



PROLOG

*Topeka, Kansas
May 1871*

Twelve-year-old Carrie Dickerson jumped down from the wagon onto the dirt road, lined with weeds, rocks, and prickly grass. She helped her siblings down one by one: Lettie, Richard, Luther, and two-year-old Jessie, all of whom resembled their dark-skinned mother, Martha, an ex-enslaved woman who had become a beautician from Kentucky. Carrie took after both of her parents. She inherited her mother's soft facial features and her father's fair complexion, which was a carbon copy of the owner of Hawthorne Plantation in Virginia, where he was born.

After helping her siblings down, Carrie took the reins from her father and tied them to a post. She watched her father lovingly sprint around the wagon, placing a small stool on the ground, before taking his pregnant wife's hand to help her down. She reveled in the fact that they loved each other so much.

Carrie took baby Jessie by the hand.

"Thank you, Carrie dear," her mother said, slipping her arm into the crook of her husband's.

Once inside the First Congregational Church, run by abolitionists, Carrie handed Jessie to ten-year-old Leticia (also known as Leddie).

Wide-eyed and innocent, Carrie asked her mama, "Tell me more about the concert singers?"

Martha fluffed her skirt and smiled at her oldest child. "They are a group of young students from Fisk University in Tennessee. They sing at church concerts to raise funds to help build their school and speak out against racism. They sing a form of spiritual music that your father and I grew up hearing. Come now, I want to make sure we find some good seats."

As they entered the church, a diverse crowd of people wearing their Sunday's finest filled all of the sanctuary seats. Carrie looked up into the choir stand where she sang every Sunday, and saw some empty seats in her hiding place. The piano where her mother played

every Sunday was empty too. Music was very important in her family. All of her siblings were expected to play an instrument.

Since there were no empty seats downstairs, Carrie looked to the balcony. She couldn't imagine her mother, in her later months, standing much longer in her condition. She took off, breasts bouncing as she ran.

"I'm going to save us some real good seats, Mama." Carrie blurted out. Her siblings followed her.

"Carrie!" her mother cried out, "stop running around here like a boy."

Carrie slowed down so her body parts wouldn't bounce as she made her way through the church sanctuary and climbed the stairs to the balcony. When she reached the top, she spotted her hiding place. The chairs were still empty. She always hid in that last chair in the first row, where she could see everyone, but no one could see her whenever her mother dragged her to those boring church meetings. It was her favorite hiding place in case she fell asleep. She bubbled with joy after finding some chairs in the first row, including her hiding chair, empty. After placing her sibling in seats, she said to Leddie, "I'll be right back." Placing her hand on her chair, she told Leddie, "This chair is mine, don't let anyone sit here, the other two chairs are for mama and papa." She curtsied politely to a nosey old man watching her every move from the second row and then ran to the bottom of the stairs.

Carrie spotted her parents talking to some of their friends. She caught her mother's attention and waved her hand, motioning for her to come upstairs.

"Mama," she whispered, pointing to the chairs on the balcony. "I found some seats." She spoke as softly as possible, knowing she would never hear the end of it if her mother heard her speaking above a whisper in church. She ran down the aisle and helped her mother walk up each step while her father followed. They all sat in their seats just in time.

A young lady sat down at the piano bench and began to play softly.

"The pianist is good, Mama."

"Yes, she is, Carrie," she said while reading the program.

Carrie imagined herself singing and playing the piano before a crowded audience. As a member of the Congregational church choir that sang mostly European church songs, the director had told her many times that she'd been blessed with a gifted voice.

The church fell into a dead silence, except for the sound of the piano. The audience began clapping as a group of four men, dressed in dark suits, and five women, dressed in dark Victorian dresses, walked onto the stage single file. They formed two rows, with the women standing in front and the men in the back. The audience continued to clap for several minutes until the Fisk Jubilee Singers began to sing a cappella.

Carrie barely heard them singing at first, because the choir sang so softly. Then the words became audible as they sang progressively louder. The choir repeated each stanza until the words "*Steal Away*" rang clear as a bell with command. The words of the song lulled Carrie and the audience into a deep reverie. After the choir sang a few stanzas, a female soprano stepped forward and continued the song in a slow, soft voice. Carrie saw her mother comforting her father by gently rubbing his back as he bowed his head and closed his eyes, no doubt thinking about his childhood days as a boy. She watched her mother dab away tears from her eyes with a dainty white handkerchief. Carrie thought she had never heard a voice so beautiful to lull her into quiet contemplation, and lyrics that

made her feel melancholy. But the music also had an uplifting, healing quality that touched a special place in her heart. More than anything in the world, she wanted to sing these songs, which her father called, slave music.

Carrie's thoughts floated back to her father's stories about his life growing up under his slaveholding father in Virginia as she continued to listen to the music. There was something healing about this music that brought her father's stories to life. As the choir finished the song, Carrie wiped tears from her eyes and looked over at her father, who was staring into space, while her mother continued to wipe tears from her own eyes.

Next, the choir sang "*Go down, Moses*," and a few European church songs, and then closed with "*Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*."

After hearing the soprano sing "*Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*," Carrie knew that she wanted to become a concert singer. One day, she hoped to sing with the Fisk Jubilee Singers so she could sing as sweetly as that soprano.

Once they returned home, Carrie's ten-year-old sister, Lennie, wearing a pink frock and white pinafore, ran up to their mother holding a letter that the postman had given to her.

"This came just for you, Mama," Lennie said as she danced around Carrie.

Martha reached out for the letter, taking it out of Lennie's hand. "It's from Harriet Beecher-Stowe." She read the letter while standing in the foyer.

Stunned by the news, Martha walked into the parlor and began pacing back and forth in front of the Victorian bay window, hung with heavy red velvet drapes, while reading the letter again.

She looked at her husband, George, sitting in a chair reading the Topeka Tribune newspaper. "George."

George lowered his newspaper, "Yes, dearest."

"Harriet Beecher-Stowe has offered to pay Carrie's tuition to Oberlin School of Music in Cincinnati, Ohio," Martha said while staring at Carrie's pretty oval face with pure joy. "But there is a stipulation."

"What stipulation, Mama?" Carrie said.

"Upon graduation, you must return home and teach school at the First Congregational Church."

George chimed in. "Carrie is too young to live away from home, dearest love," he folded the newspaper, placing it on a side table. "Let's wait until she becomes of age."

Exhaling deeply, Martha sighed, "I'll have to write her back and ask if she can extend the offer for six years when Carrie turns eighteen."

"Thank you, dearest."

Chapter ~ 1 ~

Oberlin Music Conservatory, Cincinnati Ohio

June 1878

Chapter 1 ~

Six years had passed since Carrie Dickerson had heard the Fisk Jubilee Singers perform poignant, heart-rending spirituals at her church in Topeka, Kansas. She would graduate from Oberlin's Conservatory of Music today at eighteen. Sitting at a wooden table in a music room, dressed in her cap and gown, she flipped through pages of The Cincinnati Enquirer newspaper and paused when she saw an advertisement. Auditions: Experienced singers needed to perform with the Jubilee Singers Troupe, based on the music of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers. The troupe will leave for London, England, on July 1, 1878.

"London!" Carrie exhaled. She felt her heart leap from her chest as she read the advertisement. Quickly spreading the paper out over the large wooden table, she squinted her eyes to ensure she read it correctly. She squirmed in her pink cotton day dress underneath her graduation gown in an attempt to loosen a piece of whalebone making its way through her corset. Although this choir was not the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, at least they would sing her beloved spiritual music. Touring with this choir would allow her to realize her dream of becoming a concert singer.

Carrie remembered having mixed feelings of somberness and excitement when she heard the Fisk Jubilee Singers perform at her church as a twelve-year-old girl. She could still hear the music in her mind as she walked to the piano and struck the keys in melodic chords. She began to sing "Steal Away" in her soft soprano voice. After singing several stanzas of the song, a single tear found its way from the corner of her eye, sliding down her nose and ending up on one of the ivory keys. That song always made her think of her father's life as a house servant on a Virginia plantation. Versed in classical literature, music performance, composition, music education, and music history, Carrie disregarded her professional training as she sat at the piano singing what her father called cabin songs. She had no idea how healing her voice sounded when she sang from her heart.

Suddenly, she remembered reading the letter from Harriet Beecher-Stowe, who paid for her education at Oberlin. "There is one stipulation, Caroline. You must return to Kansas and teach school at the First Congregational Church after you graduate."

Carrie picked up a pen and began drafting a letter to Mrs. Stowe.

Dear Mrs. Stowe:

I have the opportunity to tour Europe with the Jubilee Singers Troupe, not the original Fisk Jubilee Singers who sang for you in New York, but a choir that carries the same name and sings the same songs. They will travel for one year through different countries, singing songs to raise funds to educate the freedmen. I feel compelled to join the well-trained voices, which have a pure, healthy-sounding tone. I humbly request a one-year extension on teaching at the First Congregational Church.

Your servant, Carrie Dickerson.

Chapter ~ 2 ~

A coachman drove a four-passenger coach drawn by two horses down a cobblestone street in London. It stopped at a large three-story, red brick building on St James's Place.

Louis Renaud stepped out of the coach in front of the Stafford Inn, wearing black knee pants, black boots, and a powder blue day coat and vest. Two hotel footmen waited for him to enter the Inn and removed his trunk and other luggage.

Louis walked up to the registration desk, drawn by a poster of The Jubilee Singers. A middle-aged innkeeper greeted him while he dipped a quill into an inkwell.

"Evening, sir." He said, handing the quill to him.

Louis smiled at the Innkeeper and nodded, preoccupied with the people of color on the poster of The Jubilee Singers Concert hanging on the wall behind the counter.

He turned around to follow the Innkeeper to his room upstairs and bumped into Issac Jamison, a tenor with the singing group, trying to make it upstairs to his room from a night of rabble-rousing at a local pub.

"Pardon me, sir," Issac said, holding his stomach from too much drink.

Louis moved away from the man who smelled of whiskey and perfume. "No problem, Monsieur," he replied with a slight French accent. Louis recognized this man's quandary; he'd experienced it many times after drinking too much and spending too much time with his mistresses in New Orleans. Louis let out a snort while stepping aside to make room for Issac to go upstairs without creating a catastrophe.

The next morning, Louis ran into Issac again at the dining room table. He was drinking a concoction to alleviate his headache and eating breakfast.

"Well, if it is not my friend from last night," Louis said, walking up to Issac and pulling out a chair. "I'm surprised to see you up so early." He said, leaning on the chair and looking down at Issac.

"Good morning, Mr.?" Issac looked up from the table with bloodshot eyes, "er, um."

"My name is Louis Renaud. I can see that you had a strenuous evening."

"Yes, I did. I met this girl last night at a former gin palace..." he hiccupped, stopping before he said too much. Rabble rousing with local women was discouraged by his tour manager. Issac assumed that female singers would never be left unaccompanied by a chaperone.

Louis smiled widely. "Gin palace, eh?" he raised a devilish brow, "You needn't worry, my friend. I can keep a secret when it comes to wine and women."

Issac attempted to smile, but his head throbbed. "You're my kind of fellow."

"You sound American. Where are you from?" Louis asked.

"Cincinnati, Ohio," Issac held out his hand, "Wilberforce University, music major."

"Are you one of the Jubilee Singers on that poster by the desk?"

"Yes. I am."

"I own an art gallery in the French Quarter in New Orleans. I'm here on a buying trip to replenish pieces for my gallery."

“You ought to come to our performance tonight,” Issac said.

“Only if you join me at an art auction tomorrow.”

“What a good idea,” Issac said. “I’ve always had an interest in art and music.”

Louis sat in his chair and asked the Innkeeper, “What’s for breakfast?”

Chapter ~ 3 ~

Carrie led the Jubilee Singers onto the stage at Wilton's Music Hall in London, dressed in a pale blue silk Victorian gown. This Music Hall was their first concert since the director formed the choir. The noise of the audience quieted down. Carrie's dream of singing her father's beloved spiritual music in a concert finally came to fruition.

Under the hot gas lights, Carrie peered fearlessly into the curious faces of the audience who had heard stories about the choir and their music and how the Jubilee Singers brought tears to the eyes of all who listened. Carrie took a dignified stance as the choir began to sing "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." Only the choir's cappella voices made sounds now, not a peep from the audience.

Louis Renaud sat with his mouth agape, mesmerized at the sound coming from Carrie's clear soprano voice flowing over the powerful, melodious voices of the choir. Her voice warmed his soul like nothing he'd ever felt before. Her voice was like a light shining through a stained-glass window. Leaning back in his chair, he exhaled when he heard the woman beside him weeping. He'd been to many concerts before, but never felt this way by listening to the next song, "Steal Away." He closed his eyes for a moment to listen to the lyrics.

He wondered what it must have felt like to be an enslaved person at his ancestral plantation, "La Magnifique Baie," with the warm tropical Caribbean wind blowing through the palm trees, providing shade to everyone except those toiling under the hot sun in the sugar cane fields. The simple words "Steal Away to Jesus" and the misery expressed in that song dug deep into his soul. The brilliant music of the Jubilee Singers filled an empty hole he'd longed to fill all of his life. He'd finally filled it with the voice of this stunning soprano.

Carrie glanced around and saw distant looks on snowy-hued faces that responded to what they heard. Although some faces looked somber, all felt the healing effect that this music had on the people. The choir sang spirituals for thirty minutes, and then Carrie sang two arias, "Sempre Libera" from "La Traviata" and "Ave Maria," before intermission.

At the reception following the performance, Louis saw Issac standing at the end of the reception line. Issac's eyes lit up when he saw his newly found friend.

"Can I talk to you in private for a moment?" Louis asked, motioning Issac toward the hall.

Issac looked down the reception line to see if anyone was looking. Everyone was busy greeting and talking to each other, so he followed Louis into the hall.

"How did you like our performance?" Issac asked Louis.

"I have never heard this music before. Something about this music has touched my soul, especially that beautiful soloist. She was magnifique! Who is she? I must meet the songbird who has stolen my heart."

Issac snorted out a laugh. "Carrie? She's like a little sister to me."

"I am in love with her. You must introduce me to this girl."

Issac gave Louis an inquisitive look. "What are your intentions? She's not the kind of girl who visits gin pubs."

"I guarantee, my intentions are completely honorable. Please introduce me to her."

"She's going to require a chaperone wherever you take her."

"Who is her chaperone?"

"Mrs. Peabody."

"What about you. Can you not be her chaperone? Are you not like a brother to her?"

"We will need to clear it with Mrs. Peabody."

"Then introduce me."

"Okay."

Louis followed Issac back to the reception line to meet the other singers. When they came to Carrie, Issac introduced Louis to Carrie.

"Carrie Dickerson, may I introduce you to Messr. Louis Renaud. He is an art dealer from New Orleans," Issac said.

Louis took a deep bow before kissing Carrie's hand while looking up into her sparkling eyes. "Enchanted to make your acquaintance, Mademoiselle Dickerson." He hid his true feeling by closing his eyes for a moment to take in a calming breath, hoping Carrie couldn't sense his racing heart. "You are even more beautiful up close. I was captivated by your singing tonight.

"Thank you for the compliment Messr. Renaud. Pleased to make your acquaintance. Are you French?"

Carrie looked into the large, brown eyes of this very handsome man, with dark, curly hair, thick, arched brows, and a wide, toothy smile that gleamed in the light. His tall, black clad body stood tall, proud, and straight, a full head above hers. The way he stood there, confidently gazing into her eyes, told her that he was a man of influence and ability.

"I was born in Martinique, but I currently live in New Orleans."

"What brings you to London, to our concert?"

"I am here on business. I was invited to your concert by Issac."

Louis glanced at the black orchid Carrie had tied around her wrist with the white bow. "A rare flower for a rare beauty." He said, giving her his most beguiling smile.

Carrie blushed. "Thank you."

Someone behind Louis urged him to move along; he was holding up the line.

Carrie's business manager, George Peabody, and his wife Anna stood next to Carrie in the reception line. Mr. Peabody interrupted Louis while giving Issac Jamison a skeptical look. He introduced himself to Louis in an attempt to distract him from Carrie's charms. He couldn't have Carrie or any of the other young ladies in his singing troupe make the acquaintance of any man he did not know.

Carrie continued to greet ministers and first ladies who wanted her to sing at their churches. The line seemed to always slow down when people got to Carrie's manager.

Carrie smiled when she glanced across the room and caught Louis Renaud staring back at her.

After the reception line ended. Louis watched people swarm around Carrie like honey bees. Louis gave her a look that beckoned her to get away.

Carrie excused herself to refresh herself with a glass of punch. Louis came up to her at the refreshment table and took the dipper from her hand.

"Allow me," he said, slowly pouring punch into two glasses. "Are you enjoying yourself?" he asked Carrie.

“Yes, I am.”

“Now that we’ve been formally introduced. Do you mind if I call on you?”

“You may.”

“Where are you staying?”

“The Stafford Inn.”

“I’m staying there too.” He said, handing her a glass of punch.

Looking around, he said, “too bad there is no dancing here tonight. Do you dance?”

“No. I do not. Congregationalists don’t believe in dancing.”

“You mean a beautiful woman like you doesn’t know how to waltz?”

“I hear it is a wonderful experience, but I’ve never had the opportunity.”

“Well, we will just have to do something about that.” He said, giving her a devilish grin.

“I’m invited to a masquerade ball on Friday after next. Would you like to accompany me?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Peabody would never allow me to attend a ball unchaperoned. Besides, they are not big on dancing.”

“What about art museums. Do they like art.?”

“I would still need a chaperone to visit an art museum.”

“Would Issac suffice as a chaperone?”

“Well..., Issac is the oldest member of our singing group. Perhaps, the Peabodys would allow him to chaperone me at an art museum.”

An easy smile played at the corners of Louis’ mouth as he slowly handed her a glass filled with punch.

Chapter ~ 4 ~

Louis walked down the Stafford Inn's marble stairs and into the dining room, where the Jubilee Singers and their managers were seated in groups at several tables. Issac looked up at Louis, patting the seat next to him. Louis took the seat next to Carrie.

"Good morning, my friend," Louis said while shaking Issac's hand. "Thank you for saving me a seat." He turned and bowed to Carrie.

Carrie smiled sweetly.

"Louis Renaud, may I introduce you to Miss Carrie Dickerson?"

"I met Mr. Renaud last night at the punch table," Carrie said.

Carrie raised her hand to shake his, but Louis brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Miss Dickerson."

"Louis, this is Mr. and Mrs. Peabody, our managers," Issac said.

"I made Mr. Renaud's acquaintance last night in the reception line." Mr. Peabody said, giving Issac a side-eyed glance.

"Yes, I remember you, sir." Louis turned to Mrs. Peabody. You look very radiant this morning, Mrs. Peabody," Louis said. May I compliment you, Mr. Peabody? The musical last night touched my soul. I plan to attend every single concert of the Jubilee Singers."

Louis took his seat.

"Do you plan to stay in London for long, Mr. Renaud?"

"I plan to travel all over Europe for the next month."

"The Jubilee Singers will perform in London for two weeks. Then we leave for Germany for two weeks and Switzerland for another two weeks." He paused. "Then we return to Ohio." Mr. Peabody paused. "Are you from France, Mr. Renaud? I detect a slight accent, Mr. Renaud?" Mr. Peabody asked.

"I was born and raised on the island of Martinique. and educated in Paris. I reside in New Orleans, where I am an art dealer."

"Art! I love art. Do you paint?" Mrs. Peabody said.

"No. I don't."

"What church do you belong to, Mr. Renaud?" Mr. Peabody asked.

"My family is Roman Catholic."

Mr. Peabody raised a curious brow. "We are abolitionists from Ohio and members of the Methodist Church."

"Abolitionists!" Louis froze when he heard the word. It brought back stories he'd heard of his great-great-grandmother restoring slavery on the island in 1802. Fortunately, it was eventually abolished in 1848. He knew this information about his family was going to be a problem for these abolitionists, especially for Carrie, who sang so passionately against racism and slavery, so he vowed to keep his secret. Louis hated the institution and was glad those working on his sugar plantation today received paid wages.

Louis turned to Carrie. "It's quite nice outside today. Would you like to take a ride with me to get some fresh air?"

"That sounds wonderful, but I need to ask Mr. Peabody."

"Mr. & Mrs Peabody, may I take Carrie for a ride around the city today?"

“That would not be possible. Carrie and the singers are expected to attend church today. They will sing at Wilton Hall every night for two weeks, and Carrie’s only day off is Sunday, reserved for church attendance.”

“What about after church?”

“Carrie needs her rest; besides, she does not have a chaperone.”

Issac interrupted on cue. “But Mr. Peabody, what if I chaperoned Carrie?”

Mrs. Peabody smiled while holding Mr. Peabody’s hand down from objecting. “That would be fine if Issac chaperoned Carrie.” She asked her husband, “When will Carrie get another chance to see London?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Peabody,” Carrie said.

“May I go too? Daisy Jackson chimed in.”

Issac interrupted. “You’re too young to tag along, Daisy,” Issac said.

“Please, Mrs. Peabody.”

“Take Daisy with you, Issac. She can keep Carrie Company.”

Daisy almost fell out of her seat in excitement.

“Just so you know, Mr. Renaud,” Mr. Peabody said abruptly. “Mr. Thornberry, an older Methodist minister in Ohio, helped sponsor our European tour and has expressed an interest in Carrie’s hand in marriage.”

Carrie cleared her throat. “Mr. Peabody, you have never spoken about this to me. I am not the least bit attracted to Mr. Thornberry. He’s twice my age, and I plan to return to Kansas to open a music school when we return to America.” She turned to face Louis, “And yes, Mr. Renaud. Today is a warm summer day—I’d love to take a coach ride and get some fresh air with you and Issac after church.”

Louis and Issac sat in the parlor discussing the places to go and see. “There are so many places for women to see in London, such as Big Ben, Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abbey, art galleries, and rose gardens,” Louis said to Issac.

“I don’t want to see any of those places. I want to meet some women while I am out today.”

“But, you can meet women anytime, anywhere. Why now?”

“Because I do not want to live under Jim Crow laws in America again. I do not plan to go back to America after our tour. I plan to stay in London, hopefully with a woman I meet while I am here.”

“What!” Louis swung his head around at Issac’s revelation. “You plan to live with a woman you met while in London! You are a cad, Man. But you hide it well.”

Issac hunched his shoulders. “Now you know why I didn’t want Daisy to come.”

“I just want to spend time alone with Carrie, even if it is for a coach ride.”

“You have it bad for her.”

“Something about her singing makes me want to change into an honest man.”

Issac laughed. “Well, what are your intentions? Remember, she’s like a little sister to me.”

“My intentions are completely honorable. I knew it the first time I heard Carrie sing. I told myself that this is going to be my wife.”

Carrie buttoned the last button on the bodice of her white cotton frock with an attached bustle. After applying a bit of rouge to her cheek, she was ready for her coach ride

with Louis. She hadn't seen anything in London except the Stafford Inn and Wilton Hall since she'd arrived.

Carrie met Daisy in the hall, wearing a yellow cotton frock with a bustle. Although they were the same age, Daisy was a full head shorter than Carrie. At twenty-one, they were both in jeopardy of becoming old maids. But Carrie didn't care about marriage. She was living her dream of becoming a concert singer. Daisy was the one focused on marrying Issac, as she discussed with Carrie incessantly every evening before bed.

The warm afternoon sun filtered through the window on the staircase wall as they descended the stairs. Carrie reached out and clutched Daisy's gloved hand while holding onto the rail, stopping at each step.

"So you have always had these feelings for Issac?" Carrie asked.

"Yes, since the day we met at Wilberforce. He was a tenor with a choir in Tennessee before coming to Ohio. When he first arrived, we sang duets together. I fell in love with him and want to sing with him for the rest of my life."

"But Daisy," Carrie frowned, thinking about Rev. Thornberry. "Issac is more than ten years your senior. Don't you think you are too young for him?"

"That's what he tells me all the time. But my heart feels what it feels, Carrie, and I love him."

Carrie and Daisy entered the heavily carpeted parlor. "We're ready," Carrie announced.

Daisy stood beside Carrie, smiling at Issac, who rolled his eyes.

Louis immediately pushed himself to stand when he saw Carrie looking utterly lovely. Her posture was the epitome of grace, and her shiny brown eyes made his heart turn over with every blink. He lifted her hand to his lips, kissed it softly, and said, "You look exquisite, mademoiselle." He hooked his arm for her to take.

Daisy took Issac's arm.

They all walked through the door and were met by a large, open, four-passenger barouche drawn by two horses. A coachman wearing a black cape and high-top hat sat in a high box seat, waiting for them to board, while a footman dressed the same stood by the door, holding it open for them.

Carrie turned to Louis and said, "I'm impressed. We don't ride in carriages this luxurious back home in Kansas."

"Well, maybe you should come to New Orleans. You would ride in luxury every day."

Carrie tilted her head to one side. "What manner of work do you do, Mr. Renaud, that allows you to live so well because I know you are not royalty?"

Louis made a noise to clear his throat while avoiding direct eye contact with Carrie. "Um, er..., my art business is very lucrative," he said, smiling to cover his uneasy feelings. "It allows me to live and travel in style and comfort."

"Humph." Carrie huffed.

Style and comfort were two things her parents never experienced while growing up in Virginia and Kentucky on slave plantations. They only knew hard work, hard living, and laws that controlled their every movement until after the war. Even then, the government controlled the movement and quality of life for freedmen with Black Codes known as Jim Crow laws.

“It must be nice, “living in New Orleans,” she said, smiling with a touch of sadness in her voice.

Picking up on her sadness, Louis realized that impressing Carrie with his wealth would not be a good idea, so he tried to downplay it. “This is not my coach. I only hired this barouche today so you could see the city’s beauty on this warm summer afternoon.”

“Thank you kindly, Mr. Renaud, for your deliberation.”

Louis held Carrie’s hand to help her up into the vehicle. He held out his hand to help Daisy up, too. Issac climbed in behind Daisy and sat next to her in the back seat of the carriage. Louis gave the driver instructions before climbing in next to Carrie. He turned to her. “I thought we might drive by Buckingham Palace, then see Big Ben and perhaps the Tower of London.”

The horses clopped down cobblestone streets, passing large townhouses, a wooded area, and then Kensington Gardens.

Louis leaned toward Carrie, his eyes warm and gentle. “This is Kensington Gardens. Would you like to take a stroll along the flower walk?”

“That sounds lovely.”

“Daisy, Issac, Carrie, and I will stretch our legs. Would you like to join us?”

Daisy was about to rise from her seat, but Issac pulled her hand back down.

“No, we will wait in the coach.”

Louis tapped the coachman’s back with a cane to stop the carriage. He helped Carrie down while Daisy and Issac stayed inside.

Louis took Carrie’s hand as they walked down a wide path lined with pink and white azaleas. “So, mademoiselle, Dickerson, where did you get your rare voice? The music coming from your mouth is sweeter than a songbird’s.”

“Songbird? I guess that is a compliment.”

“Of course, mademoiselle. It is the highest.” They reached a bench. “Have you ever listened to the sound of songbirds singing on a warm spring day? The sound is as sweet as honey wine. There’s nothing like it except the sound of music coming from your voice when you sing.”

Carrie blushed, “Thank you, Mr. Renaud. I must admit I began singing at a very early age, when I was six. My mother plays the piano at our church in Topeka, Kansas, and I sing in the choir.”

“Is that where you are from, Topeka?”

“Yes. I was born there. I just graduated from Oberlin University in Ohio before I joined the Jubilee Singers.”

“Ahh, I see. Music runs through your veins. I had never heard singing like the music you sang when I was growing up in Martinique. Tell me about this music you sing.”

“My father calls it slave music, but it is called Negro spiritual music. Enslaved people sang this sacred music on plantations when they worshipped or worked. It was a way for them to express their minds, passions, and emotions through music, which brought them beauty and hope while being oppressed and enslaved.”

Louis thought about his sugar plantation in Martinique. He’d never heard workers singing these songs.

Carrie wanted to know more about Louis. “When did you move to New Orleans, Louis?”

“About three years ago, after I graduated from La Sorbonne in Paris.”

“You speak English so well. I could barely tell your nationality.”
 “Like many Europeans, I speak many languages.”
 “But you are American, not European.”
 “My father is French, and my mother is a mixed-race Creole from Martinique.”
 “Martinique. Tell me more about that place.”
 “It is an island in the French West Indies. My mother is dead, but I have two brothers who still live there.”
 “Do your brothers want to come to New Orleans?”
 “No.”
 “What about your father? Where does he live?”
 “He lives in Paris with his new family.”
 Carrie didn’t want to ask if his parents were divorced, so she changed the subject.
 “These azaleas are beautiful.”
 “Yes, they are. Are you ready to see Buckingham Palace?”
 “Yes. I am.” Carrie said.
 Louis took her gloved hand into his as they walked toward the coach. Issac was asleep with his mouth open, and Daisy watched as they approached.
 After driving further, Louis announced. “We are now entering Hyde Park. King William III had the route between St. James’s Palace and Kensington Palace lit at night with oil lamps as a precaution against robbers.”
 “Are there many robbers in Hyde Park these days?” Carrie asked, looking around for bandits.
 “No!” Louis said abruptly. You don’t need to worry about your safety. I am skilled in shooting, fencing, and boxing. I would never allow anything to happen to you,” he said, arching a serious brow.
 After several hours, they reached Buckingham Palace. Louis and Carrie walked to a public park and watched the Queen’s Guard protect the palace.
 “Thank you for a lovely day, Louis.”
 “When can I be alone with you again? I plan to attend all your concerts, but I also want to spend some time alone with you again. When can we meet again?”
 “After church next Sunday, there will be a gathering on the picnic grounds at St Paul’s Cathedral. Would you like to attend?”
 “Of course.”

Chapter ~ 5 ~

Coming Soon...

Note to reader: If you would like to read more chapters of Songbird, please email me at janicedenniel@gmail.com.