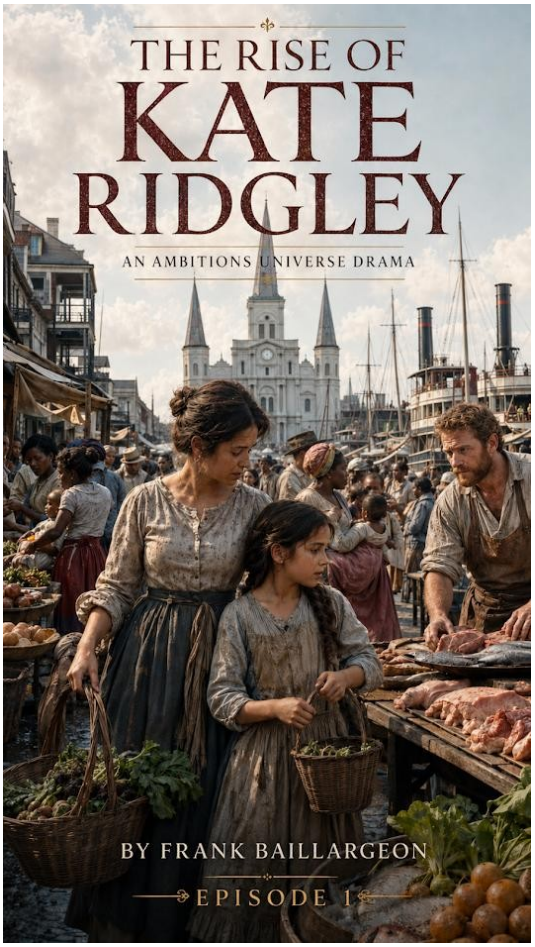
AMBITIONS UNIVERSE

The Rise of Kate Ridgley

Chapters One Through Four



By Frank Baillargeon

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Chapter 1

The nearer they came to the river, the louder the world became. The rigging creaked as vessels shifted against their moorings. Flatboats, schooners, and packet ships pressed shoulder to shoulder, their hulls knocking together with hollow wooden thuds. Masts rose above the rooftops like a forest of bare poles. Catherine smelled the river before she saw it — wet wood, fish, tar, coffee, molasses, and more.

Nearing the riverfront, Catherine saw a crowd gathered down the levee where a large paddle-wheeler was offloading. Men were shouting directions as a line of people, all dark-skinned, crawled down the gangplank — men first, wrists and ankles bound, then women carrying infants and holding the hands of children stumbling behind.

Catherine slowed, watching. Something about the silence of the group felt wrong against the usual noise of the docks.

“Who are they?” she asked.

Belle’s hand tightened on her shoulder immediately. “Don't stare," she whispered.

"They're being brought to market for sale."

"You can buy people?"

Belle hesitated only a moment. "Yes." Catherine's stomach tightened, though she did not understand why.

"Come," Belle said, steering her daughter firmly back toward the vendors. "That is not our business." Catherine glanced back only once. A little boy about her own age stood at the end of the line, staring out across the water as if searching for something already gone. For reasons she could not name, the sight stayed with her long after the market swallowed them.

The cathedral bells rang again, deep and steady over the river. The sound carried easily over the open sweep of water and market sheds. The notes seemed to settle over everything. Beneath, wagons rattling, vendors shouting prices in French, Spanish, Cajun, and English, chickens squawking in wicker cages, mule hooves striking cobblestone.

A sudden burst of wings startled Catherine. Pigeons lifted from the cathedral roof in a gray cloud, circling once, twice, before settling again along the iron railings. She stopped to watch them, head tilted. "Do they always come back?" she asked.

Belle followed her gaze only briefly. "Birds know where they're fed."

Catherine watched them pecking between the cobblestones. "Do they ever go somewhere else?"

"Sometimes," Belle said, adjusting the basket on her arm. "But only when they must."

Catherine considered this seriously, then glanced toward the ships again. Men moved along the decks, carrying crates. A woman in a blue shawl stood near a gangplank, holding a child. Somewhere, someone laughed.

"Have you ever been on one?" Catherine asked.

"A ship?" Belle shook her head. "No reason to."

"I'd like to," Catherine said quietly. Belle looked down at her then — really looked — as if measuring something she couldn't yet name. Her expression softened, but her voice stayed practical. "Dreams are fine," she said. "But keep your feet where you're standing." She reached out, brushing Catherine's shoulder, guiding her forward into the crowd.

"Stay close," Belle insisted.

"I am close," Catherine answered, stepping nearer. Life pressed in from every direction. Belle adjusted the basket on her arm and glanced down at her daughter. Her hand brushed briefly against Catherine's shoulder — reassurance, possession, love — all in a single touch as they entered the market. They moved from vendor to vendor, selecting items for the evening stew.

"Why do you always squeeze the fruit, Mother?" Catherine asked. Belle smiled. "A woman who pays without checking deserves what she gets." Catherine nodded solemnly, committing this wisdom to memory.

They stopped at the baker's stall always before buying meat for the evening meal. Belle bought two warm beignets wrapped in paper and handed one to her daughter.

"Careful," she said. "They're hot." Catherine bit into the dough anyway and laughed as sugar coated her lips.

“Slow down,” Belle said, though she was laughing too. For a few moments, they stood together, eating and watching the market unfold. This was their ritual. Their small luxury. Belle cherished these mornings with her precious only child.

Catherine was licking sugar from her fingers when Belle noticed the huge redhead, “Rusty.” He stood behind his butcher’s table, thick arms folded across his chest, cleaver clutched in his right hand, an apron always streaked with blood. He wasn’t working. He watched, grinning and nodding.

Rusty’s gaze lingered too long — the slow, claiming look of a man who believed women owed him something. Belle knew the type. She dealt with men like him every night at the Les Voyageurs on Gallatin Street. They drank too much, and looked at women as if they were prizes waiting to be taken. Seeing that look settle on ten-year-old Catherine sent a chill through Belle. Her hand moved to her daughter’s back. “Time to go home,” Belle whispered.

“But the meat, Mother?” Catherine reminded Belle.

“Mrs. Claremont offered one of her hens. We’ll pick it up on the way.” Belle looked over her shoulder. The butcher still had his eyes on them.

Chapter 2

Belle set the chicken on the scarred wooden table and sat beside Catherine. The bird was still warm; feathers dull with market dust. “Hold the legs tight,” Belle whispered,

“like this.” Catherine obeyed, her small hands gripping firmly while Belle worked the knife beneath the skin with practiced efficiency.

“You’re getting stronger,” Belle said. “Soon you’ll do this part yourself.” Catherine smiled with quiet pride. When the bird was cleaned, Belle lifted the heavy iron pot and nodded toward the bucket near the door. “Fetch the water from the cistern, darling.”

Catherine hurried outside and returned moments later with the sloshing bucket. Belle poured the water into the pot, added salt, and then lowered the chicken in. “There,” Belle said, wiping her hands on her apron. “That will make a fine stew.” She turned to Catherine, brushing a loose strand of hair from her daughter’s forehead.

Belle said, “I need to dress for work now. You stay here and get the vegetables ready. Potatoes first. Then carrots. Small pieces so they cook through.”

“I know,” Catherine said earnestly.

“I know you can.” Belle kissed her lightly on the temple. “You’re my good girl.”

Belle moved toward the small bedroom, pausing once to look back. Catherine had already begun, tongue pressed against her lip in concentration as she peeled a potato over the bowl. For a moment, Belle watched her — mesmerized. Then she stepped into the bedroom and closed the door.

Belle stood before the small mirror nailed to the wall, fastening the last hook of her bodice. The dress was simple but carefully kept—deep brown cotton that set off her eyes and the warmth of her skin. She smoothed the fabric over her hips, then lifted her hair, twisting it into place with practiced fingers before securing the pins.

Catherine appeared quietly in the doorway, as she always did when her mother dressed for work. “You look pretty,” Catherine said. Belle met her daughter’s eyes in the mirror and smiled, though the smile carried something more complicated beneath it.

“Part of my job, dearest.”

Catherine stepped closer, studying her with open admiration — the neat hair, the fitted bodice, the way Belle’s posture seemed to change once she was dressed, straighter and more certain. “Do the men tell you you’re pretty?” Catherine asked. Belle hesitated only a moment.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Sometimes they do.”

“Do you like it?” Belle turned then, lowering herself to Catherine’s height. She took her daughter’s hands. “What I like,” she said softly, “is coming home to you and your father.” Catherine leaned forward and wrapped her arms around her mother’s waist. Belle held her tightly — longer than usual.

“You remember what I’ve asked you to do?” Belle asked quietly.

“Yes. Door stays locked.”

“And?”

“I don’t open it for anyone unless I know their voice.”

“And if you’re frightened?”

“I go to Mrs. Claremont.”

“That’s right. Mrs. Claremont will always help.”

Belle said, I'll return as soon as I can." She kissed Catherine's forehead, then her cheek, then — impulsively — both hands. "You're my heart," Belle whispered. Catherine smiled. "You're mine too, Mother."

Belle straightened, gathering her shawl and gloves. At the door, she paused, looking back once more — committing the sight to memory - her daughter standing in the lamplight, small, brave, and trusting.

"Lock it after me," Belle whispered.

"I will."

The door closed. The latch clicked. Inside, Catherine listened to her mother's footsteps fade into the New Orleans night.

Chapter 3



The forge had gone quiet at last. Alyre wiped his hands on a rag blackened by years of soot and oil. He counted the day's money beneath the lamplight, lips moving silently. There were silver half dollars, Spanish reales, dimes, and copper cents. He put half the total in his pocket. He wrapped the rest in cloth and shoved it deep into an old feed bag, covering it with grain. It was their home money.

Alyre blew out the lamp, stepped into the warm, humid New Orleans night, and padlocked the shop. The smell of stew drifted down from the apartment above. His stomach growled as he climbed the stairs rapidly. Work was finished. His precious daughter, Kate, awaited him. A hearty dinner, then a few drinks with his friends.

At the top of the stairs, Alyre knocked three times and shouted, "It's your father, Kate."

Catherine stood on a chair at the table, stirring the pot with grave concentration, her tongue pressed into the corner of her mouth — the way it always was when she wanted to do something right. She turned at the sound of her Father's voice.

"Father!"

The word burst from her. She nearly dropped the spoon while climbing down to unlatch the door. Alyre laughed, fatigue sliding from his shoulders as he lifted her high.

"Well now, Kate, my dearest," he said, inspecting her. "You look like a proper cook."

"I didn't burn it," she announced.

"Then," he announced, 'we are already ahead of most restaurants in this city." She giggled, pressing her forehead to his. He breathed her in and, for one second, closed his eyes.

“You hungry?” she asked. “Hungry enough to eat the table. But we will start with the stew. It smells like heaven climbed into a pot.” Catherine beamed. She loved it when her Father called her “Kate”– his pet name for her. The praise from him mattered. He never gave it cheaply.

Alyre shrugged out of his work shirt and hung it on the peg by the door. He smelled strongly, an odor Catherine was accustomed to. An odor that she’d remember her entire life. His muscles ached from the day — shoulders tight, hands raw — “honest work,” he called it.

Catherine had already set the bowls. Two mismatched spoons. Bread from the market wrapped in cloth. “Mother left early,” she said. “She said to tell you the potatoes were at the bottom, so you should stir.”

“She is a wise woman,” Alyre said solemnly. He filled both bowls and sat. For a few minutes, they ate in silence—hunger outrunning conversation. “This is good,” he said.

“Mother did most of it.”

“You watched,” he corrected. “That is how you learn.” She nodded seriously.

Outside, evening sounds drifted through the thin walls — laughter, wagon wheels, someone playing a fiddle badly but enthusiastically. Catherine glanced toward the window. “You going out tonight?” she asked. Alyre wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “For a while. It’s Friday. I’ll be with my friends at Baptiste’s. It’s nearby, you know.” Her spoon slowed. Alyre noticed.

“You remember what we talked about?” he asked.

Catherine smiled. “You, too, Father? I just went over this with Mother.”

“I need to hear it from you, Kate.”

“Yes, Father. Door bolted. The chair under the handle. No opening for anybody.”

“Even if they say they know me?”

“Even if they say they know you.”

“Even if they say your Mother sent them?”

“Even if they say Mother sent them.”

He nodded. “And what if something feels wrong?”

“Run to Mrs. Claremont or Mr. LaPage.”

“Good girl.”

She hesitated, then asked her real question. “Will you be long?” His chest tightened slightly. *That small voice was trying to sound brave*.

“No,” he said. “Not long.” Her shoulders eased.

“Promise?”

“I promise.” He tapped her nose with one thick finger. “You’re my brave girl.” She nodded, though worry still flickered behind her eyes.

After supper, he washed, and she handed him the cloth to dry. Then he crouched in front of her. He smelled better. “Kate,’ she looked at him, ‘if anyone bothers you, you scream like a wildcat. Loud. Make the whole street hear.” She nodded. “I’ll come running,” he promised. That was what Kate needed.

He kissed her forehead, his beard scraping her skin. “My Katie,” he murmured. She hugged his neck fiercely. He held her longer than usual. Then Alyre stood, reached for his shirt, and smiled down at her.

“I’ll just step out for a bit. Back soon.” Catherine smiled, trusting him completely.

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Evening air hung heavy as Alyre pushed open the tavern door. Warmth and noise spilled over him — laughter, shouted French, chairs scraping plank floors.

“Al! Enfin! You are late tonight!”

Alyre grinned, raising both hands. “So much work. So little money.”

Laughter answered.

The room was crowded — dockworkers, carpenters, fishermen, two women arguing over cards while eyeing the men for opportunity. Old Baptiste, already drunk enough, was singing. A fiddle played near the back, off-key but enthusiastic. This was their world. Frenchmen who’d lost farms, families, country — and rebuilt life plank by plank in this humid city so far from Quebec or France.

A drink appeared in Alyre’s hand. He drank half instantly. “From me,” he shouted, digging coins from his pocket. “For everyone.”

Cheers erupted. “To Al!” “To good work!” “To surviving another week!”

He finished his drink. Cheap whiskey burned down his throat — familiar, comforting.

Then Kate slipped into his thoughts, as she always did. “She is alone tonight?” René

asked quietly. Alyre nodded. “I won’t stay long.” René clapped his shoulder. “You’re a good father.”

Across the room, Baptiste began an old Acadian exile song — slow and mournful. A few voices joined. The familiar ache stirred in Alyre’s chest, then faded. Life was better now – a business, a beautiful wife, his daughter. A second drink was placed in front of him. He started to lift it, then paused and stood. “I’ll check on Kate and be back soon.” He stepped into the night, whistling softly as he walked. Neighbors nodded. A woman carrying laundry waved.

Ordinary night. Until he saw the door. The apartment door at the top of the stairs stood open. His Kate would never leave it open. The whistling stopped mid-note. He flew up the stairs. Inside — laughter. Male laughter. Drunken. Ugly.

His Kate was backed against the wall, one hand gripping a chair. A man held her hair, pulling her closer toward the one bed in the room. She screamed. Another man edged toward the bed. The third, the butcher ruffian, Rusty Benoit, leaned against the wall, smiling.

Something inside Alyre snapped. No words. Only movement. He hit the first man like a hammer strike. Blood exploded from his nose, and he collapsed instantly. The second man, whom Alyre recognized, swung wildly. Alyre ducked, grabbed the man by the collar and belt, and hurled him down the stairs. His screams stopped abruptly below.

Benoit did not move. He smiled. A long butcher’s knife appeared in his hand. “Come then,” he sneered. Alyre charged, grabbing Rusty’s coat, trying to drag him outside.

The knife drove upward under Al's arm. Then again. Hot shock exploded through his chest. He roared and kept moving. Momentum carried them through the doorway. They crashed into the railing. Then over. Both bodies slammed into the dirt below with a sickening impact. Benoit landed on top.

Kate rushed to the railing and looked down. For one suspended moment, she thought her Father would stand up again. The man who'd landed on her Father staggered to his feet and stared down in shock — then up at Catherine. Their eyes met. Catherine would remember that face forever. Then Benoit ran.

Catherine was already moving. "Father!" The scream tore out of her throat. She rushed down the stairs and dropped beside him. Blood spread beneath his body, dark and thick. "No … no… Father…"

She heard pounding feet and alarmed voices. "Al!" they shouted. "Alyre, hang on!"

Catherine's hands hovered, afraid to touch — unable not to. When she pressed his side, warmth flooded her fingers. Too much warmth. When Alyre groaned, relief exploded through Catherine. "Father! I'm here!"

He tried to turn toward her. Pain twisted his face — pain she had never seen before. "Ma … petite," he whispered.

"You're okay. I got you, Father. I got you." Blood pushed between her fingers. It wouldn't stop. "Don't go," she pleaded. "Please don't go." His hand lifted, trembling, and touched her cheek. The gentleness broke something inside her. His fingers slipped. Kate froze.

“Father?” Nothing. She shook him lightly. “Father… get up!” She leaned over him, forehead against his chest, aware that others were pressed close. “Father … please…” But she could already feel the stillness.

Chapter 4

The scream that came out of Belle did not sound like a voice. It was a primal force that tore out into the night. For one frozen second, everything stopped—the men in the street, the frantic neighbors, Catherine’s own breath in her throat. Then the world rushed in all at once.

Feet pounded on stairs. Voices rose. A woman shouted for a blanket. Someone yelled to get the constable. Catherine was still reaching for her Father, still trying to get to him, when two rough hands—gentle in their roughness—caught her under the arms and pulled her back.

“No, child. No.” She twisted hard enough to hurt herself. “Father! Father!”

Alyre lay half on the landing, half against the wall where he had fallen, one leg bent beneath him. Wrong. His shirt was dark and wet. His eyes were open, but he wasn’t seeing. Catherine would remember that part later and then forget it again for years. The blood she would not remember clearly, only that the boards looked black and shining and that somebody kept telling her not to look.

Belle dropped to her knees beside him and reached for his face with both hands. “Alyre. Alyre, mon Dieu, no—no, no, no!”

Men crowded the landing and the room beyond. Baptiste came first, shirt half-buttoned, his suspenders hanging, his face gone pale under the lamplight. René behind him. Then Marc, then Jules, then men Catherine knew by sight and voice but could not name afterward. The smell of sweat, whiskey, and lamp oil. Someone's boots slipping and catching on the boards.

"Cover him," one of them said, low and hard, as if speaking too loudly would make it worse. A heavy coat appeared first, thrown over Alyre's middle. Then a blanket from somewhere. A hand—not unkind, but steady and final—pulled the blanket up over his chest, then to his throat.

"Don't cover his face!" Belle commanded. "Don't you cover his face!"

"No, ma'am," Baptiste said, voice shaking. "No, I won't."

Catherine lunged again. This time, she got as far as the blanket before someone caught her around the waist and lifted her clear off the boards. She kicked and cried out, furious at the arms that held her. "Put me down! That's my Father! Put me down!"

"It's me, little bird, it's me." Mrs. Claremont's voice was in her ear now, close and breathless. "I have you. I have you." Catherine later did not remember how Mrs. Claremont had gotten there so quickly. She was suddenly everywhere at once—one hand on Catherine, one hand reaching for Belle.

Belle had fallen over Alyre's covered chest, her forehead against the blanket, her shoulders shaking so violently that two women had to crouch beside her to keep her from falling sideways. Catherine saw Mrs. Claremont touch Belle's shoulder and saw

Belle strike the hand away without looking. Then Mrs. Claremont touched her again, firmer this time.

“Belle. Listen to me.” Belle did not move.

“Belle.” Mrs. Claremont’s tone changed—stronger. “They need room. The constable is coming. You and the child cannot stay here.”

“No,” Belle shouted. “No, I stay with him.”

“You will,” Mrs. Claremont said. “But not now. Not while they do what must be done.”

Someone was shouting in the street. A man’s voice called that he’d gone for the constable. Another voice asked where the knife was. Another swore he’d seen the bastard run. The night had become all edges. Baptiste knelt near Alyre’s head and bowed his own for the briefest moment, lips moving in prayer or curse. Then he stood and turned, suddenly all business.

“René, go for the constable, if Henri ain’t found him yet. Marc, stay here. Jules, with me. Nobody touches nothin’ else.” His eyes flicked to Belle and Catherine and then away, because he could not bear to see their pain. “Get them upstairs.” Mrs. Claremont nodded once, as if she had been waiting for permission she did not need.

“Élise. Nanette. Help me.” The women moved in close around Belle and Catherine. She remembered struggling as women tried to separate her from her Father. She remembered trying to see between elbows and aprons and being turned, turned, turned away from the landing, away from the blanket, away from the shape beneath it.

Her mother stumbled on the first step. Mrs. Claremont reached out for support. “I can walk,” Belle said, though her voice seemed to come from far away. “Yes, you can,” Mrs. Claremont answered, one arm around her waist. “And we’re walking now.”

Catherine reached for her mother and found only cloth at first, then fingers. Belle’s hand gripped tightly around hers. Catherine would remember that pressure long after she forgot the climb itself. Later—much later—she would remember only pieces. The scrape of a chair leg across the floor upstairs. A basin set down hard enough to slosh. Someone saying, “Not too hot.” A lamp turned low.

Mrs. Claremont’s face was very close to hers, eyes shining and fierce. “Look at me, sweetheart. Look only at me.” Catherine stood where they had placed her, shivering though the room was warm. Her shift had blood on it—she did not know whose, or when it had gotten there. Her hands were sticky. She kept rubbing them together and staring as if she expected the darkness on her skin to explain something.

Mrs. Claremont knelt and gently took both of Catherine’s wrists. “We’re going to wash now.” Catherine pulled back. “I need Father.” The women went still for half a heartbeat. “I know,” Mrs. Claremont said. That was when Catherine cried without a sound. Her mouth opened. Her chest heaved. Nothing came out.

Élise helped lift the shift over her head. The night air cooled the sweat on her skin, and she flinched. Nanette wrapped a towel around her shoulders while Mrs. Claremont tested the basin water with two fingers, then a wrist. She added a little more from the kettle. Steam rose, carrying the clean smell of soap.

They washed her as if she were much younger than ten. Face first. Hands. Arms. Neck. Behind the ears. Then the rest, quick and careful, speaking to her all the while in low voices. The water pinked, then clouded. Mrs. Claremont emptied it and asked for more. Catherine watched her own knees trembling and could not understand why they would not stop.

They put a clean shift over her head. Someone combed her hair with fingers, not a comb. Someone braided it loosely and tied the end with a strip of cloth. “Bed,” Mrs. Claremont said softly.

Catherine looked at Mrs. Claremont and shook her head. “I’m not tired.” Across the room, Belle sat in a chair as if set there and forgotten. Her hands rested in her lap, palms up, red at the creases, as though she had been carrying something heavy and had only just put it down. She was staring at the floorboards between her shoes.

“Belle.” Mrs. Claremont held out a small glass. “Drink this.” Belle looked at it but didn't take it. “For your nerves.”

“My husband is downstairs.”

“Yes.” Mrs. Claremont’s voice did not break. “Drink this anyway.” Belle took the glass because the tone was commanding, not a request, and because refusing would require strength she no longer had. She swallowed and coughed at once, whiskey catching in her throat. Nanette touched her back. Belle jerked away, then whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“No need for sorry,” Mrs. Claremont said. “Not tonight.”

From below came the muffled thud of boots and men's voices. Catherine turned her head as if she might hear her Father. Belle heard it too. "They're here," she said. Mrs. Claremont handed her a cup of tea a little later, warm and weak and sweetened more than usual. Belle held it with both hands and stared into it as if trying to remember what it was for.

"Where is she?" Belle asked suddenly. Catherine was already under the blanket, knees drawn up. "I'm here, Mother."

"Oh, my baby." The cup rattled in its saucer. Mrs. Claremont took it before it spilled. Belle stood, swayed, and crossed the room in two uncertain steps. Catherine threw back the blanket and reached for her mother. Belle climbed into the bed and pulled Catherine against her chest with a force that made the child gasp. Then she loosened her hold at once, murmuring into her daughter's hair. "I'm here, I'm here. I've got you. I've got you."

Catherine pressed her face into Belle's neck. The room had gone still. One by one, the women moved softly, gathering towels, lifting the basin, setting the empty glass aside. Mrs. Claremont banked the lamp lower until the shadows rose around the walls. At the door, she paused and looked back.

Belle lay with her eyes open, staring over Catherine's head at nothing the room contained. Her hand moved once, slowly, over the child's braid, then again, and again, as if the repetition itself might hold the world together till morning.

Mrs. Claremont spoke so low that the words were nearly part of the dark. “We’re next door. Call if you need us.” Belle did not answer. The door eased shut. Downstairs, the men and the constable continued in low, grave voices. Someone coughed. Somewhere in the street, a dog barked, and another answered.

In the bed, Belle lay rigid and wakeful. She stared into the dark while the facts of the night moved toward her in pieces too large to bear at once. She did not weep yet. She prayed. Hard. Waiting for answers that never came. Belle trembled, one arm around her daughter, waiting for dawn to say what the night had done.



Continue Kate’s Story

Catherine and Belle face the morning after Alyre’s death. Their story continues in Chapter 5.

Visit kate.ambitions.me for future chapters and short videos bringing Kate’s nineteenth-century world to life.

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