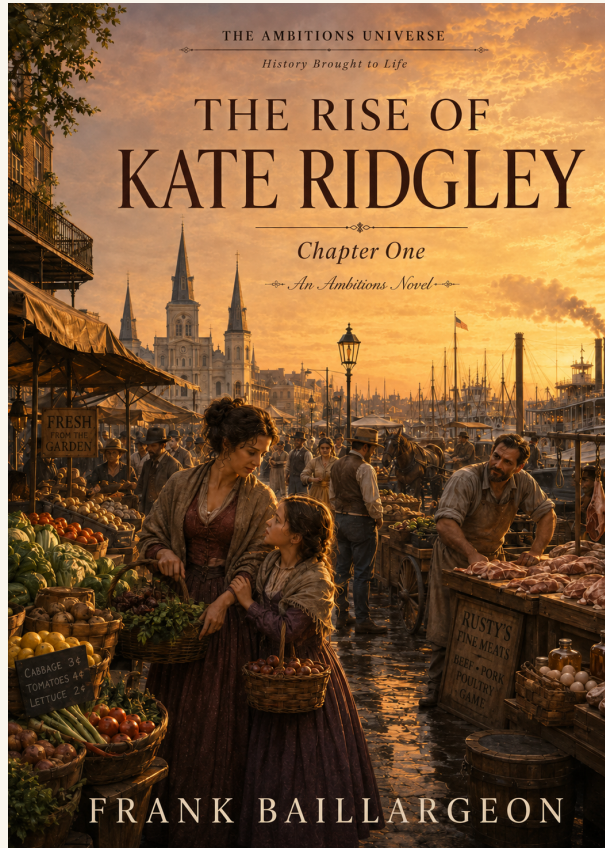


AMBITIONS UNIVERSE PRESENTS

The Rise of Kate Ridgley

Before she became Kate Ridgley, she was a girl named Catherine.



CHAPTERS ONE AND TWO

FRANK BAILLARGEON

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.

As they neared the riverfront, Catherine saw a crowd gathered farther down the levee where a large paddle-wheeler tied up during the night. 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 who stumbled 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 was watching, 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, returning moments later with the sloshing bucket. Belle poured the water into the pot, added salt, and then lowered the chicken into the pot. "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.