

## CHAPTER 1

### Charleston, South Carolina

Saturday, July 25, 1936

"Stop! Thief!" The vendor's voice grated like the screech of rusty gears as it echoed under the roof of the open-air market. The sweet smell of fresh fruit filled the air.

Melody Barnes spun toward the commotion. A fuzzy cannonball bounced off of her stomach, bowling her backward onto the cobblestone street. The sack of potatoes and corn she'd purchased flew from her grasp, the contents scattering like little missiles. Her ripe tomatoes splattered on the street just inches from her head. A glob of seeds landed on her cheek. She gasped for air just as the little boy landed on top of her.

"Sorry, Ma'am," the cannonball said. His light green gaze met hers with an air of desperation—and something else—excitement. Mischief. A slash of white teeth gleamed from his caramel-colored skin.

Melody almost smiled at the imp. Bits of straw stuck out of his kinky, light brown hair.

A shiny red apple in each hand, the boy jammed his pointy elbow into her ribs, stealing her breath again. His knee gouged

her thigh as he leaped to his feet. "Real sorry." He shot through the crowded market and was out of sight in seconds.

An elderly black man leaned over her, eclipsing the broiling sun. "You all right, Miss?"

She struggled to move, but the cobblestones digging into her spine made it impossible. The man offered his hand and pulled her to her feet, then gathered the vegetables she'd dropped.

Melody rolled her shoulders and forced air into her aching lungs. All of her ribs seemed to be intact. "Thank you. Have any idea what just hit me?" She brushed the dirt from her skirt. A glob of seeds dripped onto the bodice of her dress.

The crevices at the corner of the old man's eyes deepened, the only sign of his amusement. "Not a 'what' but a 'who.' Li'l thief steals him an apple or two from Ol' Jim ever' couple days." He pointed to a table in the center of the farmers' market. "Dat boy's sneaky as a fox. Never knows he's there 'til he's got da goods and gone."

A huge man, his face the color of the fruit heaped behind him, paced with fists clenched. "I'll kill that damn little shit when I get my hands on him," Ol' Jim raged.

Melody recalled the boy's desperation. He couldn't have been more than ten and was skin and bones. She doubted he

weighed fifty pounds. It looked like Ol' Jim had more apples than he could sell. He could spare a few for a hungry boy.

The vendor stormed toward her like a thundercloud rushing toward shore. The earth seemed to shake as he approached. He waved his arms making Melody think of a conductor leading a symphony. "Why the hell didn't you stop that little shit?" His angry glare darted between Melody and the old black man.

"Now, Ol' Jim, you knows I can't leave my cart." He pointed to a cart mounded with intricately woven sweet grass baskets ranging in size from small round ones to large picnic baskets.

"You damn well should've chased him! And you!" He pointed his fat, sausage-like finger at Melody. The reek of garlic swirled around him, enveloping her like the debris field surrounding a tornado. "All you had to do was grab him! Are you two in this together?"

Melody's temper flared. This had been a hellish morning and she was in no mood to be accused of membership in the Great Apple Gang. "I'm hardly a thief!" Blood rushed to her cheeks. She clenched her jaw and took two steps toward the fruit vendor, poking him in the chest with her fingernail.

He stepped back, maintaining distance between them. The worried look on his face surprised her. "How was I supposed to stop him? I was flat on my back in the street!" Truthfully, she

could have held on to the boy. That might have slowed him down a little, but she doubted anyone would have caught him.

She glared once more at Ol' Jim, took the sack of vegetables the basket-weaver had collected and ignored her aches and bruises as she stormed down the street toward home. She couldn't wait to talk to Cyrus about this day. Even if she'd gotten no enjoyment from it, her story—with a few embellishments—would make Cyrus laugh.

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"Cyrus McDowell, this has been a hellish day," Melody called as she entered the old man's study. She loved this room. A wall of books—some over two hundred years old—filled the right side. The emerald velvet draperies and green walls with their dark wood trim reminded her of being deep in the woods.

Her boss was seated in his leather chair, account books spread across the top of his antique desk, but Cyrus wasn't tallying up his wealth from his various enterprises. He faced the bay window, staring at the huge ship being tugged toward the docks in Charleston Harbor. He looked pale, haggard, not like his normal robust self.

"Are you feeling all right? Should I call Doc Hennesy again?"

"No. I'm just tired."

Melody could see the lines embedded under his eyes. His hair stuck out on both sides of his head like clumps of white straw from a scarecrow. She didn't think he'd quite recovered from his bout with the flu a few weeks ago. "How about some coffee?"

"Sure." He rose and started toward the door. He had a habit of joining her in the kitchen, chatting while she did chores.

Melody ran water into the coffeepot to begin a brew so strong she could almost stand a spoon in it, just the way Cyrus liked it. She turned to face him. "What's wrong?" she asked, suddenly worried. Even though Cyrus was just her boss—and had been for the last two years—he was more like family. The only family she had left.

He didn't answer right away. She continued making coffee, his silence increasing her unease.

"Nothing's wrong, Melly. Stop worrying and tell me about your day. I suppose a 'day from hell' included a visit from Louis Sandifer?"

"Why, yes," she simpered and drawled like a southern belle. "I did run into Lucifer at the bank. How did you know?"

He grinned as he always did when she used her nickname for Louis. "What did that slimy troll want?"

"Same as always. He kept touching my arm and looking down my dress. One of these days I'm going to gouge his eyes out."

"Melly, I want you to promise me, you'll never let that man be alone with you. He's depraved."

"God forbid! But my meeting with the devil was just the beginning. The line at the post office was really long, and I got caught between Lorna Wyman and Lucifer's wife. Both of them gossip incessantly, and they both hate me."

"Ah, they're just jealous, my dear."

Melody stared at him. Both women were more than comfortable. They couldn't be jealous of her, a common servant.

"I know what you're thinking, Melly. But surely you know how beautiful you are. Your blue eyes are captivating and your dark hair looks like silk."

Melody blushed at yet another of Cyrus' attempts to build her self-esteem. She shook her head and smiled. "Lorna laughs like a donkey, and Mrs. Sandifer snorts like a pig when she's not sucking air through the space between her teeth."

Cyrus laughed from deep inside his belly. Melody smiled at the sound.

"Is that all? A visit from Lucifer and then the horror of being sandwiched between a braying ass and the devil's wife?"

"No. I got run down at the market."

Cyrus' eyes popped open. He leaped from his chair. "My God! Are you all right?"

He stood before her, clasping both of her hands in his. He looked her up and down, but not the way Louis did. Concern darkened Cyrus' eyes.

"Oh, I wasn't run down by a car. A little boy plowed into me, knocking me down. The impression of the cobblestone street will probably make my back look like a black and blue checkerboard."

Cyrus sighed and dropped back into his chair, his face pale again. He closed his eyes tight as if fighting pain. His breath wheezed. "For a minute there I thought someone had found out..."

"Found out what?" Melody touched his forehead with the back of her hand. No fever.

"Nothing, Melly. And don't worry so much. I'm fine. Just feeling older every day." He took a deep breath and some of the color returned to his cheeks. "Tell me about this little boy."

Melody turned back to the coffee preparation. "He stole some apples from Ol' Jim."

"Ha! I used to steal from his dad when I was a boy."

Melody laughed. "Was that before or after the War of Northern Aggression?" She loved to tease him about his age even though he wasn't sixty yet.

Cyrus chuckled. "Ah, Melly, you're so good to me. That's why I keep you around." He took the cup of coffee she offered. "So how does the young Ol' Jim look?"

"Red as a radish and spouting accusations of an apple conspiracy. He thinks I'm a member, if not the leader of the Apple Gang, known across the South for their evil, fruit-stealing ways."

Cyrus hooted. He leaned back in his chair and sipped his coffee. She poured herself a cup and diluted it to drinkable strength.

"Don't forget, my kids are coming for dinner," Cyrus said.

As if she could forget. She grabbed an ear of corn out of the sink and ripped the husk off in one movement.

"Melly, don't worry about tonight."

"I'm not," she said, then added under her breath, "It's them that should be afraid." She forced a smile. "My mama always said, 'don't ever mistreat the cook.'"

She turned to refill Cyrus' cup. He watched her every move, but his eyes no longer held amusement. Worry, she thought, was

clouding his expression.

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"Dad, I hope that stupid maid of yours brings my coffee before my hair turns gray."

Melody cringed at the sound of Junior McDowell's nasally whine. She pushed the cart covered with a coffee service that looked like it could have come over on the Mayflower. The red walls of the hallway seemed to close in on her.

"Hell, Son, you'll probably go bald, not gray."

"Good one," Melody muttered under her breath.

"What's your hurry, Junior? Don't have time to spend with your old dad?"

From Cyrus' tone, most people would have thought he was joking, but Melody could sense his anger.

"Dad, you should fire that girl. She's inept."

"I don't want to hear one word about Melody. She's been more than a servant. She's been an excellent companion since your mother died."

Blood rushed to Melody's cheeks. She stifled a groan. That statement would certainly make tongues wag.

Melody forced her feet to continue, focusing on the rattle of the cups in their saucers and the silver spoons clinking together. Feeling every eye upon her, she entered the dining room. Scenes of the French countryside decorated the walls. A green and burgundy Oriental rug covered the heart-of-pine floor. Crystal wine glasses and antique silverware reflected the glow of candlelight from tiered candelabras.

Refusing to be intimidated, Melody's gaze met Sarah McDowell's brown eyes. Cyrus' daughter's boredom instantly transformed into a scowl. She tossed her short, curly red hair with a shake of her head and looked down her nose with a pose like Greta Garbo. Her handsome fiancé, Zeke Talley, son of a shipping tycoon who'd lost his money during the Crash patted Sarah's hand, but his hazel-eyed gaze locked on Melody's chest. He brushed his light brown hair away from his forehead and winked. Melody cringed.

Junior's black forelock hung in his dark eyes which gleamed with a fury Melody would never understand. He shifted his irritation to Beatrice, his wife, who giggled beside him. Her eyes, the color of the ocean, sparkled in the candlelight. With blond hair and a porcelain complexion, she was a perfect china doll.

Until she opened her mouth.

Cyrus sat at the head of the table. He smiled when he saw

Melody, but he still didn't look good. His skin was now flushed as if he had a fever and his eyes looked glassy. Melody decided right then and there to call Doc Hennesy tomorrow. To hell if the old man didn't want a doctor.

To Cyrus' right sat his best friend and attorney, Oscar Purcell. Melody had no idea what had prompted Cyrus calling this meeting, but it certainly had nothing to do with her.

She served coffee without a word. With the heat of her gaze she dared Junior to say anything. She turned to leave.

"Stay, Melody," Cyrus said. "I had planned to discuss some important family business tonight but have changed my mind." He shot a glare toward Sarah then Zeke, his message clear—he didn't want to say anything in front of an outsider. "All I'll say now is that no matter what happens to me, Melody remains in this house. Is that understood?"

"What?" Junior and Sarah chorused.

"She has a job with this family as long as she wants it whether I'm here or not. That is not debatable. Now, I don't feel well. I'm going to bed." He nodded to Ferris standing by the door. The butler helped Cyrus to his feet and led him from the room.

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**Sunday, July 26, 1936**

Melody opened her eyes and glanced toward the window. The sun peeked over the horizon, filling the room with a buttery glow. What was that sound? A groan? Had someone left the radio on downstairs?

Another noise, louder than the last. She glanced at the clock. It was way too early for those serial shows Ferris secretly loved to listen to.

She rose from the bed, ignoring her bruises and sore muscles from yesterday's tumble, slipped on her robe and slippers and tiptoed from the room.

There it was again—definitely a groan. Pain. It was coming from Cyrus' room.

She ran down the hall and into her boss' sanctuary.

"Help me." Cyrus sat up in bed, a trashcan clutched to his chest. He heaved.

Melody tore downstairs and grabbed the telephone receiver. She dialed the operator. "Get me Doc Hennesy!"

"Doctor Hennesy," a scratchy voice echoed in her ear.

"Doc, please come. Cyrus is violently ill."

"Be right there."

She hung up and rushed back to Cyrus. "What can I do?"

His glassy-eyed gaze met hers, but she sensed he was far away. "I've always loved you, Mary."

"Mary?" His wife had been Abigail. She didn't know who he could be speaking about, but hearing the name Mary never failed to remind her of her mother. Sadness stabbed her. Tears came to her eyes.

He shivered and groaned once more. And then he was silent.

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**Office of Oscar Purcell, Attorney-at-Law**

**Tuesday, August 4, 1936**

The heat sucked the air from Melody's lungs. It's hot enough to cook grits in here, she thought. From behind the desk, an electric fan whirred, sounding like a crop duster, stirring the humid air but providing no relief.

She ignored the glares of the fine, upstanding McDowells and blotted the perspiration from her upper lip and forehead with her old cotton hanky. If she was a bug, she'd have been squished by now. Each and every person in this bookish cell shot daggers in her direction as if she had no right to be here.

Hell, she knew she had no right to be here. What had Cyrus

been thinking?

Beatrice's eyes seemed lit from within, as if she was about to attain her lifelong ambition. Her excited whispers reached Melody's ears. "I want that antique china hutch from the plantation house. And that beautiful old bed from the blue room in the Sullivan's Island house."

Stupid cow! Melody bit her tongue to keep from shouting, "*Shut up or I will gag you!*"

From beside her, Junior's narrow-eyed glare sliced through the bravado Melody had built with sweet potato biscuit and coffee brewed strong enough to make her heart pound. Just the way Cyrus liked it.

Cyrus. Guilt stabbed her. She'd let the old man down.

Just like she'd failed Mom.

Melody sniffled and dabbed her nose. She would not cry. Not now. She'd done enough of that over the last nine days. She darted her gaze beside her. She couldn't bear the disdainful sneers of Cyrus' "loving family." Never had she seen a more treacherous pack of barracudas. And she sensed them circling, ready to devour her.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw the door. Freedom called to her.

Oscar cleared his throat and the bars of the cage clanged shut again. Melody shifted her attention to the antique rosewood desk that dominated the room, gleaming with a hundred years-worth of polish.

Light sifted through the slats of the blinds. Oscar's head gleamed with the same intensity as the desk, Melody thought, looking at the bespectacled lawyer. Did Oscar's secretary buff his scalp along with the furniture?

She grinned, knowing Cyrus would have thrown his head back and laughed if he could have heard that.

Cyrus. A wave of sorrow filled her again, wiping the smile from her face. She missed the old geezer. His raucous sense of humor. His gruff exterior. His kindness to those who deserved it. His gentleness with her, whether she deserved it or not.

He'd given her a home and an income when she'd had nothing but the clothes on her back. In the days since his final illness and death the vultures had been circling, lobbing threats her direction like seagull poop.

Junior had fired her twice, but she'd followed Cyrus' last request and refused to leave the eighteenth century townhouse where he'd breathed his last breath, and Oscar had agreed, saying no changes were to be made until the reading of the will.

*What the hell am I doing here?*

"We are gathered here for the reading of Cyrus McDowell's last will and testament dated April 14, 1936," Oscar began, his southern accent thick with refined airs.

"He made a new will?" Junior's voice quivered.

Oscar ignored him. "Though highly irregular, per his request I'll read this just as Cyrus wrote it. Junior, I want you and Sarah to know that this is nothing personal on my part. Cyrus was my friend and client, just as you two are."

Melody glanced toward Junior and Sarah. Their sneers had vanished. Identical creased foreheads shadowed their dark eyes. Junior's fingers sliced through his slicked hair leaving behind waves, reminding Melody of ripples in the lazy waters of the Ashley River.

"I, being of sound mind and body, wish to impart some truths to my loving family," Oscar droned.

Melody bit her bottom lip to keep from crying. Listening to Oscar catalog Cyrus's life into a list of his possessions would tarnish her memory of a great man.

She wished she were anywhere other than here. She meant no disrespect, but she really didn't understand what the reading of Cyrus' will had to do with her. She was just his servant, nothing more.

No, that wasn't fair. Cyrus obviously felt that he needed to leave her something, or she wouldn't be sitting here, melting in this leather and rosewood purgatory. And Cyrus was a kind and generous man. He wouldn't want his employees to suffer.

Goose bumps defied the heat and skittered down her spine. Ferris and the other servants weren't here.

I know what it is, she thought. He's left me his grand piano. He always used to say I was the only one who did it justice. He loved Amazing Grace.

She grinned at the memory of him leaning back in his leather chair watching her with a proud smile on his face.

Sarah's gasp sucked Melody back to the will and Oscar's voice.

"...I can't believe I raised you. Melody's been more of a comfort to me than you two have."

Melody's head jerked toward Oscar. His lips were still moving. Had she heard right? She risked a glance toward Cyrus' daughter. Sarah's face crinkled. She leaned forward. A tuft of auburn curls covered her cheek. She dashed at the tears marring her perfectly made-up face, but a few escaped, leaving a single black trail behind them, dripping onto her severely-tailored periwinkle suit.

Junior's face had turned the color of an overripe plum. I must have heard right, she thought.

"To my sister, Tess Bertie, I leave our mother's dining set that is currently in the Sullivan's Island house and the sum of ten thousand dollars. To my nephew, Todd Bertie, I leave five thousand dollars and Grandfather Bertie's pocket watch. To my niece, Jillie Bertie, I leave five thousand dollars and Grandmother Bertie's *Louis the Fourteenth* bedroom suite from the plantation house."

Melody heard relieved sighs from behind her. She assumed the Bertie branch of the McDowell tree was satisfied with their inheritance.

"To my grandson, Cyrus Bertie McDowell, I leave twenty thousand dollars in trust, to be distributed to him on his twenty-fifth birthday. Also in the trust will be five thousand dollars to be distributed as needed for Little Cy's education. The trust will be administered by Oscar Purcell. If that is not possible for any reason, administration of the trust will pass to my nephew, Todd Bertie."

Melody saw a malicious glare dart from Beatrice to Junior. What was she angry about? How much had she expected Cyrus to leave her son?

The overweight attorney cleared his throat again. He yanked

a frilly handkerchief that probably belonged to his deceased wife from his breast pocket and swabbed his face with it. "To my son, Cyrus Nathaniel McDowell, Junior, I leave thirty thousand dollars, his mother's house on East Bay Street, and all of the furnishings of said house. I also leave Junior the property on the Tugadoo River, the saw mill and lumberyard. It's a good living for someone inclined to show some ambition. And I hope that you will. It will redeem you."

The temperature in the room felt like it rose ten degrees. Melody risked a glance at Junior.

His mouth dropped open. "Now wait just a doggone minute!" he sputtered, barely drowning out the wail let out by his wife.

"Please, Junior, you can't argue with a dead man. Let's just get through this," Oscar said.

Junior shifted in his chair like a spoiled child, then reached into the breast pocket of his blue seersucker suit and withdrew a gold cigarette case. He flipped it open, withdrew a cigarette and snapped the case shut in one fluid movement. He tapped the cigarette on the case and lit it, making as much noise as possible, Melody thought. Smoke roiled from his nostrils like an angry bull ready to charge. Beatrice still huffed and puffed beside him sounding like a pump organ.

Oscar cleared his throat again. "To my daughter, Sarah Jean

McDowell, I leave thirty thousand dollars, the house on Sullivan's Island and its contents excluding the dining room set, the Packard and the horse operation in trust. The rest of my estate—Aerie Plantation on the Ashley, the house and all property attached, the McDowell house on South Battery, the contents of both properties, excluding the *Louis the Fourteenth* bedroom suite, the rest of my investments and all my remaining funds, I leave to my faithful servant and good friend, Melody Barnes."

All the blood rushed from her head. Her jaw dropped. She fought to suck in a meager amount of air feeling as if she'd swallowed razorblades with each gulp of oxygen.

A hissing sound filled her ears—the voices of Cyrus' relatives as they chorused their outrage—overshadowing Melody's disbelief.

"I've told you all along she was sleeping with him," Sarah's voice cut through the rest.

"You mean to tell me that my father left his money and property to that little whore?" Junior shouted.

Tears burned Melody's eyes. All she'd ever wanted was her independence. She'd spent her life in relative poverty, whispered about because her mother hadn't married her father.

*It's hard to marry a dead man,* her mother used to say in

self-defense, but Melody knew the cutting remarks, the townspeople's avoidance, the way people treated her child—as if waiting for some flaw to appear—hurt her mom.

Now she had her independence, but at what cost?

"I want to declare my father incompetent!" Junior bellowed. "He couldn't have been in his right mind!"

The lawyer blotted his head again. "It's a little late for that, Junior, and besides, he left both you and Sarah substantial sums and a good income for the rest of your lives if you handle it right. Everyone knew Cyrus was lucid until the end. You won't win this one."

Melody stood with as much calm assurance as she could muster, turned and forced herself not to tear from the office. *Put one foot in front of the other.*

"Hold on, you little hussy."

Junior's command skittered through her, but she continued to walk, spine ramrod straight, out into the heat of the mid-afternoon. She had to escape that den of braying jackals.

The sun scorched the top of her head. She'd forgotten to wear her hat again. Her black hair absorbed the sweltering heat. She turned from Meeting Street onto Broad, moving as fast as her feet would carry her, praying she wouldn't pass out.

St. Michael's chimed eleven times. It had only been a half hour since she entered Oscar Purcell's office a pauper.

And now, she was...what? She glanced down at the gray skirt she'd found secondhand at the church bazaar last week. Was she really a wealthy woman?

She hurried down Broad Street. A few minutes later she turned the corner onto East Bay, the gleaming water of the harbor visible in the distance.

She had to get back to Cyrus' house.

Her house now.

"What the hell will I do with a house?"

A hard hand grasped Melody's arm. Manicured nails dug into the fleshy part of her forearm.

Terror swelled inside her. She screamed.

"Shut up! I need to talk to you," Junior said under his breath, his teeth clenched so tightly together the skin along his jawline bleached of color.

She jerked away. "Don't touch me!"

"Oh, so now you're too good to be touched? Bet you didn't say that two weeks ago. Or did you not give my dad your goodies before you manipulated him into writing a new will? How did you

do it? Did you drug him?"

The blood drained from Melody's head. She grasped a wrought iron fence post to steady herself. "What are you talking about?"

He moved toward her, grabbing her shoulders. She jumped back, releasing the fence post, the only thing keeping her upright. She clamped her knees together and forced her shoulders back, hoping that would be enough to keep her from passing out.

"I think you did that or worse," he said. "You could have had a hand in his death."

"My God!" Melody gasped, swallowing her nausea, but her stomach roiled in protest. She turned away from him and rushed toward Battery Park.

"This is not over, you slut," Junior shouted behind her. "I will show the world what you are, a whore!"