, correct?”

I nodded, feeling simultaneously impressed and even more irritated than before. I was glad he was prepared to take care of the temperature issue, but did he have to be so smarmy about it?

“Have I forgotten anything, Dr. Talbot?”

I hesitated, almost wishing he had so I could bring him down a notch. “Just tact,” I heard myself say, once again startled by my boldness. Never one to be snarky with strangers, I couldn’t imagine where this was coming from.

Nana shot me a look of disapproval.

“Kidding,” I said, though I hadn’t been, not really. I met Blake’s eyes, which held a look not of offense but amusement. He maintained my gaze until I looked away, realizing maybe I was the one with the more egregious behavior this time.

“Would you like to carry it?” I asked in a nicer voice, hoping to bury the hatchet.

He shook his head. “Actually, if it’s safe to turn it vertically for a few minutes, I’d rather you put it in your bag till we get to the car. Hide it in plain sight, so to speak.”

“Sure, whatever you think is best,” I replied, glad my transformation into a professional-looking businesswoman had included trading out the small, raggedy purse I usually carted around for this elegant and roomy leather satchel.

We headed out after that, reaching Nana’s Mercedes without any problem. And though I wouldn’t be riding along with them, I climbed into the back so I could hand over the case in a less visible way. From there I watched as Blake helped Nana into the front, his strong hands surprisingly gentle as he supported her by the arm. It wasn’t until she was in and the door was closed and he was moving past my window that the bottom flap of his suit jacket flipped back for a moment to reveal a startling surprise. At his hip was a black leather holster containing a gun. My stomach dropped as an old, familiar image filled my mind.

The body, just lying there on the cot.

The knife, buried in the chest, nearly to the hilt.

The blood, pooled on the ground below in circles of deep maroon.

I may have been only nine at the time, but even now, at twenty-eight, I still had a distinct aversion to all kinds of weapons—knives mostly, but guns and other types too—and likely always would. At the moment, just the sight of a firearm in such close proximity made me queasy.

“Can I give you a ride to your car?” Blake asked, startling me as he slid onto the driver’s seat. I hadn’t even realized he’d gone around to the other side or that he’d opened the door.

“No,” I said, too quickly. Taking a deep breath, I tried to calm my

pounding heart as I added, "Thanks, but no need. I'm parked just a few blocks over."

He eyed me strangely. "How about driving together? Did you want to follow us?"

"No, I'm good. I...I'll meet you there."

Flustered, I reached for the door handle and was about to give it a pull when he asked me if I was forgetting something. I turned and stared at him blankly.

"The document?" he prodded, a slight smile on his lips but a hint of concern in his eyes.

"Oh. Right." I could feel my face burning as I fumbled with the latch on my bag, got it open, and pulled out the case.

"Here," I said, holding it toward him until he took it from me. "See you at the house."

Then I gave Nana's shoulder a quick squeeze, got out, and walked away as fast as my legs would carry me.



CHAPTER TWO

Renee

Needing time to think, I decided to drive the local roads northwest to Nana’s rather than hop on I-64. That way I could ease more gradually into the inevitable, into what was really bothering me.

And I knew exactly why the sight of that gun had nearly generated a panic attack. It was because things were already heightened for me thanks to the knowledge of what I had to face next, what I always had to face when I came here: that first look at the “Dark Woods,” as my cousins and I called it, where the long-ago “Incident” happened. Located next to my grandparents’ house, the woods’ proximity made it an inevitable part of coming here, a tangible presence and constant reminder of a trauma we’d rather forget altogether.

But the woods wouldn’t let us forget. What happened had happened there, and as long as we wanted to visit our loved ones who lived in the house next to it, there was nothing we could do about that.

At least the woods and the estate were separated somewhat by a wide and impassible drainage gully. Then again, all it took to get there was to walk toward the rear of the property and look for the wooden foot-bridge near the tennis court. That was how we’d always gone exploring

as kids every year—my three cousins and I—over the footbridge and into the woods and all the way along the winding path to the old hunting cabin, where we loved to play house and pretend we were pioneers.

Not that we ever did it again, of course, not after it happened. Didn't go there, rarely talked about it with anyone else, didn't even like to look that direction, but there was no escaping its presence. Though the terrain in this part of Virginia was flat, in our minds the Dark Woods loomed large in the distance, like an avalanche about to give, or Mt. Vesuvius churning near Pompeii.

My cousins and I had not been victims of a crime back then, but we had been witnesses to one within the very cabin where we'd always gone to play. Ever since, for me, the challenge when returning here was in facing the initial sight of those woods, yet again, without letting the memories it awakened completely unnerve me. What other choice did I have, really? I couldn't stay away from my grandparents, nor from the annual Talbot reunion, which was always held here. And at least it had become a little easier with each visit—correction, with each visit that didn't include having a gun suddenly appear mere inches from my face.

I just needed to pull it together, put things back in perspective, and remind myself that what happened was a long, long time ago. There was much to do before tomorrow night, when the first families would begin to arrive for the reunion, and I was responsible for an important part of it this year. Surely I could find within myself the calm and reason that permeated every other area of my life except this one.

I turned up the radio, cleared my mind, and tried to focus on my breathing as I drove. Soon I did begin to feel better. It was nearly four o'clock by the time I reached the James River, and I crossed over it as slowly as I could, taking in the view on both sides. Less than five miles to go.

I exited the highway onto Huguenot Trail, happy as always to follow the pathways of my ancestors, and drove west, parallel to the river, enjoying the lush terrain that enveloped me. After several miles, I spotted the sign for Willow Lane and slowed for my turn. Other than the one home on the corner, there would be nothing else on Willow except

for the Dark Woods—which started directly behind that house and ran for nearly a mile—and then, after that, the Talbot estate.

Clenching my teeth, I made the turn and kept going, driving past the corner house. Only once I was fully out of its sight did I slow down and pull over to the side of the road. I sat there for a long moment, preparing to confront the inevitable. *You love coming here*, I told myself in a quick pep talk. *You just need to deal with the memories as usual and then you can move on.*

Finally, I turned and looked. To my relief, the sight didn't feel any more traumatic than in previous years, despite the incident with Blake's gun. I guess the older I got, the better I understood that this place had nothing to do with what happened. It was just the setting, just the backdrop, nothing more than a collection of trees and brambles and brush. It had not been the one to wield the knife, nor the one to do what had come after. Feeling much better, I took a deep breath and started off again, continuing forward until the driveway of the Talbot estate came into view.

The house wasn't visible from the road, but it was obvious just from the elegant entrance that it had to be nice. And it was. Set back amid towering yellow pines, the stately redbrick home appeared after rounding the first curve on the drive, and its beauty caught me anew every time I saw it. A three-story Colonial, the house featured a large white portico at the front door, tall shutters at each window, and a row of dormers along the roofline. Twin chimneys rose from each end of the structure, flanked by a glass solarium to the left and a four-car garage to the right. Behind that garage, though not visible from here, were a guesthouse, pool, and huge yard beyond. Way out back was also a tennis court and the ever-present footbridge to the woods, though I wasn't going to think about that now.

I drove all the way around to the garage and parked, pulling to a stop behind several other cars. After turning off my rented Impala, I sat for a long moment, thinking through the rest of this day. It was time to get down to work, and though I would have dearly loved nothing more than to change into something comfortable first, I knew there would

be other people around, which meant I couldn't exactly trade out my skirt for a pair of sweats lest I give Nana heart palpitations.

As I walked to the front door, I remembered yet again that this would be the first Talbot reunion since my grandfather's death. Ten years older than Nana, Granddad had been ninety-two when he died, but he was sharp as a tack all the way to the end. He was an amazing man, and his absence this weekend was definitely going to be felt. Tears filled my eyes at the thought, but I managed to blink them away. No mascara smearing allowed, I reminded myself.

At least Nana seemed to be holding up well. I found her in the kitchen, talking with the caterer about tomorrow night's dinner. The reunion was structured the same way each year, with immediate family coming on Thursday evening around six, sharing a big meal together, and staying in various bedrooms throughout the main house and the guesthouse. Considering that "immediate family" included four generations of Talbots, it was a miracle we could all still fit.

The larger reunion wouldn't begin until Friday morning and would run until Sunday afternoon, with events, meals, and activities scheduled throughout. No ordinary family gathering, this annual reunion was open to Talbot descendants at large and often brought in more than two hundred participants. Most of them stayed under a group rate at a hotel in town, with each day's events taking place either here at the estate or in a ballroom at the hotel.

Such a massive undertaking was no small feat, but thanks to a top-notch reunion committee, eager volunteers with years of practice, and a set of finely honed procedures, things usually went off without a hitch. The fact that Nana employed a veritable army of hired help to augment efforts behind the scenes didn't hurt either. By the time things kicked off Friday morning, her back lawn would have been transformed into a wonderland of white canopy tents, four separate buffet service lines, and enough activity stations to entertain participants of every age.

It looked as if Nana was going to be tied up for a while, so I just gave her a quick wave to let her know I'd made it and then returned to the entrance hall, which was wide and majestic and ran the entire depth of

the house. Because the back wall was lined with windows and French doors looking out on the pool and grounds, the overall effect when coming in through the front door was striking and made the house feel even bigger than it already was.

Looking along the left side of the entrance hall and moving clockwise, first came the door to my grandfather's study, then the main staircase, the doorway that led to the dining room, and a half bath. Continuing on the right wall was the door to the laundry room and a mudroom beyond, and then finally, to my immediate right, was the large and sumptuous living room.

I loved the whole house, but for the next few days, my mind would be on the laundry room and mudroom. That's because we were going to turn them into a sort of mini museum, offering the first and final private viewing by the Talbot descendants of the Persecution Pamphlet before it would be given over to the Smithsonian. Connected by a swinging door, each room had its own entrance and exit, which made them the perfect choice for funneling through tons of people in an orderly fashion.

Knowing they would lose the use of these machines for a few days, the cleaning staff had tried to wash ahead of time everything that might be needed for the reunion. And though it wouldn't be as convenient, at least there was a small, stacking washer-and-dryer unit out in the guest-house should any emergencies crop up in the meantime.

Going into the main laundry room now, I found a worker up on a ladder mounting a projector to the ceiling and a man I recognized as Dr. Harold Underwood standing below giving directions. An academic and scholar, he specialized in historical documents and had been one of the members of the authentication team four years ago. He was short and stout with tufts of gray hair on a round, balding head. He'd been a valuable part of the team back then, and I was pleased to see him now.

He greeted me warmly with a double handshake and a smile. "Dr. Talbot, so nice to see you again. Very nice."

He dove right into an explanation of what he'd managed to accomplish thus far, and as he talked it was easy to hear the enthusiasm in his

voice. I'd hired him to help transform these two ordinary rooms into a temporary viewing space where the pamphlet could be put on display without endangering it in any way. Happy to help, he'd been the one to design the layout and bring in the necessary equipment for maintaining appropriate conditions of temperature, humidity, lighting, and more that the pamphlet required. He was also working with Blake to keep the priceless document secure, starting with a locked and alarmed preservation-quality viewing cabinet. From the looks of things, Dr. Underwood and his helpers had already made a lot of progress.

As for Blake, he seemed to be in absentia at the moment.

The older man showed me the sketches he'd done of the basic layout, starting with black fabric panels that were now being hung around the perimeter of both rooms. Covering every inch of space except the doorways, the panels even hung in front of the washer and dryer, completely obscuring the fact that this was a laundry room. Next door, an extra wall of panels had been erected across the center of the mudroom, creating a buffer around the display area to protect it from exposure to any light that might come in when the exterior door was opened.

Entering in groups of about ten to twelve, guests would start in the first room, which would be set up as a viewing area, with a projector, screen, and two rows of folding chairs. There they would watch an eight-minute video Danielle had created for the occasion, one that explained the history of the pamphlet. After that, they would file through the swinging door into the mudroom, where they would weave around the protective black fabric panels to stand in front of the case and get a look at the document itself. Posters propped on easels would line the walls, providing further information that folks could view as they waited their turn. I felt our plan was doable, thanks in large part to the fact that these rooms were a bit more spacious than the average laundry and mudrooms.

Danielle had designed the posters using facts and photos I'd sent her, then she'd emailed the files to the local Talbot branch, where they'd been printed and delivered here. I hadn't seen them in person yet, so once Dr. Underwood finished his recap, he went back to what he was

doing and I set about unpacking the posters so I could get a good look at them myself.

Of course, they were all great. Danielle was incredibly gifted, and it showed in everything she did. The facts-only information I had sent her had been pulled into bulleted lists and call outs with colorful arrows and lines and shapes that led the eye from one important point to the next. Most Talbots knew of the pamphlet's existence and some of the basic story behind it, but I doubted many of them had heard the whole tale, and almost none had ever seen the real thing in person.

I was arranging the posters on easels when Nana popped in, a small piece of paper in her hand.

"This is for you, dear. Blake's phone number. He asked that you contact him whenever the pamphlet is going to be out of the safe so he can be present."

"Even at the house? Is that really necessary?"

"His primary task is to keep that pamphlet secure until it's given to the Smithsonian on Saturday. We can't blame him for being diligent."

"Fine," I groaned, typing his number into my phone's contacts. "I guess it won't be too inconvenient."

"Oh, and one other thing." She gestured for me to follow her into the hall where we could speak privately. Once there, she said in a soft voice, "Will you be able to remember the combination to the safe if I tell it to you? I'd rather you not write it down."

"No need unless it's been changed."

"You still remember it? From four years ago?"

I nodded.

"But you only used it a few times, Renee. I know how smart you are, but still..."

"It's calcium silicate."

"Excuse me?"

I lowered my voice to a whisper. "That's how I remember it, Nana. Calcium silicate is made up of calcium, silicon, and oxygen. On the periodic table, calcium is twenty, silicon is fourteen, and oxygen is eight. Which is the combination, twenty-fourteen-eight. Calcium silicate. It even sort of rhymes."

I was proud of the clever memory aid I'd come up with, but Nana just gaped at me for a long moment, baffled and bemused. Then she simply shook her head and started for the stairs.

With a smile I went back to my mini museum and picked up where I'd left off. An hour later we were just finishing up when Dr. Underwood let me know he would be needing the pamphlet soon in order to determine placement and make his final adjustments with the lighting.

"No problem. I'll contact Blake," I said, and then I shot him a text asking him to come here ASAP if possible. *Butterfly needs to emerge from cocoon*, I added, smiling at my spy-talk and hoping he'd get the joke.

He responded soon after.

Be there in 15. Sustain diapause until my arrival.

I actually laughed out loud, amazed that someone like him would know the term. Diapause was an extended state of rest that organisms, including butterflies, sometimes entered into. By telling me to sustain it, he was saying to leave the pamphlet in the safe for now. Too thrown to come up with a clever reply, I texted him back a simple *Will do. Over and out.*

He showed up just as Dr. Underwood was dismissing his workers for the day and I was straightening the chairs in front of the portable movie screen.

"Thanks for waiting," Blake said as he came into the room. Then, glancing around furtively, he stepped closer and added in a low voice, jaw set and lips barely moving, "Imago may now emerge from chrysalis."

Again, I couldn't help but laugh. "Very impressive, Keller. Let me guess, you picked up the lingo during a previous assignment, one where you had to guard some rare species at a local butterfly conservatory?"

"Nope." With a sheepish smile, he gestured to his phone and added, "Once I realized we were playing secret agent, I just googled 'terms related to butterflies' and found some code words I could use."

"Clever. Very resourceful."

He shrugged modestly, sliding his phone into his pocket. "Comes with the territory. Kind of like it says in the Bible, I try to be all things

to all people. You're a scientist. I can do scientist—or at least pretend well enough to hold up my end of the conversation.”

His eyes locked on mine, and I felt an odd shiver. Quoting the Bible? Throwing out scientific terms in an attempt to speak my language? Maybe there was more to this guy than I'd first given him credit for. The thought surprised me, sending heat to my cheeks. Breaking our gaze, I managed to mutter, “Be right back.” Then I turned and headed for the door, my pulse surging as I went.

I tried to talk myself down as I walked across the wide entrance hall toward the study. There was a big difference between googling and knowing. Anybody with a smart phone and half a brain could do what he'd done. Other than being adaptable and accommodating, there was nothing special about Blake Keller, nothing at all.

Except maybe those eyes, which were a deep green flecked with gold. And that hair, thick blondish-brown hair that almost made a person want to run their hands through it, if they went for that sort of thing.

With a groan, I forced myself to put such juvenile musings aside and focus on the task at hand. At the door of my grandfather's study, I paused for a moment then took a deep breath, pushed it open, and went in.

Granddad.

This had been his domain, and it still smelled like him, that familiar mix of teakwood and pipe tobacco and antique paper. The room looked the same as always, the dark leather swivel chair parked behind the massive wooden desk, rows of rare books lining the shelves along the right wall, and a pair of satin-upholstered antique chairs facing the desk.

Taking a deep breath, I padded across the lush beige carpet to the safe, which was located in a supply closet on the far side of the room. As I knelt and began turning the dial—right twenty, left fourteen, right eight—I could almost feel my grandfather's presence. What a fascinating man he had been, so intelligent, so generous, so paternal. He'd had eight grandchildren, but somehow he made each one of us feel especially loved and encouraged by him.

His inviting me in on the authentication process when I was still in grad school had meant so much to me. As a student of colloid and surface chemistry, my goal to work with security printing was about as cutting edge and future focused as one could get. Yet somehow he knew that involving me with this pamphlet from the past would have an influence on that work. The authentication had given me such perspective into the longevity, durability, and stability of not just ink but paper as well. It had been a valuable experience, both personally and professionally, and I would always be grateful for it.

Swinging open the safe's door now, I spotted the pale green case atop a pile of papers and some velvet jewelry boxes. I was just pulling it out when a man spoke.

"Your grandfather sure had varied tastes in reading."

Startled, I jerked my head around to see Blake standing in front of the bookshelves, perusing the titles of Granddad's collection.

"I like how he organized them, though," he continued, his eyes slowly scanning up and down. "Looks like he has them grouped by subject, then alphabetized by book title within those groupings."

"What are you doing in here?" I demanded, feeling utterly intruded upon. What made him think it was okay to waltz into a private office as though he owned the place?

"What do you mean?" he asked, his attention still focused on the shelves. "Of course I'm in here. Like I said before, wherever that pamphlet goes, I go. "

Pursing my lips, I turned back to the safe and closed and locked the door. Then I looked toward this unwanted protector and just stood there, clutching the case to my chest. How could one person be so appealing on the one hand, yet so obstinate and irritating on the other?

"Oh, wow," Blake said, oblivious to my thoughts. He was too busy reaching for a book and pulling it out to take a closer look. "*The Little Prince*. I loved this when I was a kid." He held it gingerly and turned the pages with care. "Such a great story. So many layers, you know?"

Seriously? We were going to stand here and discuss a children's book when there was work to do? I was about to say as much when he continued.

“What’s the famous line? Something about learning to see with the heart instead of the eyes?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I replied. “I haven’t had the pleasure.”

With that, I started walking toward the door. If he wanted to go wherever the pamphlet went, then he was welcome to follow along—or not, his choice.

“Wait, what?” he said, quickly closing the book and sliding it back into place on the shelf. “You’ve never read *The Little Prince*?”

I kept going, and as I moved into the main hallway he fell into step behind me.

“Nope. Saw the movie version, the one with Shirley Temple.”

He caught up and walked at my side. “No, no. That was *The Little Princess*.”

“Oh, sorry. Well, at least I’ve listened to the music. I like Purple Rain.”

“Purple Rai— That’s *Prince*. The singer.” Only then did he realize I was making fun of him. “Ah. Think you’re smart, huh, Talbot?”

I shrugged, working hard to stifle a smile. “That’s the rumor, anyway,” I said before moving into the room and leaving him in my wake.