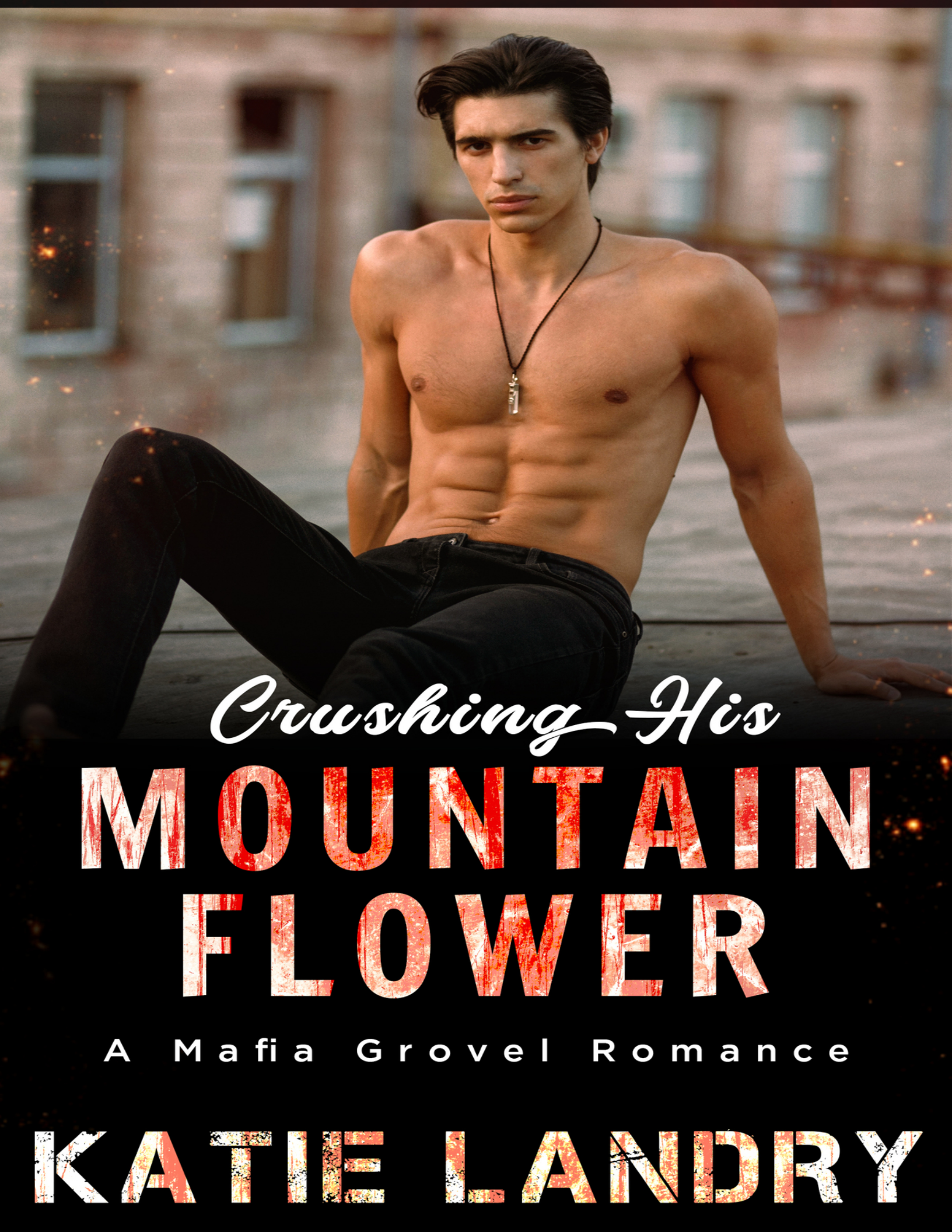




Crushing His

MOUNTAIN FLOWER

A Mafia Grovel Romance

KATIE LANDRY

Crushing His Mountain Flower

A MAFIA GROVEL ROMANCE

KATIE LANDRY

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

[Author's Note:](#)

[Introduction](#)

1. [Léonie](#)
2. [Léonie](#)
3. [Léonie](#)
4. [Léonie](#)
5. [Léonie](#)
6. [Léonie](#)
7. [Léonie](#)
8. [Léonie](#)
9. [Étienne](#)
10. [Étienne](#)
11. [Étienne](#)
12. [Léonie](#)
13. [Léonie](#)
14. [Léonie](#)
15. [Étienne](#)
16. [Étienne](#)
17. [Étienne](#)
18. [Léonie](#)
19. [Léonie](#)
20. [Étienne](#)
21. [Léonie](#)
22. [Léonie](#)
23. [Léonie](#)
24. [Léonie](#)
25. [Léonie](#)

[Afterword](#)

Author's Note:

This book is set in an imaginary Appalachian mountain region run by French mafia families, so it is for mature readers only and contains violence and a sexist culture.

There are a lot of French names in this book. Étienne is pronounced EH-TYEN.

OceanofPDF.com

Introduction

(where it all began. . .)

Maybe it was the fact that I had never been in love before. Maybe it was something about that sultry summer heat that hung low over the valley, but I knew as soon as I saw Étienne Bastide that no one else could ever compare as long as I lived.

His family the Bastides and my Pinoteaux family split all the territory in our part of the Appalachian Mountains, both of our grandfathers kicked out of France for criminal activity and their descendants now ruling two empires in the lawless mountain territory. There wasn't a single gun, herb, or illegal car part that came through his lands that my husband didn't get a cut of.

And I'd heard about him. Heard of the wild Bastide boy that everyone said was reckless, dangerous, arrogant, the one who thought he was gonna run the mountains.

But as a good girl I didn't get to run with the Bastide boys.

So the first time I saw Étienne he was fighting at a county fair. Tall, with the characteristic Bastide dark, pitch-black hair, deeply tanned skin and cut-glass jawline. He was shirtless, his chest slick with sweat. His opponent, another man who looked about the same age, maybe a year or two older than me, was much broader and for a moment my breath caught in fear that this lanky man with the beautiful harsh eyes might be in danger, as heavy fists landed so close to his face.

I didn't know enough about fighting to realize that Étienne was only playing with him, taunting him.

The fair grounds, down in a clearing between our two territories, were silent, because our parents and relatives were watching too. In our culture, to be strong was everything. Losing a fight meant losing face.

If you lost face everyone would know it.

And Étienne Bastide did not lose.

As if aware of all the bated breath, his foot shot forward even as he dodged a heavy, brutal blow, and I heard the crack of a kneecap breaking, the fight ending with the other man ground into the dirt and mud.

Étienne was victorious, and I let out a ragged, relieved breath.

He had won. It was right that this man should win, and I could tell by the way my brother looked at my cousins that he had been *expected* to win, that already he was expected to lead the Bastides.

The other man stood up, red and shame-faced. Now he would have to accept his punishment, and even though I knew what was coming, I still gasped as Étienne put a thumb in the blood from his burst nose and wrote the words on his opponent's forehead.

Léger

Settle in with a love story.

Head to [Lokepub](#) for more romance novels.

Weak

It would have to stay there until it wore off. It could not be washed off or rubbed off. It had to stay as a mark of shame and weakness for all to see.

"That boy is trouble," my Gran grunted in the big Jeep on our way home.

"*Trouble?*" I couldn't help breathing. To me he had been like an untouchable god, and I had trembled as his eyes roamed the crowd.

What would I do if those eyes ever landed on me?

Faint, probably. Or something else equally embarrassing.

“There’s something in him that could never be tamed,” she said. “He’ll be more mountain than man one day, just you mark my words.”

“Oh,” I said, thinking about this. Gran was the smartest and kindest person I knew, so she must be right.

But—was it so wrong that this made me even more intrigued by him?

“How come *you* didn’t challenge him then?” I asked my brother Réjean. “If you all don’t like him winning so many fights?”

My brother met my eyes briefly in the mirror, then looked away.

“*He* can’t beat him,” my cousin Margot piped up from beside me. “He’s too scared to try and be shown up in front of everyone.”

“Shut up,” Réjean snarled, and the rest of the trip devolved into shouts and cousin quarrels, but I just looked out the window, back where we had been, like I could see through the heavy forests to the fairgrounds.

The man who couldn’t be beaten. . .when would I see him again?

CHAPTER 1

Léonie

“**W**hen are you due?” my cousin Margot asked, shaking out her bright red hair and scanning the chattering crowds gathered for my baby shower.

“37 weeks, not too long to go now—” I said, but she wasn’t even listening.

“Your house is so beautiful, of course, but it doesn’t bother you to live under the same roof as your mother-in-law and the woman your husband used to run around with?”

Her tone was sharp, but her eyes were on my husband Étienne, circulating around the yard, that long-sleeved white shirt open to the throat, head and shoulders taller than everyone else in attendance.

“No, of course not,” I laughed, keeping an eye on my mother-in-law and her assistant walking toward me. Hopefully she hadn’t heard what Margot had said.

Margot was just trying to get a rise out of me, I guessed we had never fully outgrown that competitive cousin dynamic.

“That was a long time ago, and Placidie isn’t as awful as she seems,” I whispered. “She’s just protective of her son.”

It did seem a little bit strange to see Bastide and Pinoteaux families mixing together. As a rule, we didn’t mix.

But my baby was a special event.

“Ready to open the presents, Léonie?” Placidie asked.

My mother-in-law was a very beautiful woman, running a manicured hand through her flowing black hair with its dramatic snow-white streaks,

while her assistant Faustine was dressed in a tight-fitting short cream dress.

Bold choice with the full wineglass she was holding, but I wasn't going to say anything.

In fact I wondered if she was a little bit drunk the way she was slinging it about.

"Yes, of course, I'm very excited," I said. "Let me just get Étienne."

"I'll get him," Faustine said eagerly, whipping around so fast that the bright scarlet liquid slopped out of her glass and landed all down the front of my pretty pale green maternity dress.

"Oh! I'm sorry, Léonie," she said.

"What a *mess*. You're going to have to go get changed," Placidie said, her voice brittle with barely-suppressed disdain. "You can't be seen around everybody looking sloppy and filthy."

So much for my hope that my elegant mother-in-law would *like* me a little more by the time our baby came.

"All right," I said, glancing back at my husband, but he wasn't looking at me.

I can't wait to have his baby, I thought as I hurried inside.

Actually I'd been dreaming of having his baby from the first moment I'd ever seen Étienne Bastide. *He* didn't know about the years of my secret longing, but from that first day, he was like a god to me.

But for a long time he didn't notice me at all, even though at 18 and 19 we were both together at all the major festivals and feast-days.

I had the kind of quiet personality it was easy to overlook.

At the time, I was such an innocent, living in the Pinoteaux compound and having very little contact with the outside world.

There were a lot of other women who held his attention.

Not me. Painfully shy and awkward, with translucent freckled skin and pale lashes, a thick mass of bright red hair I didn't know what to do with. I was the last girl Étienne would ever look at.

He favored the bold, confident women. Ones like Faustine, who was his age, but who got to do everything my strict daddy wouldn't let me—dye her hair platinum blonde, wear makeup, go out on dates.

I wanted to *be* her so badly. But the Pinoteaux family was strict—no dating for me. My brother or my cousin or some other male relative was always watching. And by then Gran wasn't around to advocate for me. . . fight with Da that I deserved a little more freedom.

It wasn't until much later that I realized *why*.

The Bastille Day picnic the year I turned 19 was the first time Étienne noticed me. . .

It was late in the afternoon, the air baked and dry, the men lounging around by the tables drinking wine, while the young people our age had been chased out into the meadows beyond.

Étienne and the others were playing mumblety-peg, their knives flashing bright in the sunshine.

I was hanging back, trying not to make it so obvious that I was sneaking peeks at Étienne, that I wished he would notice *me*, instead of flirting with Faustine, his tanned hand looking breath-takingly delicious on her waist as he pulled her closer for a kiss.

But I never could have predicted how he *did* notice me, because the only warning we got was a rustling deep in the woods, and then suddenly, the animal burst through to the meadow.

It was some kind of rabid boar that must have been crashing through the trees for hours, its flanks slick with sweat and froth.

And everyone else was fast enough to flee.

Except me.

I had been wandering little further out, in a meadow knee-high with fragrant mayapple, checking for the first tart blackberries.

"Léonie!" my brother Réjean called. "Come away from there!"

But by then it was too late--the boar was between me and the path, pawing the ground, its eyes red-rimmed.

I whimpered, began to back up as the wild blackberries all spilled from my fingers.

"*Don't run,*" a deep voice called, and I looked up to see Étienne, advancing on the path toward me, his movements tight and controlled.

And our eyes met for the first time.

He was beckoning me closer, telling me to walk *toward* the rabid boar.

It should have gone against every logical instinct in my body. Move *toward* the dangerous predator? *Closer* to trouble?

But I didn't even stop to think, the boar tossing its hairy head back and forth, looking like it wanted to spear me with those tusks.

I instantly obeyed him.

One step. Then another, my eyes locked on Étienne's. I couldn't look away, my lips parted and my heart pounding.

Later I realized there was a knife in his hand, but at the time I didn't even notice. I just did as he said.

The boar was snorting louder the closer I came, but I didn't even notice that either.

It was like I was hypnotized. All this man had to do was crook that one tanned finger, and I would have followed him off a cliff.

The boar lowered his tusks and charged, but Étienne was faster, moving in a blur, and I was still walking forward, trusting in him, when the first splash of blood landed on my dress.

"Don't look, Léonie," he said, and I obediently squeezed my eyes tightly shut, lips tingling to taste my name in his mouth.

He knew my name.

His words went down like the sweetest, most fragrant juice. He had said them to *me*. He had looked at *me*.

Everything was different after that.

I waited breathlessly until he stood beside me, his fingers skimming my lower back.

"All you all right?"

"Yes," I breathed, heat pulsing on my skin. Would he see the goosebumps raised by the faintest trace of his breath across my collarbone?

I didn't open my eyes until he told me it was safe to look.

From that moment on, my status changed. Étienne didn't touch me or *flirt* with me, and sometimes he barely talked to me, but at every single gathering, he was beside me.

Sometimes he showed me how to play mumblety-peg or carve simple figures into wood.

But mostly he made sure no other men talked to me.

And visit by visit, I realized he had stopped paying the other women any attention.

When I turned 21, my Da wasn't surprised when his Da sent a message that *I* was the one Étienne wanted to marry.

By then, the powerful Étienne Bastide could have had anyone or anything he wanted.

And he wanted me.

Now at 24, I was lucky enough to sit in our baby boy's massive nursery folding tiny onesies, wondering when I was going to go into labor and who he was going to look like.

Would he be dark-haired and tanned like Étienne? Or pale and auburn-haired like me?

How beautiful and perfect it all was, here in the sprawling massive Bastide house, here in the mountains where ivy and roses grew up the side.

Lucky and blessed beyond belief. My only sorrow was that my beloved Gran wasn't here to see this.

Even though she was always skeptical about Étienne back in the day, I knew she would have been so happy to come over and quilt or knit with me, while away the long, lonely hours during the day when my husband had to work.

I straightened a little stuffed coyote on a shelf as I passed by the nursery. All of these were local animals. So our son would know right from the beginning that his daddy was from the mountains and the mountains were a part of his daddy.

I could feel him kicking too, baby boy wanting to come out and see the world. I knew it was better that he cooked just a little bit longer, but I was so excited to meet him.

Étienne and I hadn't agreed on a name yet, but my husband's idea would probably win. He had the much stronger will, it was the way of things that I could never stand my own up against his.

I hurried—well, *waddled*, really—into the bedroom.

Excited to get back out there and take my husband's hand, so proud to be seen with him.

I peeled the wet dress off and adjusted the bra over my aching breasts, then checked my hair in the mirror, making sure my auburn curls didn't look too wild.

That was when I saw somebody in the shadows.

Whirling around so fast I hit my elbow on the doorknob, I saw my brother-in-law emerge from the rumpled bed.

"Mano, what are you doing here? Get out!"

He strode toward me. Casual, relaxed. Like he had *any* right to be in my bedroom half-naked, no shirt on, his pants hanging low on his hips.

Clutching the wet dress to my chest, I stumbled backwards.

"Stop! What are you doing?"

But Mano only put an arm around my thick waist and pulled so I was flush against his body. He was like a shorter version of my husband, his chin covered in stubble that he dragged along my throat.

“Kiss me,” he rasped.

“Ew, what is *wrong* with you?”

Just then the door to the bedroom was thrown violently open, crashing against the opposite wall.

“What the hell is happening in here?”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2

Léonie

My breath still caught in my throat every single time I saw him, butterflies fluttering low and dirty in my stomach to remember that he was *mine*.

Étienne was wearing a white shirt that seemed molded to his body, that accentuated every ridge of his muscles and his coiled, tense power.

But his dark brows were drawn together and he looked livid with anger.

“What the hell are you doing in this room with my brother?”

“Étienne, I—*nothing*, of course!”

For a minute, I foolishly wondered in my innocence what in the world he could be talking about.

Then, as Mano only leaned back against the wall and didn’t say anything, I realized in our half-dressed states that my husband thought this looked—*incriminating*.

“Nothing happened here!” I cried. “Your brother was in here when I came in.”

“So naturally you undressed in front of him,” Étienne retorted, his hard eyes flicking between the both of us.

“Of course not—I mean, I didn’t see him right away! Not until only a few seconds before you came in.”

“Oh,” he said coldly. “Of course. That seems likely.”

He stalked into the room and I shrank back against the door.

“How long has this been going on?”

“Nothing is going on! You can’t possibly think anything is going on!”

Other people were in the doorway, I realized. Placidie. Faustine. In my panic I couldn't see who else.

Please, don't let my family hear until I can get this straightened out!

"Come on," Faustine said, her overlined lips curving up at me. "You didn't think you could hide him forever from your husband?"

"Hide *what*?"

Étienne looked at the unmade bed and flicked the covers aside, where I saw—a torn condom wrapper!

"Wh—what could that be from?"

"I don't know," Étienne said coldly. "Why don't you tell me why I found you undressed with my brother."

"You can't—possibly believe! You aren't seriously suggesting—"

Always shy and awkward, now I was almost inarticulate with confusion.

To my horror, I began to see my family fill the doorway too.

The whole Pinoteaux family was different shades of red—from deep silvery auburn, to light strawberry blonde, and the bright flaming red of my brother.

What were they all going to say now?

I had been so incredulous and in shock the day my father had told me Étienne wanted to marry me.

"You must—be mistaken," I had protested.

Da had little patience, and none for his only daughter.

"Don't be an empty-head. Can't you see he's crazy about you?"

But I couldn't see that. Had never seen that. It didn't matter. I would have married him even if he'd hated me.

That's why my brain was slow to accept what Étienne was accusing me of.

"I think it's pretty clear from this condom wrapper what was going on," he snarled.

"No—absolutely not—Mano—"

But my brother-in-law only shrugged.

"I didn't think anyone would come in."

With an inarticulate roar of fury, Étienne tore his brother away from the door and closed big fingers around his throat.

"What has happened?" I heard the voice of my brother Réjean calling out. "We are outside waiting for the gifts to be opened."

Étienne turned around, his movements sleek, predatory, deadly.

There was complete and utter silence as I desperately tried to cover myself up.

“When I made a marriage agreement with the Pinoteaux family, I was promised a faithful wife. Not a slut.”

“*What?*” Réjean thundered. “She has not been unfaithful. I’d vow on the ancestors she hasn’t been.”

“Your sister Léonie is pregnant. But *I no longer know if I’m the father.*”

“Impossible.”

“I just caught her here in my brother’s arms.”

“No—” I choked out, but he ignored me.

“The Pinoteaux family name is shamed. I went into this marriage with good faith and a good name. You have wronged me. You have shamed my family with this deception. It is an insult I must respond to or lose status.”

The silence was crushing, the guilt seeping into my soul.

Even though I knew it wasn’t my fault. *Couldn’t* have been my fault.

In our culture, honor and family name were everything. And Étienne had just humiliated my brother and, by extension, the whole Pinoteaux family.

Réjean could not let this go, or lose even more face.

“I didn’t do it—” I burst out.

“*Silence,*” Étienne snarled.

Réjean’s nostrils flared.

“Perhaps we should have given her to Mano instead,” my brother said.

“Perhaps he would have taken a firmer hand with her.”

Wait, what? Mano wanted me?

I was so shocked I could only stare at Étienne’s brother, and, to my discomfort, Mano was looking at me, too, with an expression on his face that I couldn’t figure out.

But Étienne was already lunging at Réjean, my brother’s jaw moving under his ginger beard.

They met with a crash, Mano and the other Bastides shifting back and forth, watching the Pinoteaux.

Was this going to turn into open warfare?

Réjean might outweigh Étienne by forty pounds, but I had never seen my husband defeated in a fight. *Ever.* He did not fight for fun. Even at the fair. He fought for status, for his name, for honor.

Réjean took a swing, aiming for my husband's jaw, but the blow only glanced off as Étienne barreled into him.

Réjean's arms windmilled, attempting to dislodge Étienne, but my husband brought his knee up and drove Réjean's face into it.

My brother staggered and, despite his much greater size, Étienne was able to knock him off his feet and send Réjean crashing to the ground.

God's blood, my heart was pounding as my husband stood victorious over my fallen brother.

Étienne spat in Réjean's face, and put a big boot on his throat, just for a moment, but long enough for everyone to see. Then he wrote it with the tip of his boot.

Léger

Weak, loser

He prowled toward my other family like a powerful panther as Réjean rolled away.

"I didn't make an agreement over a slut. What will you give me now?"

He spread his arms wide, his shirt slick with sweat, the long lean lines of his arms deadly, powerful.

Margot's eyes were wide and shocked as she stared at me.

"We can't do anything without my father here," Réjean said, shooting me a look of cold loathing as he got heavily to his feet.

Étienne made a noise of disgust.

"That is not necessary."

"Nevertheless, the arrangement was between our fathers. It will wait until then. But you would certainly be within your rights to turn her out of the house if she is a whore. Simply turn her out of your home and let the mountain take care of the rest."

Prickly panicky heat broke out on my skin.

I opened my mouth to speak.

My own brother. Proposing that Étienne leave me in the worst part of the mountains, out exposed to the elements and wild animals.

"You think I should leave your sister to die?"

Réjean shrugged. "Or leave her here and I will turn her out the other side of the mountain."

He made a move like he was going to grab me, and I instantly shrank back.

How had things spiraled out of control like this?

Étienne scoffed, and wrapped his own hand around my arm, pulling me back from my brother, but there was no kindness in it, or in him.

He turned my face toward him, then grabbed a pen from a cup on my side table.

“No,” I protested. “Please don’t do this. I’m innocent, I swear—”

But with my face trapped under his hard fingers I could feel what he wrote on my forehead.

Légère

Weak, shameful

“You’d like the problem to go away that quickly, wouldn’t you?” my husband asked Réjean. “Unless you want the truce to be over today, the marital agreement will stand until I can speak to your father.”

“If you wish to raise a bastard, that is entirely your choice,” Réjean retorted.

My husband’s spit was still sliding down Réjean’s face, and he was too proud to wipe it off. His status had already been damaged; he could not risk it further.

“You will pay for what you have done,” Étienne said coldly. “Leave this property, you and all your family.”

As frightening as the red-hot flame of his anger had been, his cold granite face was worse, as my husband escorted me with hard, tight fingers into his SUV.

“Pinoteaux family are dogs.”

What was he going to do with me? He hadn’t handed me over to my brother to be left on the side of the mountain to fend for myself. Did that mean somewhere, deep down, he still had doubts about what he had seen? That deep down, buried below all the bullshit someone had been feeding him, he still loved me?

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Come with us,” Placidie said, putting a hand around my arm, the tips of her sharp nails jabbing into my skin.

“Where? I don’t want to,” I said, feeling tears prickle my eyes. “Please, Étienne, just give me five minutes. I don’t understand what you are even accusing me of.”

Faustine’s lip curled up at my obvious distress.

“Shouldn’t it be obvious? Cheating.”

“I would never—”

But Étienne had his fingers firmly on my arm and there was no option but to follow.

I was placed into the back of the SUV, my palms slick with sweat, and we set off down the windy mountain roads, with Étienne at the wheel.

“Stepping out on Étienne?” Faustine asked coolly. “I wouldn’t have thought you’d dare to face his temper.”

I gasped. “Is that what you all think happened? Étienne, *tell* them. Tell them how much I love you. The very idea is. . . ridiculous. I’m nine months pregnant!”

“Don’t talk to me about the baby. Now get out.”

I looked around, bewildered to find myself at the small, brown-brick building.

“Where are we going? Why are we at the *hospital*?”

Faustine smiled at me. “Can’t you guess?”

But I couldn’t. I just thought they must be concerned about my baby, making sure he was all right.

I was hooked up to the monitors, my heart in my throat until I heard that reassuring *thump thump thump* of his tiny strong heartbeat.

There you are, I thought, smiling at the screen as he came onto the ultrasound feed, his little feet kicking like crazy.

Oh, you’re just like your daddy. Restless and full of energy.

Étienne had gone to get a doctor, and I was left alone in the cold sterile room with Placidie and Faustine.

“You just could *not* keep your legs together, could you?” Placidie said, her mouth in a thin line. “I warned him. I warned him how it would be.”

Tears were rolling down my cheeks now, and I couldn’t stop them.

“You know how this looks for him?” Faustine demanded. “To have a slut for a wife?”

“I am not a s-slut!” I protested, feeling that familiar relief when my husband came back in the room.

But it didn’t last for long.

“Étienne, please, they’re saying such awful things to me,” I whimpered, nausea rising in my throat. I felt like I was going to vomit, and my forehead seemed to burn knowing what he’d written there.

But it was like I hadn’t even spoken. The man with him wasn’t my usual doctor, an unfamiliar older man with gray hair and a white coat.

“Doctor, has she been with any other men?” Étienne demanded, and the shame and confusion filled me until I wanted to sink to the ground.

The idea that I would have brought shame to the Bastide name--

“What—*monsieur*—we can’t—” he protested.

“*Has she been with any other men?*” Étienne raged, his big hand slapping a glass jar on the side table against the wall shelf, where it landed with a shattering crash.

“I want a clear answer. Yes or no. It shouldn’t be that fucking difficult to tell me. Has there been another man’s cum in that pussy or not?”

I began to tremble.

I had seen him angry, of course, but never like this. Never at me.

“Please,” I begged again, feeling my throat go dry, afraid the words wouldn’t come out. “Étienne, you know I have *never* been unfaithful to you! I never would!”

He looked coldly at me. “That’s not what I have heard.”

“Who told you that?” I wailed, feeling pieces of my heart splintering off at the look on his face. It was like he *hated* me. How could this be possible?

How could his feelings turn so quickly?

“Who told you I was unfaithful? It is a l-lie!”

If I could only get the *words* out, he would see that this was just a tragic misunderstanding. Surely he could never dream it of me. Me, who had been his ever since the first moment I saw him!

“Never mind who has told me,” Étienne said. “What matters is that I have been told. I’m not raising your bastards, Léonie. If you think I will do so out of kindness, you’re wrong. I’m going to find out right now who is lying to me and who is not.”

His eyes slid over to the side of the room. Was he looking at his informant? At the person who had told him these awful things?

But I couldn’t tell who he was looking at. Was it Placidie or Faustine? *Who?*

Faustine held up something to my husband and a look of absolute loathing crossed Étienne’s face, so dark and forbidding that I began to tremble.

I twisted to see a packet of cigarettes in her hand, their fingers brushing as she passed it over.

“I found this on your private balcony.”

"I don't know whose that is!" I protested. "I've never seen it before in my life!"

Étienne only glared at me. Those arms had been around me so many times. But right now they were crossed across his muscular chest, and he was giving me the kind of look usually reserved for everyone else *but* me.

"You have to *believe* me," I pled.

None of his family liked me. But who would have filled his ears with lies?

"What have you been doing?" Étienne gritted out, crushing the cigarettes in his fingers. "Have you been bringing men to our bedroom, fucking them on the balcony? Who the fuck have you been letting in your pussy?"

"No one!" I cried, shrinking back on the table, curling my legs protectively under me. "I swear on my Gran's life. On all my ancestors' graves. No one at all! I love you so much. You know that!"

"We are here for a paternity test," Placidie interposed. "They will compare your blood samples with a swab from Étienne's cheek and then we'll know for sure."

"This is ridiculous," I protested, "Étienne, you cannot think for a moment I would ever be unfaithful to you."

I reached out for him, but he brushed my hand away.

"Then where did that condom come from?"

"One of the security guards, maybe? Someone on patrol?" I asked timidly.

"Do you really think any of the men under my command would *dare* go into my personal quarters without permission?" Étienne asked.

"But—"

I could not understand it.

"Why are you being like this?" I cried, trying to be brave but everything was so scary and upsetting and I kept getting painful Braxton-Hicks contractions all over my belly.

Everyone in the room was staring at me.

"Étienne you know I—have been in love with you ever since I was—18!" I said, unable to control the tremble in my voice.

Faustine made a little noise of derision in her throat, and I wanted to cry *you were too!*

“Have you?” he asked, narrowing his eyes. “Or maybe you’re just a liar. I guess we’ll see what the paternity test says.”

He snapped his fingers at the nurse, who unwrapped a little cotton swab.

“Do it,” my husband said, his fingers tapping impatiently on the examination table. And I watched with a sickening lurch in my stomach as the nurse swiped his cheek. Tight, barely-controlled anger rolled off him in waves.

“Your father assured me you were a virgin. Was that a lie, too?”

“No, of course it wasn’t!” I cried. “I’ve only ever been with you.”

“Why should I believe you? You’re at home by yourself plenty.”

“Because you’re always away working!”

“I’ve been told you act inappropriately with men, too. Flirting, getting close. Touching them.”

“That’s also a lie! Who told you that?”

The tears were streaming down my face now. Because this was insanity. He could not possibly believe these lies over his own wife’s word!

“Be quiet, woman. We will get the results soon and then we will see if you’re telling the truth or you’re a little slut.”

I subsided into silence, trying to quiet my sniffles.

At least the paternity test would reassure his mind. And then maybe we could move past this, figure out why he had believed someone else, and fix it.

Because not only had I never been unfaithful, but I’d never even *looked* at another man.

Even the thought of another man was repulsive to me. Étienne had my whole heart and he always had.

But when the doctor strode back in his white coat, he looked at the two of us, and he said something I knew must be *impossible*.

“Mr. Bastide, you are not the father of your wife’s baby.”

CHAPTER 3

Léonie

“**W**hat have you done?” Étienne turned toward me, his fingers tightening over the bars on the examination table until his knuckles were pure white against the deep tan of his skin.

I felt my husband’s anger and disbelief like a physical blow, like something had cratered inside me.

“No no no. . .it’s not *possible*,” I whispered, my throat feeling scratchy. “There must be some *mistake*. Please, you have to believe me.”

“Why would you do this?” Étienne demanded, the only sound in the room besides my ragged breathing the steady *thrum* of our baby’s heartbeat on the screen.

“There is no *other man*!” I cried. “Have you ever seen me even *look* at another man? They don’t exist to me!”

It seemed inconceivable that my husband could be unaware of my embarrassing obsession with him, the humiliation of knowing I loved him more than he loved me.

But I loved him anyway. I couldn’t help it. *He* had a whole world out there in the mountains, but *I* had no world other than him.

Everyone knew I’d follow Étienne Bastide off a cliff if he told me to. That all he had to do was raise an eyebrow or a long, strong finger and I’d do as he asked.

He bent closer, and I whimpered, that distinctive scent of cologne mixed with rough Appalachian herbs. My husband always smelled like the mountains, different with each season, because he knew his range so well,

knew every herb and flower of his territory up to where it met Boudreaux territory to the South.

“That’s not what I’ve heard. I’m gone a lot. I would have thought you were smart enough to keep your legs closed.”

The harsh rebuke stung, and my cheeks flushed to hear him say such things to me with his family and *Faustine* right there.

“But *you*, Étienne, have *you* ever seen me look at another man?” I asked, my hands clenched in tight fists.

I never spoke to my husband like this. It wasn’t done in our families. It was not the way of things. But as I struggled to sit up on the table I felt desperate for him to understand.

He didn’t answer, his dark eyes boring into mine.

How could he not read the *truth* of what I was saying on my face?

“Whatever you’ve been told is a lie. I promise.”

But Étienne pointed at the doctor. “You think I’m a *fool*? The *paternity test* doesn’t lie.”

And the words seemed to slide back down my throat, because how could I argue against it? How could I convince him? *Somewhere* there had been a mistake. I didn’t know how or why. But it was the only explanation. Someone wanted to break us up.

Étienne stalked across the room and cocked his head as he looked up at the monitor, our baby still pumping his little fists and kicking his tiny little toes.

Placidie was shaking her head. Like she didn’t even want Étienne to get closer to his son.

“Whose bastard child is this?” he rasped, pointing at the screen. “It’s not goddamn mine. So whose is it?”

“Please,” I wept. “*Please*. When would I have had a chance to cheat on you? I spend all day at our home and you know who comes in and out of there.”

“Perhaps you did not want to marry me,” he countered. “Perhaps you had another lover and your parents forced you to marry me.”

“No, never!” I said, shocked. “There is no one else, Étienne. No one but you.”

He scoffed, and turned away from the monitor as my heart crumbled into ruin.

How could he look at the ultrasound and deny the evidence in front of his eyes? To me I could see nothing but a resemblance to him in our child's vitality and strong, pulsing heart.

"Perhaps—the more detailed imaging?" a nurse ventured in a timid voice. "This is only the 2D imaging. There is—more detailed imaging we can do. It costs a little more, but surely. . ."

The doctor shot a glare at her. "I will take it from here, Nurse. Your opinion is unnecessary."

"No," Étienne said with disgust. "I don't want to see further evidence of her betrayal."

"But they would show," I begged. "They will show that the baby is yours. *Look* at him."

"Sit back," the nurse told me. "You are breathing so hard you might hyperventilate."

The entire room was silent.

"There is no reason not to!" I insisted.

Étienne wasn't looking at me, and it was like being plunged into darkness.

"*Fine*," he said in a tight voice and I felt almost weak with relief again, as the nurse hastened to switch to the much more defined 5D imaging, and in only a few seconds vivid, colorful images of our son filled the screen.

These were much more detailed and even my wrecked and anxious heart filled with joy as I watched our baby's strong, determined fists and the perfection of each tiny finger and toe.

"That's him," I said, and this time the tears felt happy.

How could they not be? I was looking at the evidence that my husband loved me, that he chose *me*. That he had put a baby in me.

"Étienne, look," I almost laughed. "Look at the shape of his nose. Look at the color of his hair. He looks like *you*. He's *yours*."

My husband said nothing, still standing in front of the screen, his tall, strong frame with all its suppressed power and vitality concentrated on the image of our baby in my belly.

Claim him, I wanted to beg. You must feel what I do, that urge to protect and cherish our baby. I *know* you love him. You *must*.

"You know who it looks like," Faustine said, as she and Placidie stared at the screen.

"Who?" I asked.

“Your brother’s friend Bruno. One of the Pinoteaux guards.”

The blood seemed to drain from my face.

“He does not! He does *not* look like Bruno! I’ve barely even seen Bruno since I got married.”

“Are you *sure*?” Faustine said.

“What do you think?” my mother-in-law asked Étienne, shooting me a venomous look.

“I know nothing about babies. But I don’t see any evidence of Bastide blood.”

I could only stare in disbelief.

Where had that condom wrapper come from? The cigarette pack? What motive did anyone have for falsely incriminating me?

Étienne was still staring at the screen, and Faustine came up behind him, her pink-tipped nails touching his elbow and my stomach sunk to see the easy familiarity between them, the way he turned and bent down to listen to what she had to say.

“That hair color—yours is black, but this baby’s looks brown. And I don’t think the nose is your shape either.”

“You’re right,” my husband said. “*That* is not my baby.”

“I told you,” Placidie said. “I told you about marrying into the Pinoteaux. They are not trustworthy.”

For your next romance novel.

Visit [Lokepub](#) and find a story to read.

I lurched upright, swinging my feet off the exam table.

“How can you say that isn’t your baby? The one we have been so excited for?”

But Étienne’s face was set.

The 5D image slid off the screen and it felt like my hopes that this could be resolved easily slid off too.

But still I tried to get through to him.

“I promise that is *your* baby! I have not been unfaithful. There must be some mistake.”

Étienne shook his head.

“Faustine,” my husband said, and the sound of her name in his mouth made me so jealous. Why did it sound so low and sensual?

“My *wife*,” he spat the words like they were a curse, “claims the paternity test must be wrong. Can you go with the doctor and ask them to run the sample again? See if there’s any possibility there was a mistake.”

The tone of his voice made it obvious he thought it was a ridiculous idea.

“Can I see the test?” I asked. “I want to figure out what must have happened.”

“I’ll take that,” Faustine said as she snatched it from the table. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure there was no mistake.”

“But—” I protested as I met her eyes.

“Come with me,” Étienne interrupted, jerking his head to the door, and I was left to get off the table by myself and stumble after him.

Faustine had a little smile on her scarlet red lips as we left, and I had a sinking, horrible feeling that she would do *anything* but fix this mess.

How could I trust she would even do what my husband had asked?

“The samples—they must have been mixed,” I babbled on as Étienne, Placidie, and I got in the SUV. “Or—maybe they did his cheek swab wrong.”

“How did that other dick feel in your mouth?” Étienne snarled coldly as he spun the big vehicle out of the parking lot, and I knew, could feel in my *bones*, where he was going, his ever-present security following along behind. “Did you take off your ring or did he fuck you in the ass knowing you’re married?”

“Étienne, please—*stop!*” I cried, tears blurring my vision as he drove down the mountain roads. “If you would just let me *explain*—”

The set of his face was void and expressionless. Étienne did not show emotion unless he desired to. I should know that very well.

“You and this bastard baby are going somewhere while I decide what to do with you.”

We drove down the winding roads, down low into the valley, and I began to get increasingly frightened the lower we got. This was a long way from my husband. From my home.

Finally, we pulled up to a high gate, its iron bars overgrown with thick ivy, and Étienne got out, ripping the ivy away. Then without a glance back at me, he flicked open a black box and rapidly punched in a code.

The doors swung open and I began to see men emerge from the shadows, men with sharp knives, who nodded to Étienne and fell in silently behind us.

The driveway was long and overgrown too, and we emerged from fields of wildflowers to an old-fashioned wooden lodge lying silent and dark in the shadows of the mountains.

No lights glowed from within. The entire place looked abandoned and dark.

And it dawned on me. My husband was planning on imprisoning me here.

“Get out,” he bit.

“Don’t leave me here,” I begged, unbuckling my seatbelt with trembling fingers. “Please don’t leave me here. Give me a c-chance, Étienne, to *explain*—”

“Give me your ring,” he demanded.

“M-my ring, no, please—”

“Your *ring* or I’ll take it from you.”

His jaw was set and rock-hard.

Shamed, I pulled the beautiful ring off my finger and handed it over. I didn’t know what kind of diamond it was, only that Étienne had said it was a fallen star, big and translucent, with all different colors that danced inside it—sunset reds and oranges and summer sky blues and buttercup yellows and cow-cream white.

He shoved the ring in his pocket, and it felt like the baby and I were already being erased from his life.

I was trembling from head to foot, still so shell-shocked that I could barely speak.

To have *Étienne* turn on me, *Étienne* who I loved more than anyone else in the world. . .

“If I can prove to you that you’ve been lied to, that I am innocent—”

My husband’s hands were tapping impatiently on the side of the car, and he was looking off into the distance, back up those mountains.

“Réjean is arrogant,” he said, the confrontation with my brother clearly uppermost in his mind. “Small-pricked soft-bellied dog.”

“And yet you’ve brought his unfaithful sister and her bastard baby out here,” Placidie said, glancing over at me.

“Please, my love—”

Étienne slammed his hand into the side mirror, sliding his eyes over me as he stalked back around to the driver’s side of the big SUV.

“I should have listened to my mother.”

For several long moments as the SUV started to move I was frozen in shock and horror, forcing myself to breathe as the emotional blow reverberated through my body.

He regretted our marriage. He regretted choosing me.

And then I turned around to see the lodge, the evening shadows creeping over it, the windows dark and shuttered.

What was in there?

Panic engulfed me. I couldn’t be left alone here!

Clutching my swollen belly, I headed down the driveway, really more of an overgrown path, waddling as fast as I could after the SUV.

But it was already at the end of the drive.

The gate was already open.

And then he was already gone.

There were little tight pulses all over my belly and I was cramping up, gasping for breath.

When the gate clanged behind my husband, I sunk to my knees and slid down through the overgrown meadow to the ground on my hands and knees.

My ribs were aching and it was like I couldn’t catch my breath. The wild night smells of the mountain filled my nostrils, and for the first time, they frightened me.

He had abandoned me. To be without Étienne for a single night gave me anxiety. To be without him for even longer—it was unendurable.

“Let me help you up,” an unfamiliar voice said. “it will do you no good to lie on the ground in your condition.”

I knew it was true, and wearily I dragged myself up and turned around.

But the person who met my eyes was so unexpected and so impossible, that all I could do was open my mouth and scream.

CHAPTER 4

Léonie

This man in front of me looked almost exactly like my husband, tall, pitch-black hair, strong brows, that unmistakably hard and sensual Bastide mouth. Only this man had a dark beard. And his eyes were kind.

“W—who are you?”

“For my sins, I’m Hugo Bastide.”

Still I stared. Now that I looked closer, he was several years older than Étienne, perhaps in his early 30s, but surely this couldn’t be a cousin—not with how similar they looked!

He helped me up, his hands strong and capable, and my shock must have been written all over my face.

“I’m Étienne’s older brother. And from the fact that he came himself to leave you here—you must be his wife Léonie. I’m sorry we’re meeting like this.”

“But—he doesn’t have an older brother!”

Hugo’s mouth twisted up in a bitter smile.

“Yes, he does. I live here.”

“You live *here*? But why? I’ve never seen you. . .”

“This is where he puts the people he’s ashamed of.”

“Why is he ashamed of you?” I asked, and Hugo reached beside him for a cane.

Oh.

“I’m—sorry,” I said. “I s-still don’t understand—”

“All my brother cares about is the honor of our family name. And he’ll do anything to preserve it. Those who don’t have the strength to preserve our family name, or who project an image of weakness, are cast out.”

I was still, *still* so naive and ignorant of the world around me that I could only stare.

“That doesn’t seem fair. That doesn’t seem like something Étienne would do.”

Hugo looked at me for a moment, his eyes flicking past the *léger* written on my forehead. But instead of instantly correcting me, he only gave my hand a brief squeeze.

“Come inside,” he said. “Tell me what happened that you have been left here.”

I was nervous looking up at the dark lodge, but relieved to see Hugo turn on lights as we entered.

At least I wouldn’t be wholly alone.

Inside was a little less scary than I had feared—the walls were faded green wood, and everything was a bit *worn*, but things were good quality, a solid wood table, big fireplace, and a window that looked out over the meadows.

I had never been down this low in the valleys, not overnight, and it was so strange and unsettling to have the mountains looming tall over me. Étienne *loved* living on the peak. Said it made him remember the mountains were wild, but he was the master of them.

“I’ll let you have my room on the first floor,” Hugo said. “You don’t need to be going up and down the stairs in your condition.”

In my condition, I thought numbly. Yes, my condition of my husband hating me now.

My condition of loving a man who believed everyone *but* me. A man who should have trusted *me* instead of his family.

What was he doing right now?

Did he miss me? Or was he going to sleep convinced I was a whore, a slut, an unfaithful wife?

Was Faustine comforting him. . .

I opened my mouth to protest Hugo’s kindness, but only a croak came out as the enormity of my situation was crashing in on me.

“Thank you,” was all I could manage.

It seemed there were two servants here, a couple in their 40s named Tilly and Armand, who had already gone to their separate quarters in the back, so Hugo warmed up some of the supper Tilly had made earlier.

“What happened?” Hugo asked gently. “Congratulations on your pregnancy, by the way. You look beautiful, and I hope your baby is doing well.”

There was a massive lump in my throat, and I could only be miserably grateful that he hadn’t commented on the shame marked in dark, angry lines across my forehead.

“My baby is doing well. He—Étienne—doesn’t think it’s his.”

Hugo’s brows drew together.

“Why?”

I bowed my head, expecting this kind man’s demeanor to change entirely once I confessed the truth.

“I—it’s so embarrassing, but he caught me in the bedroom with—your other brother Mano! At our baby shower, too! So of course then he wondered who actually was the father of my baby.”

I flushed, aware of how shameful this must look to him.

“But I swear I had no idea Mano was there, or even *why* he was there. Or why he would put me in such a compromising position! Then Étienne—he had me take a paternity test and *the baby isn’t his*! But that’s *impossible*, and I have been wracking my brains trying to figure out how something like this happened. I know it’s impossible because I’ve only ever slept with him!”

There was a pause for a moment.

“Who else was there at the baby shower?” Hugo asked.

“Oh—my husband, your—mother, Mano, and—Faustine. My family, all except for my father, who has been away. Several of the other prominent families.”

“Ah,” Hugo said.

There was another pause.

“Eat now,” he said, but there was still kindness in his voice, so I forced myself to choke down some of the ham, the fondant potatoes, even though I wasn’t hungry at all.

“*L’enfant* needs the nourishment,” Hugo said gently when I paused. “I’ll have Tilly make some leek soup tomorrow. Something a little lighter and easier to get down.”

Tomorrow. How many tomorrows would I be here?

"Thank you," I said.

My belly brushed against the table, and I felt a solid, sturdy kick, a ripple across my belly.

How excited I'd been to feel the first twinges of nausea. After that long engagement, to get pregnant practically on our first month together was such a blessing. I felt so favored. So lucky.

When we first got married I'd asked my husband, very awkwardly and shyly, if I should be on birth control, and he'd only run strong fingers down my body, making goosebumps break out and shivers run up and down my spine.

"Not for you, Léonie. *I want a baby.*"

And I'd gotten pregnant. Been so proud, that he was happy, that I'd pleased him, that here was something only *I* could give him.

And now—he didn't even want me or the baby.

Hugo led me down the hallway to his bedroom. His room was cozy, with its own fireplace, and filled with bookshelves.

"I can't take your room," I protested, but he shook his head.

"They'll keep me locked up here, but never fail to consult me about things like logistics for the business. What you see here are my bribes for good behavior."

He smiled again, finding a bitter amusement in the Bastides.

It did not seem fair to me, and I didn't know how Placidie could accept this state of affairs. If it was *my* son, I would move heaven and hell to get him out of imprisonment.

"If I behave, I get books. The *reward* for not trying to escape."

The truth hung between us. That he *had* tried to escape. That he had failed.

"Are the guards always here?" I asked.

My brother-in-law bowed his head.

"Almost always. Or if they aren't, the gates are always locked and barred. But sleep now. I'll show you around in the morning. It will help you not to be so frightened. I promise the guards won't bother you."

"Why do you believe me?" I asked impulsively, my eyes feeling red and raw with crying. "You are the only one who has."

Hugo turned around, one hand on the doorknob, the other on his cane.

"*Because I know the Bastides.* I know what they're capable of."

In horror, I had to realize that I, on the other hand, knew very little about the family I had married into. . .

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5

Léonie

Exhausted and shattered, I slept.
And I dreamed.

I dreamed about my wedding night.

My cousin Margot had so frightened me with dire-sounding warnings.

That men were hard. Men were cruel. That I must hold my tongue and let him do what he wanted to me. It was the way of things.

Nothing or no one on earth could have talked me out of marrying Étienne, but I was still very nervous when he brought me into the Bastide home, so high and so far from anyone else.

But he hadn't been terrifying at all.

He had been gentle, so gentle, stroking my hair and touching my body so carefully with his big, rough hands.

And then there had been a *pinch* of pain, sharp and bright, powerful enough to bring big plump tears to my eyes.

But he was there, his low, gravelly voice rumbling in my ear. And then it was only a dull ache. And then the ache had turned into a pleasurable throbbing. And then it didn't hurt at all.

No wife in the world could have spread her legs for her husband as eagerly as I did.

I knew he was a hard man. But he had always been gentle with me.

How had it all gone so wrong?

How had he gone from a man laughingly crooning old French folk songs and lullabies to my belly to this man who wouldn't even acknowledge our baby as his?

When I woke up, waddling as fast as I could to the bathroom because I had slept a *long* time, the pain of his rejection threatened to swamp me, but somehow I had to figure out what had happened and how it could be untangled.

The main question I had to figure out was *who did this?* Who had turned Étienne against me?

It could not just be an innocent mistake. Mano hadn't ended up half-naked in my room on accident. Someone had set me up on *purpose*.

My restless energy had to go somewhere, and I babbled it all to Hugo as he listened quietly, a book beside his plate.

I had never known someone who was interested in things like reading and study, who was a scholar, and I told him everything. All my longing and my fears.

Hugo was patient, listening, then gently trying to redirect my energy, showing me around the lodge and out on the porch, asking how far along I was and what the doctor had said about how my baby was growing.

But I was feverishly obsessed with one thing only.

What evidence would convince Étienne?

That first day began and ended with only Hugo and I, and no word from anyone else. Would Étienne change his mind? Would my brother reject how he had spoken to me and demand Étienne let me go?

The next day my heart leaped to see a big SUV at the gates.

It was my husband! He had found evidence that the test was wrong! He was here to bring me home!

But as I clutched the windowsill with anxious, feverish hands, wondering whether to run and beg him to believe me, or stay inside and wait, I saw it was only Placidie and Mano.

Mano.

Why had she brought him with her? And how could I get him to tell the truth?

"Interesting that my mother would come here with this particular son," Hugo said as soon as they entered.

Placidie only shrugged. "He is not to blame for the conduct of a loose woman."

My face burned with the injustice of her comment.

"I am not a loose woman! You should know I only love my husband!"

"I'm here to talk to Hugo."

“What were you doing in my bedroom?” I demanded to Mano. Why haven’t you told Étienne the truth?”

Mano looked unconcerned. “I told him you came onto me. I only went there to see if you really would whore yourself out.”

Hugo got up from the table, wincing in pain.

“Why were you in her room?”

“Pussy, big brother. Sweet, pretty pussy.”

“Well, you weren’t ever going to get that from me!” I flared angrily.

I felt angrier than I ever had been in my life, but I couldn’t make myself tamp it down.

Placidie stepped in between the three of us, lines tightening around her lips.

“Hugo, has she been crying to you about this nonsense? Léonie here was caught trying to whore herself out to her own brother-in-law and the paternity test showed her baby isn’t even Étienne’s. She’s just lucky she isn’t cast off into the mountains like she should have been. So if she tries to whine about that, tell her she should’ve kept her legs shut.”

Hugo raised an eyebrow.

“I believe her.”

Placidie’s hands tightened like claws around the pad of paper she was carrying.

“What is it with Bastide men and this Pinoteaux witch?” she bit out. “It’s like she has you all under a spell.”

“The Bastides are full of bullshit,” Hugo said bluntly, making his mother stiffen angrily. “Did you see the results yourself? You’re going to take *Mano’s* word for what happened?”

Placidie shot an irritated look at me.

“If you are asking if I saw the cells under a microscope, no I did not. Why would I disbelieve the doctor?”

“Maybe he was paid off,” Hugo said. “By *you*, perhaps?”

She scoffed. “You’re dealing in conspiracy theories. Why won’t you believe the obvious conclusion—the paternity tests showed Étienne isn’t the father, therefore, he isn’t the father.”

“Because mother, *I know what you’re capable of.*”

Placidie’s tightened skin went white.

“What has she done?” I asked eagerly. “What happened before?”

“Nothing. Sit down, stupid girl. That is old news and Hugo’s situation was not the same.”

“But did you oppose our marriage?” I pressed, amazed at my own audacity. “Did you try to keep Étienne from marrying me?”

Before, I never would have dared to talk back to my mother-in-law. *This wasn’t before.*

“My son was brought up to hate the Pinoteaux dogs. I course I opposed your marriage. A man like Étienne, with all his power and intelligence, to throw himself away on a weak woman like you? The idea was repulsive to me. He was thinking with his prick as men always do.”

My cheeks flamed at how she talked about my family. Was that why Étienne had been so ready to believe the worst of me?

“*Mme*, all that shit between our families is ancient history,” Hugo put in. “Is it?”

What shit was ancient history? There was so much I didn’t know, so much I was ignorant of. Étienne never talked to me about work, only the plants and flowers he had seen in the mountains.

But what else went on in the mountains?

“I don’t buy it because I know you, *Mme*, are as fluent in bullshit as any of them.”

“Are you accusing *me* of faking her paternity test? I don’t deny there are other women I preferred him to marry. Other women who would have been much better for him. You have no evidence, Hugo. I’m surprised at you, indulging in a whore’s lies.”

She looked amused instead of angry, supremely self-confident about herself and her place in the world.

“If it’s a lie, why hasn’t Étienne killed him yet? On some level I think he has doubts about this story that’s been concocted to sell to him.”

“What story?” Mano countered, circling his brother. “You forget I was there, with her in my arms.”

“You always *were* Mother’s little lapdog.”

“I’m not talking about this anymore,” Placidie rapped out sharply. “Sit down, Hugo. I need your advice on these accounts. Does it look like we are getting the proper percentage or is our man down in the valley taking some off the top?”

Hugo stared at her. “If you want me to help with the business, let me out of this prison.”

“If you want to eat, you’ll help me out.”

Hugo flicked his eyes over to me, then sat down heavily at the table.

“What do you have for me?”

Frustrated and achy, I began to make a cup of tea, my belly bumping into the counter. Their business talk washed uncomprehendingly over me as I took the steaming cup out to the porch.

How much did Étienne know? Did he know how much his mother hated me?

There was a noise beside me, and I saw Mano had come out, too.

“Get the hell away from me!”

“I’ll bring you some clothes,” he said abruptly. “So you have something else to wear besides Hugo’s old shirts.”

“Tell my husband there is nothing between us! I have never in my life flirted with you. I never encouraged you to come into my room. And we have *never* slept together.”

Mano lit up a cigarette. “You should know how stubborn Étienne is. He can’t be convinced of anything he doesn’t want to be. But me? I can be convinced of anything. Tell me, sweet girl, how much do you want your clothes?”

I hesitated. I *desperately* wanted my clothes. But I even more desperately wanted to clear up this mystery. And I did not want to be beholden to Mano.

I was becoming very convinced that Placidie had set this up to split Étienne and I apart.

Would Mano do what his mother said?

And could he be convinced to admit everything to my husband, so he’d let me out of this prison?

So I swallowed my anger and confusion.

“Yes, I would like my own clothes.”

Of course Étienne would be upset about hearing those lies, I told myself. Of course he would believe the paternity test, it was only normal to be angry about such things. Once I was able to show him evidence of the plot against me—he’d change his mind.

“How soon is your next doctor’s appointment?” Mano asked. “I can take you to it, if you like.”

Surprised, I blinked and looked fully at him. He was still leaning against the railing, lighting a cigarette as his eyes slid down my chest to where my

breasts swelled against Hugo's soft button-up shirt.

I wriggled my feet, uncomfortably aware suddenly that the bottom of the shirt only reached to the top of my thighs as Mano pushed off the railing and took a step toward me.

"N-no," I said. "I'm hoping to be back at home soon. So Étienne can take me."

Mano paused, and his eyes narrowed slightly. Up close, those Bastide eyes unnerved me, his dark stubble not hiding the silver scarmarks on his cheeks.

"My brother rejected you. Yet you still talk about him with that tone in your voice."

"Only b-because he believes lies about me," I said, my boldness growing. "When he knows the truth, he'll change his mind."

Mano frowned, and took another step toward me, forcing me to slide backward.

"And what is the truth?"

"You and *someone else* set this up, didn't you? I whispered.

I took another step back. Mano was close, way too close.

"Do you know where I got these scars?"

There was something he found amusing, something to twist his lips up, but I couldn't share his humor.

"Tell me the truth!" I insisted, staring at his face, trying to discern the truth of it in those dark eyes, the hard, scarred expression.

"Do you know where I got these scars?" he repeated.

Mano reached out and took one of my long, copper-red curls, rubbing it back and forth between his fingers in a way that made me want to vomit.

His fingers curved around my throat.

"One summer, before he had asked your Da for your hand, you were gathering ginseng and some of it fell out of your hands. I picked it up and handed it back to you, and when I did, our hands brushed together."

"I don't remember that—"

"And Étienne *thrashed* me for it. Forced me to get my knife out and defend myself. And, of course, against him I could not. Told me in no uncertain terms that you were his and if I ever touched you, I would get the same. So no, beautiful Léonie, I do not want to facilitate your reconciliation."

But before I could say anything else, Placidie called for him, and he followed her back out to the SUV.

My hair, my whole *body*, felt dirty at his touch.

Hugo and I stood on the porch, watching them go.

“What would happen if you tried to get out at the same time one of their SUVs does?” I asked.

“Don’t bother,” Hugo said. “The guards have been instructed to keep us in by force. You are not to put yourself at unnecessary risk.”

By force?

“When I leave, I’m taking you with me,” I said decidedly. “It is cruel and unjust to keep you here, and Étienne will agree with me once I explain it.”

“Perhaps,” Hugo smiled. “Let’s take a walk and then play a little mancala or *belote*.”

I didn’t want to bring my suspicions about Mano to him, so I let him distract me from my pain. Perhaps I was just overreacting. Later I wished I had told him everything I suspected. . .

Mano was back the next day, knocking on my door as I looked in Hugo’s bookshelves for something that would keep me from remembering, over and over again, how Étienne had looked when he wrote that horrible word on my forehead and what he had said to me.

“Come in,” I called, assuming it was Hugo.

“Here,” Mano said, stepping inside and holding out a brown grocery bag.

“Are those my clothes?” I asked, reaching eagerly for them.

“Say please,” he taunted, and suddenly I found I could not, could *not* beg the man who had set me up.

“Never mind,” I said. “I don’t want them.”

I turned away bitterly. There had been no word from Étienne. What if I didn’t get a chance to convince him I was innocent before the baby was born. . .

“All right, all right,” Mano said.

When I still didn’t respond, he put a hand on my arm and spun me around.

“Look at me when I talk to you, woman. I just did you a favor.”

“Who are you to order me around?” I retorted, feeling temper spark inside me. “You’re the one responsible for me being imprisoned here!”

“Oh, always so proud,” he snapped. “Proud Léonie Pinoteaux with her nose in the air and her legs snapped shut, always glued tight.”

I stared at him. “What are you *talking* about?”

“Pretending to be such a good girl, and all the time you were a conniving little wide-eyed gold-digger. Nothing would do for you but the best.”

“What do you know about anything?” I cried, trying to shove him away because he had crowded me against the bookshelves, so close I could smell the sweat off him, his belt buckle brushing against my bump. “What do you know about how I was back then?”

“I know plenty,” Mano said, “But you only had eyes for Étienne.”

“Don’t touch me!” I shrieked as his lips descended on mine, hard and demanding.

I slapped him as hard as I could on the cheek, and then Hugo was there, leaning heavily on his cane but looking angrily at his brother.

“You need to leave,” he said.

“What are you gonna do about it, *poule mouillée*?”

Weakling.

Hugo took his cane and swung it at Mano, stumbling heavily against the doorway, but the blow landed hard enough on Mano’s ribs that the other man was forced to drop his fistful of my hair.

“I bet you couldn’t do that again without falling,” he taunted, but in desperation I grabbed the fireplace poker and jabbed it into his back.

“Go away and never touch me again!”

“I’ll be back,” Mano snorted, dumping the grocery bag all over the floor. “Maybe you’ll be a little more grateful then. Maybe you’ll play nice with me. Or maybe I’ll tell my brother more about what we’ve been doing.”

“Liar!” I cried, watching him scatter maternity clothes all over the floor, kicking them towards me with his boot.

Étienne had to be told about this!

As soon as Mano left, I poured out most of what had happened to Hugo.

I had to tell Étienne. The motive was right there in front of me!

Mano was jealous of Étienne.

We discussed ways we could get in touch with Étienne, make sure he would listen to me. . .

There was a home phone here, programmed for only a few numbers and Hugo dialed one of the handful of people he was permitted to call.

“Yes?”

My knees went weak to hear my husband’s voice on the other end.

“It’s Léonie!” Hugo said, and I only prayed Étienne would believe him.

“Her water’s just broken and she’s gone in to labor! You need to get down here.”

“*Her water broke?*” he asked sharply, and inside I gloried to hear something in his voice that wasn’t cold indifference or anger.

There was still something there. Something like concern for me.

“The contractions—” Hugo began, but Étienne had already hung up the phone.

“Did it sound like he was coming?” I asked.

“Yes,” Hugo said, frowning a bit. “I only hope we can convince him to take a second look at the paternity test before he gets angry at the deception.”

Every moment was an eternity of pacing the kitchen floors until I saw that dark SUV at the gates. At last, it was him!

My heart leaped to see my husband’s tall, strong body, the way the bright sun hit on his tanned skin, making him gleam with health and vigor. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach at the way the tight shirt fit against his flat belly and muscular arms.

He had come! He had come!

I looked horrible, pale and wan, with big dark circles under my eyes and my red curls lank around my face. But I couldn’t worry about that.

Straightening Hugo’s hand-me-down T-shirt over my belly and tightening the rolled-up sweatpants, I hurried out to the porch.

But instead of rushing over to check on me, Étienne went around to the passenger door, opening it like a gentleman.

Out emerged Faustine, her hair falling down in shining waves, wearing a tight navy dress, a perfect line of lipstick across her upturned lips.

And on her finger was something shiny. . .

CHAPTER 6

Léonie

“**L**éonie?”

A shadow fell across the doorway.

And for a moment, one precious and fragile moment, I met his eyes, and I felt that thread pull tight between us. For a moment we were husband and wife again and the rest of it was a nightmare.

“Are you in labor?”

Was it my imagination or was he breathing heavily?

This was my chance. My chance to convince him.

“Running to greet me?” he bit out before I could say anything. “Trying to convince me you still love me? That you’re still a faithful wife?”

“Of course I still love you, Étienne!” I cried, desperation and hope warring inside me. “It doesn’t matter what happens, I’ll always love you!”

I fell into his arms and he didn’t stop me, as I landed on his chest, his heartbeat pounding in my ear, not caring that my belly was bumping into him, that there wasn’t any room with how swollen and big I was.

He smelled so delicious, so perfect, that I could only hold him tight, and whisper, in a voice that was breaking with emotion,

“I love you so much, please believe that I have always been faithful to you! Take me back home, please don’t leave me here!”

Étienne tipped my chin up so he could look directly into my eyes. His were coal-black, darker than anything, framed with those dark lashes and brows, the strong slash of a mouth.

“No matter what happened, you’d love me?”

“Yes, yes,” I cried eagerly.

For a moment he said nothing, his big hands spanning my face, pressing into my flesh.

Then he snorted, and those hard hands were on my arms, unwinding them, and carefully, firmly, setting me aside.

“Your lips are full of lies. I can’t believe *anything* you say. You aren’t even in labor. That was a bunch of bullshit.”

“Please, I have proof! It was the only way I could get you here, get you to listen to me!”

“Don’t listen to her,” Placidie put in as she and Faustine came up on the porch. “She’s just trying to manipulate you.”

“Hear her out,” Hugo said and Étienne’s lips curled up as he saw his brother.

“Stay out of this. If I want input on how to handle my own wife, I’ll ask.”

“You’re a fool,” Hugo said, straightening up to his full height. “Hot-headed, barbaric Frenchman. You’re so anxious to get the Bastides involved in a family feud you don’t realize *you’re* the one being manipulated.”

I squeaked as Étienne crossed the deck in two strides, his hands around his brother’s throat.

“Shut your mouth about things you don’t understand.”

“Please, listen!” I begged, trying to get in between the two of them. “Your whole family hates me! Your *Mme* even admitted that she didn’t want us to get married. The whole thing was a setup.”

Étienne shoved his brother away, and his distance was like a physical punishment, like my energy was all getting drained out of me, like my essence was getting leached out and spilling onto the ground.

I needed him to pull me out of this nightmare.

“It’s true I married you over the objections of my family. And how have you repaid me, Léonie?”

He pointed at my belly.

“Are you going to tell me who you let in your cunt?”

“Nobody, I swear no one! You *have* to believe me! Someone else must have messed with the test!”

“I did not touch your paternity test,” Placidie said coldly. “You have not needed anyone’s help to shame yourself, Léonie. But I see that your brother here is sympathetic to your plight.”

Étienne shrugged. “It does not matter what he thinks. He’d love to see me raise a bastard.”

“I asked the doctor,” Faustine put in. She was standing close, way too close to my husband, and I couldn’t help remembering all those days before he chose me that they’d been close, that he’d had an arm around *her*, a hand on *her* ass, their mouths meeting in a passionate clash of tongues and fingers and bodies. . .

“He said of course there is no truth to the conspiracy theory. No one tampered with the test.”

“You should ask the doctor yourself,” Hugo put in. “Think about who has a motive to split up your marriage.”

But Étienne, *nothing was getting through to him!*

“And Mano—he set me up,” I said desperately.

“And for what purpose? What would he have to gain by that?”

Now was the humiliating part. Now I would have to confess what Mano had done, how he had looked at me.

“I think he—has an interest in me.”

“An interest in you? And what the fuck do you mean by that? Stop speaking in riddles.”

“A s-sexual interest.”

My face was flaming in embarrassment and humiliation as my husband stared at me.

Faustine laughed, the tone cold and brittle in the silence.

“You’re delusional. Mano is interested in me. Has been courting me for a while. Everyone knows it.”

“Did *you* see anything?” Étienne demanded of Hugo.

Hugo glanced over at me. Would it help or hurt my case to explain that he’d seen Mano kissing me?

“I have seen him here, a—more than I might have expected. More than is necessary.”

“He’s been accompanying me,” Placidie put in.

She shifted her handbag to the other shoulder, and her eyes were cold and hard. *Your move*, her body said.

“I believe Léonie,” Hugo said in a tight voice. “If you weren’t such a fool you’d see she’s telling the truth.”

Étienne scoffed. “You’re soft. That’s all this is.”

“Won’t you—*isn’t there any way*—please—”

Étienne shrugged, breaking into my incoherent babbling. “What would you have me do? Disbelieve all the evidence in front of me?”

“And what is she wearing?” I burst out. “Did you give *her* my ring?”

He didn’t answer the question.

“If I had, could you blame me?”

“Yes, yes, I could! Because you refuse to believe me!”

I was fighting panic. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go.

Faustine’s smile was unendurable, and she deliberately put a hand on my husband’s arm, fingers splayed over his biceps. I wanted to fly at her—claw her eyes out. But that wasn’t how I had been raised.

Fighting was for boys and men.

Girls were supposed to be the soft ones.

“That’s *my* ring. You gave it to me. We’re still married.”

His strong shoulders shrugged, the muscles clearly visible underneath his thin shirt.

“Not for much longer. I won’t stay married to an unfaithful wife.”

My husband turned to go.

“You never loved me! You *can’t* have loved me, if you’d believe these lies!”

“Don’t give me that bullshit,” Étienne snarled, pointing a finger in my face. “I gave you plenty of attention. More than I should have.”

“Please, put your hand on my belly,” I cried, grabbing for his shirt, desperate for anything that would change his mind. “Then you’ll see. I promise. You’ll feel the connection, you’ll feel blood calling to blood. He’s your *son*, Étienne. If you turn your back on me, at least don’t turn your back on him.”

But his shirt slipped through my fingers, like my husband was removing every trace of me, like he couldn’t even bear my touch.

“I don’t want anything more to do with you or that bastard child. If you enjoy my brother’s company so much, let him leave the Bastides and take care of you. But there will never be a place for you again there.”

After that, everything was gray.

CHAPTER 7

Léonie

I lived in the void, in the space between earth and sky, in the blurry zone of constant, throbbing numbness and pain.

Étienne did not believe me, *would* not believe me.

He had taunted me by asking if I'd always love him, then flung my love back in my face.

Why had he married me, if he felt this way about me?

It must have been something he got in the marriage settlement with my Da. I did not even know what had been in it.

But I knew Étienne did not love me.

The only moments that broke through my unending pain were the kicks and ripples across my belly from my boy.

Étienne had wanted the name *Bérenger*, which meant boy in French, while I loved the name *Ciel*, which meant sky, from the heavens.

Étienne. Étienne, my love.

I ate and drank, but I hardly knew how or when.

Hugo fed me, Hugo made sure I had something to eat and drink.

Time passed, and it hurt.

Living hurt. I wanted to sink into the forest floor and go somewhere I didn't feel this, I wished I was a bird of prey, a hawk.

I wished I was something that could sink its teeth into Étienne.

The shame of his rejection filled me and I had to look back at every day since the first time we had met.

It had been enough to love him more. It had always been enough just to be able to love him. I didn't care that it was *more*.

It was the way of things. He was strong and I was not.

It was normal that I loved him more. But now he wanted none of it.

No man could have been kinder than Hugo, putting aside his own bitterness at his imprisonment to try and coax me out of my fugue state.

But nothing worked. I knew I had to live for my son, but it was like I couldn't make myself go through the motions.

My days were filled with a dull, constant fear that Mano would be allowed to come and take me away.

But if only I had known. . .

Hugo took me on walks outside to try and cheer me up, and today the sun was beating down on my head, but as usual I barely felt. The grounds outside were perhaps two acres of pretty, soft-smelling wildflowers and tall grasses with the occasional apple tree.

The rest was high iron bars and a fingerprint scanner to get in and out.

One end of the gates abutted a bit of the dense forest, another end was facing the road winding up and up to where Étienne still lived in the house we had shared.

Was Faustine there with him? Had he already asked another woman to marry him?

I didn't know, and I wouldn't know unless he came to visit again.

And he had no indication of doing that.

This is a prison, I thought with dull resignation. *I'm walking the prison yard.*

"Look at these," Hugo said, "Dutchman's Breeches. Aren't they so funny looking?"

He was pointing at a group of flowers in the hollow of a tree, but I couldn't make myself focus on them, my vision blurred and shadowy.

I knew he was trying to help me and that I was being ungrateful and horrible, but I still couldn't make myself even speak in response.

And then.

I heard the first shot.

My brain moved through a dense fog of depression, and I was slow to realize what had happened. Too slow.

It wasn't until Hugo lunged toward me that I realized what was happening.

With a cry, I dropped to my knees and scurried behind the tree, Hugo dragging me up against the bark as I cradled my belly protectively.

I heard another shot, and this one hit a branch behind us.

Suddenly, it was like the world was crystal-clear again, colors and sounds intruding with painful sharpness on my brain.

I wanted to live

“Security!” Hugo called. “Two intruders to the northwest!”

Another shot hit, closer this time, so close I felt bark shrapnel all down my arm.

My breath caught in my throat. It was a complete bluff, a total lie. There was no one at the lodge today but us and the two older servants.

“*Get them!*” Hugo barked, his voice sharper now, an order. “They’re hiding in those bushes right at the edge! Aim right there!”

There was a rustle of leaves and as soon as we heard that Hugo had me moving, down on the ground on my hands and knees among the high meadow grasses.

“Go!”

I crawled as fast as I could, my heart pounding through my chest, my breath rasping from the exertion.

I heard another shot, and Hugo’s low grunt of pain.

Twisting back, I saw a bloom of blood on his arm and, deep in the forest, I saw what looked like two flashes of red.

Red hair, narrowed eyes.

I thought I recognized those faces, the look of them, the set of their lips, but at this distance I couldn’t be sure.

Pinoteaux faces. But why the hell would my cousins be here?

Why would they want to kill me?

“*Hurry,*” I hissed back at Hugo.

His face looked gray, skin sagging.

Trying to get as flat as I could, I slithered backwards and draped one of his arms across my shoulder.

“Just go, Léonie!”

“And let me baby’s uncle die out here? Gods, no!”

Stumbling and sweating, we managed to reach the front steps.

Then we waited for several long moments. There wasn’t a breath of sound in the woods or fields around us. But were they still out there?

Hugo tapped my arm.

“I hear birds. Let’s go.”

Supporting each other, we made our way up the stairs and then into the house, but I didn't let my breath out until the door was safely slammed behind us.

My feet pattered on the wood floors as I raced into the kitchen to grab a kitchen towel to press on Hugo's wound, but to my relief his injury was not deep.

"It took a chunk out of you, but thank the ancestors it didn't hit a vein."

I looked down at my bloody hands. *Who was I?*

"What the fucking hell?" Hugo exploded. "Who wants to kill us?"

But who had been the target. Hugo? Or me? *Who wanted to kill me?*

I knew one person who might want to get me out of the way.

Who might want to get rid of his current wife to clear the path for a new one.

Who believed in mountain justice.

Étienne

Would the man I knew do that? But then again, how much did I really know him. . .

Now I had two choices.

I could either lay down and live in fear or stand up and fight this, and as I carefully bandaged Hugo up, I knew what my choice was going to be.

My relationship with Étienne might be dead, but no matter what he thought about *me*, I wasn't going to have my baby grow up not having a daddy. Not being acknowledged by his daddy. When I knew damn well who his daddy was.

Étienne was going to be forced to acknowledge his child.

But how to do that?

The first step was figuring out why my husband had believed the lies about me, why he was so quick to distrust me and throw the allegations in my family's face. And that meant I'd have to dig into the little hints I'd gotten about the feuding between our families.

"Where did the feud begin?" I asked Tilly the next day as we sat in the kitchen together.

I'd begun to gravitate more toward the kitchen—at first glance, Tilly seemed to be a stoic woman with a plain face and severe bun—but there was something comfortable about her, and being in the room with her as she baked bread or helping her skin a chicken was the closest I could get to contentment at the lodge.

Tilly frowned, concentrating.

"I know it involved ya'll granddaddies," she said. "And as far as I know, they both died, so according to mountain law that should have been the end of it."

"Then why is Placidie still obsessed with this feud if it was supposed to be over? Why would she try to stop Étienne's wedding over it?"

She shrugged.

"All I know is the Bastides hate the Pinoteaux, and the Pinoteaux hate the Bastides. And the Bastides don't forget. Ever. When they say they do, they're lying. Placidie has always thought Étienne hung the moon. She made no bones about the fact that he was her favorite. He was the one chosen to lead the Bastides when Étienne's Da was sick. And for her favorite to choose a Pinoteaux—that didn't sit right with her."

Well, the Bastides might be stubborn, but I could be stubborn, too. In fact, I could be a lot of things I'd never dreamed of.

"I want to get out of here," I told Hugo later, pacing up and down in his study.

Now that I was back in a strong mind, I was full of restless energy.

"How many times have you tried to escape?" I asked. "Let's figure out what went wrong."

One thing I loved about my brother-in-law is Hugo didn't waste time with bullshit about how it couldn't be done. He just looked at things logically and thoughtfully, pulling out some paper to give me rough sketches of how he'd tried to escape before.

"I've tried several different times. But I was always caught in the forest."

"Well, we will have to be sure *not* to get caught in the forest."

"The main problem is not having a vehicle or weapon, because we will have to go a long way to get out of his territory."

"What about Tilly and Armand?" I asked. "Do they have a vehicle? Any weapons?"

Hugo looked surprised.

"I'm not sure," he said slowly. "Their quarters are separate and locked. I presume they *do* have a vehicle. But they're employed by the Bastides."

"Employed by the Bastides," I said. "But I wonder if perhaps they are more loyal to *you*. After all, they've lived with you for years."

“Perhaps,” he said. “But they might also be too afraid of Étienne to do anything.”

“I am sick of hearing about Étienne!” I cried passionately. “I want to *wring* his throat!”

A smile played about Hugo’s lips.

“Well, we will try to escape without needing their help. At night perhaps, after they’ve gone back to their own quarters.”

“I don’t care about Étienne,” I lied. “But I want someone to *pay*. I want to prove I was right, and he was wrong. That I am carrying his baby.”

“If we escape,” Hugo said, “if we can find someplace else to go—somewhere else you can raise the baby. . .”

“I will still want him to acknowledge his child,” I said. “Even if it is just to send money our child is owed. How can I force him to accept our baby?”

“Well, what are you willing to do? How far are you willing to go?”

I hesitated, then crossed my fingers over my belly. I was almost 39 weeks now. Although my doctor had said first pregnancies often were overdue, in theory I could go into labor at any time.

And I wanted to be gone by then.

“What do you mean?”

“We need to get someone to admit they set you up. Then record it. Étienne would have to admit he was lied to.”

“How are we going to make them admit it?”

“I’ll ask you again, Léonie. *How far are you willing to go?*”

His eyes gleamed at me, and I felt anger growing, something deep and ancestral, something pulling up from the ground of my grandmother’s people.

Something feral that was *pissed* that my husband had done me wrong. Something that *snapped* and *bit* at the idea of my ring on another woman’s finger.

Mountain women were supposed to be sweet. Docile.

But there had been stories about my Gran. . .the things she’d done. . .

I never knew what had happened to her. One day she simply—wasn’t there and Da told me not to ask about it. Was she in the Pinoteaux version of the Bastide prison? Or dead? What else didn’t I know about our families?

“If I get one of them into a room. . . and we didn’t let them leave. . .do you think you could get information out of them?”

“Yes,” Hugo said, smiling. “I may be a scholar at heart, but Léonie, you may be sure of that.”

I felt prepared to do anything but I didn’t know yet what I’d have to do.

..

For a few days, there was no news from the outside world. Tilly and Armand and Hugo and I cooked and ate and played *mancala* and read books. I let Hugo feel the baby kick, and he laughed, the sound transforming his whole face.

We didn’t talk about who had shot at us.

Because *what if it had been my husband behind it?*

Tilly gave me a tiny onesie she had knitted for Ciel. Because that was going to be his name. If Étienne denied he was the father, Ciel must have come from heaven. Because I was damn sure I hadn’t had any other cock but my husband’s between my legs.

Then one day, Mano pulled up, his dark truck rocking over the gravel and coming to a stop right in front of the door.

Shit. It was still early in the day. Tilly and Armand were still in the kitchen. And if we didn’t 100% trust in their loyalty, should we be doing this in the living room?

Hugo was already moving, leaning heavily on his cane.

“Can you get him in the basement?”

My heart was in my throat.

“Yes, yes. I can do that.”

Could I do that? Where was the sweet, frightened Léonie Bastide who needed her husband beside her to get through a mountain storm?

She was godsdamn *dead*, that’s what. Whoever had risen from the ashes wasn’t Léonie Bastide.

Hugo disappeared and I walked to the front porch to greet my other brother-in-law.

“*Léonie*,” he said. “You decided not to be a hellion this time?”

I felt heat rising, pulsing from him.

“Maybe,” I parried.

“You look good,” Mano said, his eyes eating me up, his gaze lewd and lustful. “Tits getting bigger. Getting more curves all over you. Wonder if your milk will come in soon.”

“Why did my brother say he should have let you marry me?”

“Because I wanted you. And we always had a connection. It’s just that of course Étienne could offer more.”

Watching me to see what I’d do, he put his thumb on my lip and dragged it down, exposing my teeth like I was a horse at the fair.

Inwardly raging, I forced myself not to make a move, not to spit at him like I wanted to do.

“And what would you have done to get me?” I asked softly. “Hid in my room? Pretended we were lovers?”

His thumb covered in my saliva, he dragged it down my throat, his fingers leaving a sticky trail along my cleavage.

“I would have done more than that. My big brother doesn’t know how far I would have gone.”

“You lied to him, didn’t you?”

“You still in love with Étienne?” he returned tauntingly. “I’ve seen him around with Faustine. She’s all over him like a boar in rut season.”

“No,” I said as my heart seemed to shrivel inside me. “I’m not in love with him anymore.”

He smirked.

“Good girl. You’re not too good for me now, are you princess? Now that you’re damaged goods.”

“If you tell him the truth—”

“You don’t get him. At this point, there’s no going back. He can’t be seen with a slut. A whore. Any woman with even a suspicion of threatening his status. So you might as well give in, sweetheart. Play nice with me and I’ll make sure you get some good treats in here.”

Was he right that it didn’t matter anyway? That he had been the only one to set me up? That Étienne would never forget—

“So you set me up just to get me to yourself? No one else knew about it?”

“Do you really think you’re in a position to make demands?” he laughed arrogantly. “All you need to know now is your fate is in *my* hands now.”

Mano thought he held all the cards, but even if what he said was true—I refused to just meekly submit to being passed from brother to brother.

In fact, I was done weakly submitting at all. I was done with not knowing what was happening.

“I think there’s something wrong with the water heater in the basement,” I said. “Could you please look at it?”

Would he really fall for something so ridiculous?

I had every reason to hate him, and he should know that.

But he took a long, lingering look down my body, his eyes lingering on the swell of my breasts, the way my swollen nipples were bursting out of my too-small bra, the way the maternity shirt he had bought me stretched across my belly.

“Yeah,” Mano said. “Yeah, I’ll take a look at it. Give me a kiss first.”

I had never kissed anyone except my husband. But didn’t I have a husband only in name now?

My skin crawling, I took a step closer.

“This is your brother’s baby,” I said.

“I don’t care.”

Almost shivering, I put my hands on his chest, felt the hammering of his heart under my fingers, his shirt slick with sweat in the mountain heat.

Then I closed my eyes and kissed him, knowing it was my only chance of finding out the truth.

I would know the truth.

Mano replied eagerly, his thick bulge pressed hard on my belly and when I pulled back his eyes were gleaming.

“Damn, I can’t wait to take you properly,” he groaned, and I forced my mouth to stay in my false smile, the fake brightness I didn’t feel.

“Let’s go. I’m really afraid we’ll lose our hot water.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure you have everything you could ever want down here—I’ll bring you pretty clothes and jewelry. And anything you need for the baby.”

All I want is to be free, I thought.

He followed me closely down each steep stair, his smoky breath hot on my throat.

I had never been in the basement, and the cold, stale darkness seemed to rise up around me.

“Turn on the light, Léonie. You might trip.”

“I won’t trip.”

Where was Hugo? Had he made it down to the basement? Or had I just walked down a set of stairs with a dangerous man who didn’t give a fuck that I was married to his brother?

The concrete floor was cold under my bare feet, and I took trusting steps into the darkness. One, then two, Mano following behind me with each one. I could hear his heavy breathing, practically feel his erection pressing at my back.

Hugo, please be ready

“There’s nothing wrong with the water heater, is there?” Mano chuckled. “You just wanted to get me down here, you little slut. Well, I have no objection to that. Why don’t you bend over that washing machine and drop your panties to the floor.”

I reached up and pulled the light. In for a penny. . .

“You’re right,” I said. “There *isn’t* anything wrong with the water heater.”

Mano blinked in the suddenly bright light, and Hugo hit him in the back of the knees with a shovel, a hard, sharp blow that sent him crashing to the ground.

Then Hugo whipped a rope around his brother’s throat and began to tighten it as Mano made a choked whistle.

Hugo’s arms were strong, powerful, and I stepped closer to where Mano was struggling with the rope, trying but failing to loosen Hugo’s hold. Time for the answers I was desperate to get.

“Idiot. I have no intention of being the whore you cast me as. I know you didn’t plan this yourself. I want you to tell me *exactly what happened* the day you entered my bedroom. And Mano? That connection you thought we had? It was imaginary. I don’t even remember you.”

Just as his eyes opened in shock—

I heard the front door slam open, and a rough, dominating voice I knew very well called out my name.

“Léonie? *Merde!* Where the hell are you?”

CHAPTER 8

Léonie

W*hat was my husband doing here?*

“Go. Keep him away from the basement,” Hugo said. “Be careful, though.”

“All right. I’ll try.”

Crouching as low as I could with my belly, I crept to the stairs, expecting at every second Étienne would open the door to the basement and find us.

“*Stall him,*” Hugo hissed. “I’ll put this asshole somewhere.”

“*Don’t kill him yet,*” I hissed back, and I saw Mano’s eyes widen, but the rope around his throat was too tight for him to call out and sound the alarm.

He wasn’t going anywhere until I got my answers.

“Tilly? Armand?” Étienne bellowed, pacing into the other room, and I tracked his movements through the crack in the basement door, trying to catch my breath.

His body looked tight with irritation, impatient and angry.

Had he been the one behind the attack? Was he here to finish the job?

Well, I wasn’t going to go down hiding in the basement. If he was going to kill me, I’d force him to do it to my face.

And if I didn’t move now, I might not have another chance.

As soon as I heard him in the kitchen, I crept as silently as I could up the last few steps, closing the door as much as I dared without trapping Hugo, then practically collapsed against one of the bookshelves.

It only took a few seconds before my husband whirled around, his eyes instantly honing in on me as I felt the force of his intense gaze.

“Where were you? Why didn’t you answer when I called?”

Bile and nausea threatened to rise in my throat, but I only shrugged.

“I don’t know.”

Étienne stalked back over to me, those strong arms crossed across his chest.

“What were you doing?”

“Nothing.”

I didn’t rush into his arms. Didn’t beg him to please believe me.

In fact, my hands weren’t even tempted to touch him. To get what? More rejection?

“I’m looking for Mano.”

My heart skipped a beat and the hairs on the back of my neck began to rise.

Had he guessed what we’d done?

But my voice was still steady.

“I haven’t seen him.”

“His truck is right outside,” Étienne bit out.

I shrugged. I had never lied to my husband before, but I didn’t owe this man anything, no matter how fast my heart might beat, how much past memories tried to intrude on my consciousness.

“That’s strange.”

Inside, my heart was thudding hard as my husband narrowed his eyes.

“You’re trying to tell me you haven’t seen Mano?”

“Maybe he went out in the woods. They can be very dangerous, you know.”

Étienne’s eyes narrowed.

“What do you mean by that?”

I had to get Étienne away from this room. Because what if he decided to look around? What if he saw that the door to the basement was cracked open?

What if he found Mano?

Not until I had a chance to find out the truth.

I edged closer to the door, but he was in between me and the outside in a moment, looming over me.

My heart beat, but not from love or excitement that he'd changed his mind. From anxiety that Étienne would see the open door, that he'd go down to the basement.

That he would stop me from finding out who had turned my life upside-down.

"Maybe he's around the grounds somewhere," I said, attempting to step around my husband. "Nasty creep like him probably goes around looking in the windows."

Étienne's brows drew together, and he put a hand on my arm, his palm curling around my elbow, each finger hard and heated and digging into my skin.

"Why would you say that?"

"No reason."

I tried to shake him off and it pissed me off that I couldn't easily do it.

"What are you saying about Mano?"

"What do you care? According to *you*, we were sleeping together."

Now Étienne looked even angrier. Stood even closer.

"What else was I supposed to believe when I came in the door and saw you in his arms? Half-dressed?"

"I don't know, maybe you should have believed *your wife*, who you know damn well never cheated on you."

Something worked in my husband's throat, a muscle that throbbed with a singular intensity.

"Answer the question, Léonie. Has he been harassing you?"

"No."

"Are you lying to me?"

I turned away, wrenching my arm out of his grip.

"I'm not talking to you anymore."

I crossed my arms protectively over my belly. Baby boy was active today, punching my ribs, kicking my bladder. God, I needed to pee.

"If—Mano has been improper toward you, trust that he will be punished."

I said nothing. Because I had no faith in him or his promises.

"Well, Mano isn't here," I bit out. "You can go now."

"Look at me, Léonie."

When I didn't obey, Étienne took my chin in his hands, and forced me to face him.

“Come in the kitchen. Tilly and Armand will leave.”

I forced my restless fingers to unclench.

Calm. Stay calm.

My husband sat down in a chair, his fingers tapping on the wooden table, his legs stretching across the floor.

Expecting me to follow.

I only stared at him.

Was it my imagination or was he glancing down at my belly? How long had it been since he’d seen me? Had it been a few weeks? I’d lost some time to that gray blank of depression.

I hadn’t had my phone since the day they’d frame me. Who was *they*? I’d find that out soon enough.

So I didn’t know what fruit or veggie my baby was as big as now, but from the way he was pressing on my ribcage, squashing my organs, and make it hard to breathe, I guessed I was at watermelon level now.

Did Étienne ever wonder if he’d made a mistake?

“Where is your hospitality? Get me a glass of water.”

Anger curled inside me.

“Get your own glass of water.”

I stared defiantly right back at him.

I couldn’t read the expression on his harsh face. Jaw like sharp glass, throat a column of muscle. Every inch of Étienne Bastide revealed what he wanted it to.

Nothing.

But, after all, I knew nothing about the man I had married.

Nothing at all.

“I’m thirsty. I want a glass of water.”

Fury sparking through my fingertips, I jerked open the cupboard behind me, to reveal the neat rows of upside-down cups.

“Well, there you go.”

His brows drew together.

“You know, Hugo’s life is very comfortable here. I could make it a lot less comfortable.”

Bastard.

I swallowed my anger and grabbed roughly for a cup.

“Now, that’s a good girl, Léonie.”

I tightened my lips as I poured him the most lukewarm cup ever. He was *not* going to get a rise out of me.

But then I moved closer.

“Come now, you can move a little faster,” he said mockingly, raising one finger.

Just one finger, the rest of his body looking entirely relaxed and entirely sure of me.

That’s how his whole life had been, I reflected bitterly. When Étienne raised a finger, he got what he walked.

“You’re a loyal little creature, aren’t you? I really believe that no matter what I did, if I raised a finger, you’d come back to me.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

He snorted, and his dark eyes gleamed at me. What burned maliciously in those depths? What made him such a wicked, brutal man, so uncaring of his own wife and child?

“Girl, I own you and I have for a long time.”

My temper flared uncontrollably inside me, and I twisted my hand to fling the water in his arrogant face, but he struck faster, knocking the glass away before a drop could get on him.

The water splashed all over the floor, the glass slipping through my fingertips to shatter on the ground.

And in a second my husband had me up against the table, my hands clutching the wood as he gripped my hair.

“Léonie Bastide, what the hell has gotten into you?” he growled.

Emotion almost swamped me, but instead of love it was rage.

“I could *never* come back to you. Not after what you did to me.”

“What *I* did?” he hissed, his arms caging me in, his weight pressing down on my back as I felt his hard thigh against mine. “What about *you* inviting other men into our bedroom?”

“You didn’t even check yourself on the paternity test, or even do any investigation to see if maybe, just maybe, you were being lied to and set up. You’re a lazy bastard, just like Hugo says you are.”

He pulled my face around to look at him.

There was a strange light in his eyes, and suddenly he seemed so terrifyingly *alive*, like there could be no one in the world as alive as Étienne Bastide.

He was more predator than man, wasn't he? I wondered as a shiver ran down my spine.

"Maybe you should trust me that I'm taking care of it."

"I *don't* trust you," I said, my jaw set.

There was something hard jabbing into my side, and I felt humiliation wash over me.

"*Merde*. All right, wife, I'll look into the paternity test. After these meetings are over."

"You want to look into the paternity of your own child, but—you *have too much work?*"

"That's right."

Angry, I shoved back with my hips, trying to slam back into his cock and balls.

"I hate you!"

Étienne gripped my hair tighter, his other hand burning my hip.

"*Stop saying that.*"

"Get off her!" I heard Hugo call out as Étienne's lips descended on my throat, in a kiss that was more like a bite.

Steadying himself on the table, Hugo wailed the cane across his brother's back. Hard. Once. Then again.

Étienne snarled in rage and whirled around to grip the cane so hard it cracked.

I flew between them.

"Stop it! Get away from Hugo!"

"Christ, Léonie, get the hell out of the way!" Étienne snapped. "You're going to hurt yourself."

It was when he shoved Hugo back that he noticed his bandaged shoulder.

"What happened to you?"

There was a beat of ragged silence as Hugo darted his eyes over to me, and Étienne pounced, his hand around his brother's throat with frightening rapidity.

"You better not be hiding something from me, brother. Tell me what the fuck happened."

"Léonie and I got--shot at this week. One of the bullets grazed me."

For a moment Étienne stood stock still, like an unnatural frozen statue.

"You got shot at?" he repeated, turning to look at me, his eyes uncanny, unblinking.

"I didn't get hit! You should be worried about Hugo. He's the one who got us out of there."

"Why didn't you fucking tell me? Who did it?"

"Who has motive to hurt me?" I replied quietly, letting it hang there in the heavy, angry silence between us.

"Jesus Christ, woman. You think I hired someone to kill you?"

"Maybe."

He let Hugo go and slammed his hands on the table, glaring down at me.

I forced myself not to move.

"What kind of man do you think I am?"

"I think you're the kind of man who would like to get rid of an inconvenient wife so he can have another one."

He gave me a contemptuous look.

"Who said I was getting another wife?"

"You put a ring—"

"I asked you a damn question, Léonie Bastide. Who told you I was getting you a new wife? No one."

"No one had to tell me anything. It was pretty clear. Your mother—"

He sent me another scorching look.

"Never mind my mother. Believe what *I* tell you."

I said nothing. I knew what I had seen.

Étienne ran a hand impatiently through his dark hair.

"No, I didn't try to kill you. *Putain de merde*. Tell me where the fuck Mano is, I need him for this meeting. I know he must be here! His goddamn truck is here!"

Neither of us said anything.

"If Mano has acted improperly toward you, believe me, he will be punished."

Still I said nothing. Then Tilly and Armand were brought in and questioned.

"*Monsieur*, I saw nothing," Tilly said. "We've been working in the kitchen for the last few hours. I surely would've heard something if he'd come inside."

“So you are expecting me to believe Mano parked, never came in the house, and somehow vanished from a locked-in yard?”

Étienne kicked the door open, then began to search the first floor in a frenzy, jerking the couch away from the wall and yanking open doors and closets with violent fury.

It reminded me of my nightmare from weeks ago.

Only this time there really was a man here.

A man I was hiding from my husband.

The old Léonie would never have done such a thing.

Good thing she was dead.

When he was thundering back down the stairs, I saw movement out of the corner of my eye.

It was Tilly, stepping in front of the slightly open door to the basement.

So Étienne couldn't see it.

My husband was in a towering fury, and I had to clench my fists in my skirts to keep my knees from knocking.

“There should have been security here. I have to go to a meeting now, but I will send more security to investigate. You will not have to worry about anyone else skulking around, I promise you. And I will get to the bottom of who shot at you.”

Still I said nothing.

“Say something,” Étienne snapped with a frown.

“All right.”

He looked like he was waiting for something else from me, but I only stared out the window.

“*Hellfire and damnation*, wife. Just let me go to the damn meeting. Then I'll come back here and listen to you. If you insist the paternity test must be wrong, I'll look into it.”

I said nothing again, and with another low curse, he went out the front door.

Hugo and I looked at each other, waiting until the gate had slammed shut behind his SUV.

“We don't have much time,” I said. “Unless we want his guards crawling the grounds while we're doing this.”

We would have to get information out of Mano fast.

Hugo's smile split his face, and for a moment my gentle brother-in-law looked almost savage.

“I can be quick.”

First, we repaired his cane the best we could, then back we went, down to the basement again, and Hugo, his gait uneven with the cracked cane, dragged a bound and tied Mano out of a locked supply closet.

“You won’t get away with this—” Mano started, his face contorted in fury, and Hugo hit him square in the mouth, then wrapped the rope around his neck again.

“Brother, if you think I am going to go easy on you after years of being locked up, you’re a fool.”

I watched as Mano’s face began to turn purple.

The fact that his hands were bound behind his back meant he couldn’t even try to escape, and I watched as abject panic chased the arrogance off his face.

“It wasn’t your idea to set me up, was it?” I asked as Hugo let him have a tiny, shallow breath. “Even though you want me, someone else put you up to it, didn’t they?”

Blood dribbled out of his nostrils.

“I want to know who it was. Who wanted to split Étienne and I up that badly? Your mother? Faustine?”

“You better answer,” Hugo warned as he tightened the rope brutally tight again for several long seconds, then let it loose.

“Fine,” Mano wheezed. “It wasn’t my idea.”

I knew it.

“You planted the condom wrapper there to make me look bad.”

Hugo elbowed Mano viciously in the head.

“I did plant that condom.”

“Who put you up to it?” Hugo growled. “I know you’re too spineless to have planned something like this yourself.”

“I can’t tell,” Mano rasped. “He’ll kill me if I do.”

“I’ll fucking kill you *now*, fucker.”

“He?” I asked sharply. “He who?”

“Étienne. Who else has any power in these mountains? My brother is the one who forced me to do it. He orchestrated the whole thing.”

CHAPTER 9

Etienne

I strode into the tavern room at the Distant Whistler, trying to put the disquieting encounter with my wife out of my head.

This was the closest a meeting-place could get to neutral ground between the Bastides and the Pinoteaux, a lone outpost on a craggy ridge right on the border between our lands, open to the elements on both sides to make sure no one could get trapped here.

It was still dangerous.

But I was sick of wondering who was plotting against me. Sick of waiting for them to strike.

And if Réjean and Léonie's father Yves had intended this to be a trap, they would find I'd had men scattered about the few houses here on the ridge since last night.

2, 4, 6 of their trucks. Exactly the number we had agreed on.

But that didn't mean they would play fair, and I knew it.

My fingers tightened on the vial around my neck. It had everything in it that had fueled my vengeance for years.

A few drops of my grandfather's blood. Saved as he bled to death on the mountains he loved. Killed by a Pinoteaux.

I was only 16 but I could still remember every sensation of that day. The sick, agonizing feeling of helplessness. The way he had gripped my hand wordlessly, how he had told me to leave him. In case there were others around who would hurt me too.

The way I hadn't left. Had fought and raged and roared against every moment as he slipped away from me.

They said it was Léonie's grandfather who did it. And he was dying anyway.

So when I killed him.

It was a death for a death.

The feud should have stopped there. That should have been the end of it. My *Da* had agreed.

But I knew it wasn't right. I knew Papé's blood still called out for justice. I knew Leonie's grandfather had taken the fall for Réjean.

Because how had her frail, elderly grandfather managed to kill my strong one?

No, I knew Réjean had been the one to kill Papé, had been spotted in the area. He had seen a Bastide by himself and taken the opportunity to cut down a rival from behind.

And he still lived.

But now I had the chance to finally make it right.

Now I had the chance to crush the Pinoteaux and their schemes against me, to destroy Réjean's plans to expand their borders and enrich their wealth.

And as the Bastides filed in behind me, I felt power flowing through my fingertips. At one point our families had both been nearly equal in power. Not anymore. Through bad business decisions, poor treatment of their workers, and mismanagement, Pinoteaux had been on the downslide for years. The massive influx of cash a few years ago had been the only thing to slow their decline.

In fact, it had dragged out their destruction. . .

The only thing that bothered me, as I felt triumph singing through my veins, was the report that someone had shot at Hugo.

It was possible my brother had enemies, but someone who was bold enough to risk capture by my guards?

My first instinct was that Hugo had been trying to fuck with me, but then Léonie had verified it was true.

Léonie couldn't lie to me. Ever. My wife was simply not capable of it.

So it must have happened, and I'd need to investigate it. *What if she had been accidentally shot in the crossfire?*

Once my vengeance was complete, I would figure out who had a grudge against Hugo.

I nodded to Faustine, putting a hand on her lower back to guide her into the tavern, making sure my fingers spanned her bare skin as the ring sparkled on her finger.

The low-roofed room smelled like cigarettes and foul beer and shit in here.

Yves and Réjean and their other kinsmen had arrived before I did, but I didn't care. Let them think they had the upper hand.

All I cared about was justice for Papé and killing anyone who was a threat to my family. And then his blood would finally rest easily.

I could not lead the Bastides with this insult still unpunished.

Every eye was on me as the Pinoteaux dogs waited for me to guide my mother into a chair behind me.

Then I put Faustine beside me, my fingers sliding lasciviously along her chin as she turned those shining eyes to me.

She was a very beautiful woman, and more than one of Léonie's kinsmen had asked to pay a bride-price for her.

I sat in the middle chair. Right in front of Yves. Ignoring the amber mug of beer set in front of me.

"I am here for justice," I said. "I gave you a bride-price based on a faithful, virtuous wife. Now that I have caught her in bed with my brother, I see that was a lie. I demand restitution. Immediately."

Their faces were blank, but if word got out, dishonor on their house, dishonor on their lands, dishonor on their ancestors and descendants. It risked every business relationship they had ever developed.

"Peace has been good between us," Yves said, clearing his throat. He was a heavysset man with a red beard streaked with silver. "To keep the peace, we are willing to offer you a significant amount for your compensation."

I put an arm around the back of Faustine's chair, my fingers curling over her shoulder, brushing along her skin.

"No," I said. "As the head of the Bastides, I can't risk the threat to my status being seen with a whore would be. I want the bride-price back. All of it. You gave me a bad bargain. I'm owed that money."

"The bride-price is not—available," Yves said after a moment. "That was a large sum of money."

The look on Réjean's face went down like a fine whiskey, inside I feasted on their utter panic and helplessness.

I knew very well what the loss of the bride-price would do to them.

It would reduce the Pinoteaux to abject poverty, and only *then* when they were reduced to nothing, and their land was taken to make *my* family wealthy, would I kill at my leisure.

Réjean and Yves glanced at each other, and I felt my body tense, although outwardly I didn't move a muscle.

"We shouldn't even be negotiating without your *Da* here. Unless there's some *reason* he couldn't be here."

"He's dead," I said. "You know that."

"So many of your family members seem to disappear," Réjean retorted, his eyes narrowing cunningly at me. "In fact, there was talk of an older brother who hasn't been seen in a while. . ."

There was a movement behind me—a gasp—an uneasy rustling. . .

But I didn't move a muscle.

"Dig up the Bastide graveyard, see if you can find some corpses to fight then," I shrugged. "Perhaps that is the only way to beat us."

But something indefinable had changed in the room. I could feel my muscles, coiling in readiness.

"Rumor has it that paternity test you've been passing around is faked," Yves said, his face expressionless.

Inside, my heart began to pound harder.

But I had prepared for skepticism, and I only laughed, shoving the papers across the desk at them.

"Unfortunately not. Bring the doctor in, if you don't believe me. He'll verify what I say."

"I know what the papers say, son."

"I caught her in person. I saw her with my own two eyes. There is no question of her infidelity."

"I haven't spread your family shame yet because I respect our relationship too much. But it could make things very difficult for your suppliers if word got out."

"You say she was caught with your own brother," Réjean said. "That would shame *you* as well. It is in all of our best interests to keep this quiet."

I shrugged. "It does not matter who an unfaithful wife whores around with. It still a shame on her family."

"Yet, you didn't throw her out," Yves said. "Why?"

I snorted, resting my hands on the table between us. Casual. Relaxed.

“Of course I did. I wouldn’t keep a whorish wife in the house.”

“So where is she?”

“That’s my business, isn’t it? I bought her from you, I paid the bride-price for her. She’s mine until you give me the money back.”

Réjean shifted in his seat.

That’s right. Squirm, fucker.

“You’re well within your rights to turn her out of the house and onto the back of the mountain. How have you not done that yet? Is it possible you yourself do not believe the paternity test?”

I scoffed. “Why would I even risk an unfaithful wife? You really think I don’t have plenty of women who could take her place?”

Jerking my head sideways, I put my hand on Faustine’s thigh, her miniskirt inching up and bunching around her hips as I spread my grip out possessively.

My fingers dug in as Yves bent forward.

For your next romance novel.

Visit [Lokepub](#) and find a story to read.

This fucker had to give in. He had no proof the test was tampered with. He would have to give in and agree to return the bride-price that was the only thing keeping their miserable family afloat.

But he didn’t.

“I think you’re full of bullshit, Étienne. I don’t think you have a shortage of women. I know you could fuck any woman this side of the mountain if you wanted. That’s always been true. But I think despite all the bullshit you’ve been spewing for weeks, you are in fact *very attached to your wife and child*.”

Everything seemed to freeze inside me, and I had to fight the urge to curl my fingers against the table, to make any outward sign that his words had affected me.

“Attached to a whore? You’re a fool. I wouldn’t forgive that.”

But Yves shook his head.

"You see, I only let you marry the girl I knew for sure was head-over-heels in love with you. You think I'd risk sending a woman who didn't love you, knowing the power you held over us with this bride-price? *I'm going to call your bluff.* I think you have no intention of casting aside your wife. Or of abandoning your child."

"That's not my child. I don't care what happens to it."

Yves leaned forward.

"I think when this damn bastard child comes out, it's going to have hair *black as night.*"

"Have you ever known me to be fucking soft?" I snapped as hairs raised on my back of my neck. "I'm not raising some other man's child. Give me what I ask or I *will* send your daughter out to the back of the mountain."

But Yves only raised an eyebrow.

"Étienne, I was on the other side of the negotiating table for that bride-price. You didn't negotiate like Étienne Bastide. You didn't negotiate like the cruel, bloodthirsty killer I know you are. You negotiated like a man in love. You negotiated soft."

"Bullshit," I said coldly. "I care nothing for your daughter."

But my hands were gripping the table, and I heard rather than saw shifting back and forth.

Men getting ready. Men sensing violence in the air.

"I've been fucking every woman's wet cunt I could find since finding out your daughter is a whore."

Yves raised an eyebrow.

"Have you?" he said, his voice silky-smooth. "I don't think you have. I think this is all an act. I think you've never had the smallest intention of fucking another woman. I think you've been hiding Léonie away somewhere safe until you get what you want from us."

Anger was curling inside me, building along my spine.

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it? Then I have another deal for you. 1/4th the bride-price back and we will send someone to take care of the problem for you."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean leave the gate open where she's staying one day and let us do the rest."

The proposal sat thickly in the air between us, stank and festering.

And I realized I had fucked up.

I had made one fatal mistake.

And it was going to fuck up every plan I had made for taking the Pinoteaux down.

I assumed Léonie's father valued his only daughter.

But he'd only cared about the bride-price.

"You're proposing I sit back and let you kill my wife?" I snarled, feeling the rage rising inside. "Fucking unnatural dogshit family!"

They were trying to stand, hands reaching for their knives, but I was already lunging against the table, lifting it with a screech against the floor and flipping it forward.

Fucking Réjean managed to avoid getting crushed, the table landing on his leg as his men leaped forward to extricate him.

Yves wasn't so lucky, the heavy wooden table pinning him across the chest.

There was a searing pain in my forearm as some red-headed devil struck me, but my knife was already plunging forward and I heard a crack as Yves' first rib broke.

I drove his head back against the hard floor as he struggled to free himself.

"Have you already tried to kill Léonie?" I spat on him as someone else came up on my other side.

Jerking my knife back, I struck some goddamn cousin straight in the heart, blood bubbling down his chin as I yanked my weapon back out.

There were arms trying to pull me off, as I dragged the knife down Léonie's *Da's* forehead.

Réjean landed a blow on my jaw, forcing me to get up to avoid another blow landing on my skull. I kicked out sharply at his knee, feeling blood run down my arm.

"Stay away from Léonie," I warned him through gritted teeth.

"Why do you care what happens to a woman you called a whore?" he taunted.

I smelled gasoline.

Fuck.

The Pinoteaux couldn't win in honorable warfare, so one of their fucking lackeys would rather burn down the tavern rather than admit defeat.

"Everyone out," I roared as I saw liquid splatter against the window.

Glancing back as I guided my mother and Faustine out, I saw Pinoteaux cousins bending over Yves.

Had I killed him?

Fuck. Léonie wasn't safe at the lodge. I needed to move her location immediately.

The attempt hadn't been on Hugo at all. *Léonie had been the target all along.*

Fucking shithell, I had fucked up.

If I moved quickly I could run some of their trucks off the road, isolate each one and kill whoever was in it.

There was no other option now that I knew what they were capable of.

Faustine was still hanging onto me, and I shook her off impatiently as flames began to lick the dry grasses around the tavern.

"Stop fucking breathing on me. I told you never to touch me unless we're in that negotiation room."

Her eyes looked wide and hurt.

"But you're injured! I'm just trying to help."

"You aren't," I bit out.

"But I thought—"

"You thought fucking nothing. Give me that ring. There's no need for you to wear it anymore."

She looked down at the sparkling ring and pouted.

"But it looks so pretty on me."

"I don't fucking care. It's my wife's."

When she moved too slowly, I ripped it off her finger and pointed to the backseat.

"Get your ass back there and attend to my mother."

"You really think Léonie will forgive you after what you've done to her?" Faustine said bitterly.

"Of course," I snorted. "I know everything there is to know about Léonie. That woman would follow me off a cliff. She might have shown me more mountain temper than I've ever seen from her, but she'll just be grateful when I tell her the truth."

I hopped in the SUV and spun it around, my eyes zeroing in on the first Pinoteaux truck.

But just as I slammed down on the gas, I got a call from my security chief that I'd sent down to secure the lodge.

“Not right now,” I bit into the phone.

The service was shit, but through the static buzz I could hear crackling in the background.

“Étienne, you need to get down here immediately. *Something bad has happened.*”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10

Étienne

“**W**hat happened? *God damn you, tell me what happened!*”
“You—I think you better come see for yourself. It’s—
Léonie.”

Tires squealed as I spun my SUV around and took off down the mountain in the opposite direction.

“Étienne, what—” my mother protested from the back seat.

“Shut up,” I snarled as I jammed my foot on the accelerator, spinning around the tight corners in a plume of dirt and gravel.

“*You’re scaring us,*” Faustine whimpered as my right tire tipped over the edge.

But my eyes were glued on the road below me, irises burning in their sockets.

What had happened?

Those bastard Pinoteaux had made it very clear that they were willing to *kill* Léonie rather than lose face.

Cold sweat was breaking out on my neck, pouring down my back.

The gate had locked behind me. There was *no* way anyone could have gotten in.

Léonie was safe.

I would *never* have left her anywhere unsafe.

But panic crawled all over my skin, nightmarish fears I had to ruthlessly force out of my brain. I was pushing the SUV to the limits of its engine to make it down the switchbacks and across the pitted, uneven ground.

Blood was still dripping down my arm, pooling on my thighs as I jerked the car around the last curve.

And something was burning.

Smoke was billowing from somewhere on the lodge grounds.

Fucking hell.

“You’re bleeding—” Faustine tried again, her dry claws pawing at my shoulder.

“I don’t give a *fuck*,” I bit out.

Had there been an accident? The lodge caught on fire?

Then I saw the front gates were open, and my stomach dropped.

That shouldn’t have happened. That should never happen.

With the gate opened like that. . . anything could go wrong. . . down here in the valley where the heavy forest dampened the sound of screams.

The lodge was still standing. So Léonie must be in there. Sitting down at the table, those bright blue eyes behind the pale lashes blinking in confusion at me, just waiting for me to tell her everything was all right now, she could come home. . .

But in front of the lodge—

Tilly and Armand were holding each other and right in front of them were two bodies lying crumpled on the ground.

One was covered in a blanket, but there was—hair—spilling out over the grass, bright red hair streaked with blood. . .

No. No.

I was never sure how I drove down that driveway, how I got out of the car, how I made my way over to her.

The earth seemed to be rushing toward me, but how could that have happened, was I upside-down?

I didn’t even feel myself hit the ground.

Their bodies were burned—terribly. But my wife’s long auburn hair was unmistakable—the sun catching the gold in it, my rough fingers reaching out to touch, because I couldn’t—*couldn’t* believe this was real.

Somehow I was crawling forward, dirt and blood between my numb fingers.

I wanted to ask what had happened. *What happened.* That was the main question, because this was impossible.

I had left her here just a few hours ago. And she had been safe. But someone was making too much noise for me to speak over.

And I realized that noise was *me*, roaring so loudly, my ears ringing so hard that I couldn't hear myself.

My mother's mouth was moving, Tilly and Armand were replying.

I heard the words *attack* and *caught them unaware*.

"There must be some mistake," I croaked out, my fingers clutching at my wife's hands, eyes scanning the burns on her face. "Send for a doctor—"

"*Monsieur*, I'm sorry, she is gone."

"Léonie! Léonie, *listen to me*. You have to come back!"

Her eyes were closed so tightly, the pale lashes splayed over her cheeks. If only I could make her open them. *Then* she'd come back.

She'd always come when I called before. . .

I knew for goddamn sure that gate had locked behind me.

So who else knew the code?

Léonie's skin was cold, and my fingers shook as I placed them over the pulse in her throat.

Nothing. Not a beat. Not a sound.

Tilly was sobbing, burying her face in a handkerchief as Armand patted her awkwardly on the shoulder.

"We-we put a blanket over her. It didn't seem right to just leave her like that. Poor little thing. Least she has a little peace this way. Lord knows she didn't in life."

My elbows gave way and I landed on my chin so hard on the ground my lip split open and blood was running down my face.

"I was always going to bring her back," I croaked through bloody lips.

Mano? Had it been Mano? Where was his car now?

Had he been hiding somewhere and then killed them? Had he been angry at her rejection?

Hugo had been even more severely burned, as I watched Tilly carefully covered his body with a blanket.

"*I was always going to bring you back*," I said again, but my wife's eyes were closed, her injured face frozen, indifferent.

"Étienne, we need to go back home—" Mme began. "In case the Pinoteaux—"

"I don't care," I snarled, pulling Léonie into my arms. "I'm not leaving her. She'll come back. She couldn't leave me on this earth. She'd never leave me. She'd never leave me."

“*Monsieur*, you must stop,” Tilly pled as I put Léonie’s cold hand to my cheek.

And the older servant pushed in between us, and there were more hands, pulling at me, prying my fingers off Léonie.

“Monsieur, no good can come of this!” Tilly said firmly. “You have to accept the truth. She is gone.”

No no no

“They must be taken to the funeral parlor,” Armand said. “Best to move them as soon as possible.”

The words meant nothing. My howls of rage that shook the hills meant nothing.

My hands could snap a neck, climb a cliff, lift a boulder. But they couldn’t bring my wife back. They couldn’t fix what I had done.

I refused to leave Léonie. I stayed beside her. In the back of the hearse, down the road, and to the viewing area in the funeral home.

“You may stay with her until tomorrow morning,” someone in a suit said.

Mme spoke, Faustine spoke, my security chief spoke, but I heard none of their words.

Only a piercing, shattering ringing in my ears. My throat was hoarse, so hoarse.

I must have been roaring in rage and terror, only I wasn’t even conscious I was doing it, or what words I was saying.

And then at last I was left alone in the dark viewing area, my wife’s body resting on a table in front of me.

Until tomorrow morning.

Was that really how long I had left on this earth with my wife?

With Léonie, who the ancestors had given to me.

Léonie, who I had watched for years without her knowing it, because I couldn’t believe someone like her could be real.

Surely she was a tool of the Pinoteaux dogs, to seduce and weaken me. .

And by the time I realized she truly was that sweet and pure, I had fallen for her.

I couldn’t stop myself from stroking her beautiful lock of hair.

“I meant to bring you back,” I pled. “I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean what I said.”

Pain and anguish wracked my body. I should never have left Léonie alone after I'd learned they'd been shot at. I should never have assumed Hugo was the target.

I should never have taken her out of our home in the first place.

But all I'd been able to see was my revenge. The culmination of the grudge I had held tight against my heart for years.

And she'd be safer, I told myself. Much safer down in the valley.

Because of course I couldn't have told her what was going on.

I knew my Léonie, she was as sheltered and innocent as could be, the truth would have been read all over her face.

And it had to look real.

In one fell swoop I could accomplish two things.

Eliminate the Pinoteaux threat *and* get revenge for my Papé death.

Léonie should have been safe. A few weeks away in the lodge. Just until my revenge was complete.

And now she had died thinking I scorned her. That I wanted another woman. That she was a whore.

My stomach heaved and I drove my head into the hard wood of the table. Over and over, until the room swam around me and blood ran into my eyes.

Then I opened my mouth and roared. Cursed, raged, begged the ancestors to bring my wife back to me.

"Do not take her! You can't have her yet! I need her too badly!"

But there was no answer.

Desperately, I opened the wound on my arm, let it run over the table where she lay.

"Ancestors, hear my blood, bring her and our baby back. Take me instead."

I gripped the vial of Papé's blood, but for once it did not sing to me, beg me for justice.

Had more bloodshed been what he wanted or was that my own desire for domination and arrogance?

How much of her pregnancy had I spent unseeing, unappreciative, waiting for my revenge to be complete?

With a ragged breath, I took her hand in mine, turning it over so we were palm to palm.

The last time I would ever hold her hand in mine.

Painful, bloody tears blurred my vision.

They felt strange coursing down my cheeks, carving bitter trails along my skin.

Fuck me for a fool.

Had she suffered for long? Did she call out for me? Was her last thought wondering where I was?

Did she despair as she died, that I who had promised to always protect her, *had abandoned her*?

The sun peeked over the horizon, sending weak light through the window to illuminate her body until it was a blaze of flame.

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I ignored it. I didn't give a fuck what was happening out there. The rest of the world could be on fire for all I cared.

I wasn't going to miss these last moments with my wife.

My mistakes had cost her life. Cost our baby's life.

My stomach heaved, burning with bile, and I laid my bloody head against the wood.

How was I supposed to go on without her?

Léonie always thought I hadn't noticed her.

And I had never bothered to tell her the truth.

That I noticed her long before she noticed me. I had just been too suspicious of a trick. A plot. To let it show until that damned boar had forced my hand.

In fact, it could never have touched her because she didn't know it, but my eyes had been on her the whole time.

That it had always been her.

And now—I could never tell her.

My long fingers wrapped around hers and I lifted her palm up into the sunlight. I knew every inch of her delicate hand better than my own. Every freckle. Every scar.

But as the summer light streamed in the window, I frowned.

Wait a minute. . . something was missing. . .

CHAPTER 11

Etienne

A few summers ago. . .

I had been leaning back against a fence, passing cigarettes back and forth, the others wrestling and lobbing an occasional fist at each other, because French mountain families didn't do *play-fighting*.

Everything was a test to see where you ranked in the pecking order.

I was at the very top. And I intended to remain there.

Faustine was talking, her hip jutted up again my thigh, but I wasn't listening to her.

I was looking across the clearing at Léonie Pinoteaux, but she wasn't looking at me.

Ever since I had killed that mad boar in front of her, she'd been extra careful not to get caught looking at me.

But I knew she wanted to.

Unlike most of the other girls, she never purposely tried to get my attention, never flirted with me.

She had my complete attention anyway.

Could she possibly be *real*? Was that sweet, open gaze real? Or was Léonie's manipulative family using her to ensnare me?

Was her shyness real or faked?

Everything about her appealed to me, those thick bright red curls that she had wound wildflowers all through, her delicate fingers that were swishing gently through high grasses to find a few of the small juneberries, the way she was soft and gentle.

I had to find out if she was real and true.

“Léonie,” I said, pushing off the fence and walking toward her. “Come with me. I know where you can get a lot of berries.”

“I’ll come too,” Faustine said eagerly behind me.

“I didn’t ask *you*.”

She huffed, but my eyes were all on Léonie, a pink flush on her cheeks, a little white tooth worrying her bottom lip.

And she followed me right away, her trust sending a heady rush of blood all down to my cock.

I was going to find out who this woman was, because she was going to be 21 soon. Old enough to offer a bride-price to her father.

We wound our way up the mountains, Léonie following obediently behind me. Her smell was all up in my nostrils, that delicate wild mint and dittany scent that meant I knew she loved being in the mountains as much as I did.

She was my twin soul, the one the ancestors had sent just for me.

Everything in her sung to me, called to me.

Mme and Da were against this match. The Pinoteaux could not be trusted, they warned me over and over.

“*Can’t you find any other girls you like?*” Mme had cried just last night.

But no, no, I couldn’t.

There were plenty of girls around.

But none like her. . .

The effect she had on me made me angry, my gut tightening at the way her scent seemed to burn through my whole body, and when I had helped her up to where juneberries grew in a wild purple tangle, I took Léonie Pinoteaux’s chin with my fingers and kissed her.

It was nothing like I expected, her lips unbelievably soft underneath mine, and the rush of possessiveness I felt surprised me with its vehemence.

My cock was throbbing, pressing against the thin fabric of Léonie’s dress as she shyly reached out her hands for my shirt, and I could barely repress a lustful groan as she tightened her fingers against my chest.

This girl was mine. I put an arm around her waist, crushing her close to me, and was only able to drag myself away when she gasped in shock at the feel of my tongue plunging into her mouth.

My heart was pounding and my eyes were glued to where my kisses had made her pretty lips even plumper.

For a moment I wanted to flip up her skirt and take her right here on the hillside, and I could barely make myself step back.

Because I knew she would have done exactly as I wanted, and the knowledge was equal parts terrifying and thrilling.

“This is the best place to find these berries. Grab some,” I said roughly, and Léonie instantly plunged her fingers into the bushes.

Ancestors, that kiss had almost knocked me on my ass.

“Ouch!” she cried suddenly.

“What happened?”

Léonie pulled her finger back and there was a line of blood spiraling around her ring finger, dripping down in bright scarlet drops and coating her nail.

“I guess there was a thorn there,” she whispered.

“You should look first,” I said sternly.

“But you *told* me to,” she replied, blinking those big blue eyes at me, the pale lashes sweeping over her freckled cheeks.

And I knew then that I didn’t give a fuck what it cost, I was going to get Léonie as my bride. . .

Present day

That little scar she carried from the thorns had always been my reminder to be careful what I asked my wife to do.

Because she would obey me instantly.

So these cold dead fingers I was gently holding in my own?

Weren’t hers.

If they didn’t show the evidence of her sweet and trusting nature? They weren’t my wife’s.

I didn’t have to see shit else. Because somehow I’d been played.

For a moment I stared uncomprehendingly at the two corpses.

Who the fuck—

Then I wiped the blood off my face and stalked out of the room.

“Monsieur, so sorry for your loss,” the funeral director said, hurrying after me. “Would you like to arrange a time for the memorial service?”

“You can dump those bodies in the trash heap,” I snarled.

“But—Monsieur, your wife—”

“That’s not my wife.”

“What?”

“I don’t know who the fuck you’ve got back there, but it’s 100% and completely not my wife. Now you’re going to let me drive that hearse of yours, because I have somewhere I need to be. I’ll have my men drop it back here when I’m done.”

“But, Monsieur—”

I was already gone, grabbing his keys without asking and peeling the fuck out of the parking lot. I needed to get back to the lodge immediately and figure out what happened.

If that dead body wasn’t Léonie, *where was she?*

With the red hair on the dead woman, it had to be a Pinoteaux.

But where had a dead Pinoteaux woman come from? Who had killed her?

And why had I been told she was my wife?

There were a few remaining guards at the lodge, instantly snapping to attention when I drove up.

“Search this house from top to bottom,” I ordered. “I want to know where my wife is.”

“Sir—”

“I said *search the house!*”

The first thing I would do was figure out exactly what the hell Tilly and Armand had seen. Had they been fooled by the fake Léonie and Hugo too? *And whose deception was it?*

But when I yanked the front door open and strode inside—

They were gone.

And their entire quarters wiped clean.

Fuck. That meant they had to be connected to the disappearance, even though they’d served the Bastide family for decades.

We went from room to room, my furious hands tearing apart the beds, the closets, slamming the kitchen table against the wall.

Where the fuck was my wife?

As I stood in the kitchen, breathing hard, I heard a faint banging from somewhere in the building.

What the hell?

I followed it, room to room.

“Léonie? *Léonie?* Sweetheart, is that you? I’m coming to get you!”

It sounded like it was coming from under the floors somewhere.

Was my wife in trouble?

Hastily, I descended the stairs to the basement, flicking the light on just as I heard the knocking sound redoubling.

It was coming from one of the supply closets!

If someone had locked my wife in a closet, I was going to tear them limb from limb. . .

I opened the door and out tumbled my idiot brother Mano, his arms and legs tied up so he landed hard on his chin on the concrete floor.

Flicking out my knife, I impatiently cut his bindings free.

“What the fuck happened?” I snapped, ripping the dirty sock out of his mouth. “Where is Léonie?”

“How the hell should I know,” he rasped out, rubbing his throat. “Maybe you should ask Hugo.”

I dragged him upright.

“Tell me what the fuck happened to you. Who tied you up?”

“Fucking Hugo knocked me down from behind.”

“You—let *Hugo* tie you up? Our brothers who reads books all day? Idiot. Where the fuck is my wife?”

“I don’t know,” he groaned. “But she seduced me down to the basement with her. How the hell was I supposed to know it was so Hugo could fuck me up?”

I stared uncomprehendingly at him, yanking him upright by the ear.

“You are telling me that my *nine-months-pregnant wife* lured you into the basement so our brother could tie you up?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“To get information. Damn, I need to piss. I’ve had to piss all over myself.”

“You’ll be fucking pissing through your ass if you don’t tell me where my wife is!” I snarled, shoving him into the wall. “What did you tell her?”

He looked at me, and I felt fear and rage shudder all over my body.

“*What did you tell her?*”

“I told her everything,” Mano hissed back, trying unsuccessfully to block my fists as they landed on his face.

“I warned you—”

“I told her *you* were the one who set her up. *You* were the one who told me to wait for her in the bedroom. *You* told me to leave a condom wrapper

on the bed. *You* bribed the doctor. *You* called her a whore in front of the ancestors and her whole goddamn family. Not me.”

Fuck

“And then what happened?”

“Hugo tied me up, stuffed a sock in my mouth, and left me in the closet. And when I see him, I plan to wring his neck.”

“I can’t believe Léonie did that.”

“Well, brother, then you are blind as well as a fool. Because she deliberately set me up. I’m pretty sure they were leaving together. They looked thick as thieves.”

Fuck fuck fuck

I turned and headed back up the stairs.

So my wife had left the lodge knowing I had set her up.

But not knowing *why* I had done it.

She might even have left thinking I hated her. . .

Fuck.

I called my mother.

“Send every man at home down to the lodge! I need help searching for Léonie.”

My plans were fucking shot, there was no point in the lies now.

“*Léonie*? But isn’t she—”

“No!” I snarled. “I was lied to. She’s alive out there and I need to find her.”

“But—the Pinoteaux are already trying for our supply lines,” Mme squawked into the phone. “You have to come back here and work on security plans.”

“I don’t care. The top priority is finding my wife! Get them down here *now*!”

Something caught my eye as I paced the porch. There were two paintings there. One looked like my brother Hugo. The other. . . was Léonie.

And the painter had caught that play of light in her eyes, the way the summer-sky blue had different spots of golden sunshine in it.

“Yeah,” Mano said as he came up behind me. “Looks like we both might be edged out by Hugo.”

“I’m not *edged out* with my own wife,” I snapped, unease spiraling inside me as I looked at those two paintings next to each other.

I might have fucked up, but Léonie loved me. That was just a fact of nature. I simply needed to see her and explain. . .

Once the Bastide men arrived with my SUV, I sent out specific orders for where and how to search, to make sure that we covered our territory fast and efficiently.

“They might be hiding in an outbuilding or abandoned trailer. Check near streams or somewhere they might be trying to grab a vehicle. I want her found by noon!”

It hadn’t been that long. They can’t have gone that far.

Mano I took with me, and we ascended the narrow path to a nearby peak.

How many hours head start had she had on me? If I stood up here I’d have a perfect vantage point and would hopefully see the two of them and be able to pinpoint where exactly to find her.

“I can’t believe I haven’t seen them by now,” I snapped impatiently. “I need to find her to undo the shit I did. Look out the window, asshole.”

Mano was leaning against the side of the car, stroking his chin.

“You really think she’s going to forgive you?”

“Of course. Once I explain myself.”

He tapped his hands on the side mirror.

“Maybe not. The way her tongue felt in my mouth didn’t feel like she missed you.”

“Her tongue in your *what*?”

“Yeah, why else do you think I went into the basement with her like an idiot? I’d do anything to feel that tongue on my prick.”

Red rage flooded my vision, and without warning, I grabbed my brother by the nape of the neck and dragged him across the seat. Then with one boot I kicked him out the window, driving along the mountain roads with my grip the only thing between him and a thousand-foot drop.

“What the hell?” Mano yelled, as I slammed his head against the side of the car.

“Don’t you fucking talk to me about her tongue on anything of yours again, asshole, or I swear I’ll strangle you with that stupid ponytail.”

“You were the fucking idiot who said that shit to her!”

His feet were desperately reaching back for the narrow gravel road as I swung the SUV even closer to the edge.

“You think I need you, shithead? I don’t. I’m only keeping you around so you can help me find my wife. What else did you say to her?”

“You’re a goddamn lunatic! I told her *you* had moved on, but I still wanted her.”

With a growl, I dragged Mano back into the SUV and threw him on the passenger seat.

“Moved on? You think I could ever move on from my wife?”

“Well, you sure acted like you didn’t care about her,” he said angrily. “All I did was say she didn’t have to worry. *I* would take care of her after you married Faustine.”

“*Faustine?*” I barked in disbelief. “Why the hell would I chase down third-rate pussy? That was a waste of your damn tiny-dick breath, because I would never let another man take care of her!”

My jaw was clenched so hard it was aching.

“Have you been selling information to the Pinoteaux about us?”

His jaw dropped as I kicked out with my boot, landing a blow on his kneecap.

But even as he sputtered in denial, I realized *I* had been the one in denial. I thought Léonie would be waiting for me to forgive her. But she had freed *herself*.

We scoured every inch of Bastide territory. All that long day and through the night.

But there was no sign of them. Not one sighting. Not one clue which way they had gone.

When we uncovered not one trace of them, I sent my men farther afield, made incursions into Pinoteaux territory, outrunning their guards to scour the landscape.

The thought of her going *there* for safety, where they would so happily barter her life for a little security and a better social status, made me want to vomit.

Where had a nine-months-pregnant woman and a man with a cane gone? How had they vanished without a trace?

As the next day dawn my panic spiked harder.

How was my wife able to hide so well from me? *How* had she escaped with Hugo and been able to lie low for this long?

And how was she doing? How was our son doing?

I was *desperate* to not miss any more time with them.

The thought of it was unendurable. She was 39 weeks pregnant now. She could go into labor at any time.

Was she out hiding in the woods somewhere?

And right now I wouldn't be there to hold her hand, guide her breathing, make sure the doctors took good care of her. I wouldn't be the first one to see our baby boy.

Shithell

I was running on cigarettes and energy drinks and no sleep, my eyes raw and red from searching, always searching.

Where was she? It was the only thought in my head.

Now that we were in open warfare with the Pinoteaux, they were encroaching on our territory, openly flaunting the boundaries between our lands but *I didn't fucking care* about anything else until I found my wife.

Somehow, she was hiding from me. Every patrol that came back in, I dreaded them finding her body.

I needed *something* to draw Léonie out. Something to barter or bargain with.

But what?

She was hiding somewhere. *But where?*

I'd sent feelers out to contacts far and wide, but no one had seen her. Had she fallen into a river? Been kidnapped? The not knowing was *torture*.

I had an idea, but it was only a shriveled, desperate, idiotic idea. Because surely. . .surely they were half-legend at this point, hidden away from the rest of the mountain families. . .

But it was all I had.

"Come on, asshole," I told Mano one morning after we'd spent the last 14 hours searching for them.

"Where are we going?"

"To find Léonie. I have an idea.

"Not Faustine? I thought you wanted to fuck her."

I snorted.

"Maybe *your* desperate prick should get on that. I've never been so desperate. I'm in love with my *wife*."

"Have you figured out yet that your wife doesn't *want* to be found? Has it penetrated through your arrogant head that she isn't going to forgive you with a snap of your fingers?"

“No,” I said, turning away with stone-cold fear in my throat. “She’ll forgive me.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 12

Léonie

Mano's words seemed to punch through my chest cavity and drag my heart out, leaving it a messy spill of blood and gutted muscle on the basement floor.

I knew Étienne didn't love me, but until this moment I didn't realize how much he *hated* me.

My *husband* was the one responsible for all the degradation, pain, and humiliation I had suffered?

Not Placidie. Not Faustine. Not Mano.

Étienne.

"Étienne told you to pretend we were having an affair?"

"That's right. Told me what to do and what to say. Right down to pretending he was going to throttle me."

"Why?" I cried. "Why would he do that to me?"

"Why do you think?" Mano retorted as blood dripped down his face. "To marry Faustine probably."

Oh. Of course.

To replace me with the woman he really wanted.

Hugo was looking at me, his brow creased with concern.

"If what Mano says is true, Étienne is a monster," he said tightly. "To abandon his wife and child like this? It's unfathomable."

"Let me go," Mano said, his dark eyes gleaming. "I can take you—I can protect you—"

But Hugo didn't even wait to hear the rest of his speech, just tightened the restraints on Mano, stuffed a sock from the washing machine in his

mouth, and thrust him into a closet.

"I'm sorry, but for him to go along with that plan is unconscionable. I don't trust him either."

"I want to get out of here," I said, stretching my aching back.

My eyes were surprisingly bone-dry. Because what was there to say now? Every minute I stayed was another minute under the control of a man who not only didn't want me, but took pleasure in using me as a pawn for his cruel games.

We needed to escape as soon as possible, before Étienne sent guards to torment me further, keep me like a trapped butterfly to drag out and claw for his amusement.

"Let's take Mano's truck," Hugo said. "We can try to ram through the gate with it."

"What about Tilly and Armand?" I asked nervously as he took me by the hand and drew me up the stairs after him.

Tilly might have been sympathetic to me when Étienne was here, but would she really just sit back and let Hugo and I escape, knowing how the Bastides would punish her?

"We will have to hope they turn a blind eye," Hugo said, grabbing a few things from his room.

Tilly and Armand were nowhere to be found now. Had they gone back to their quarters for an afternoon rest, as they often did?

There wasn't much time to decide. But I had nothing to take with me.

All of my possessions had been left at my old house. All my wedding-presents, keepsakes, everything I had sewed or made for Ciel. There was nothing *here* except borrowed toothbrushes and donated clothes.

But I was leaving my prison and starting a new life with my baby.

"You'll have to drive," Hugo said as we hurried down the front stairs. "I think we should drive south, try to get to the end of Bastide property. Beyond that is Boudreaux territory and perhaps we can make it through there to one of the cities beyond."

My heart sunk.

"I haven't heard good things about Jake Boudreaux. That way is definitely dangerous."

"Do you feel safer going through Pinoteaux territory?" Hugo asked, opening the driver's side door for me.

Damn. Did I? Should I go to my family's home, throw myself on their mercy, and beg a safe place for us?

It might be easier than trying to make it all the way across Bastide territory without getting caught.

But the red flash of hair on those two people in the forest nagged at me.

No, I wouldn't risk going there, either.

"You're right. Let's go south."

Hugo helped me up and I moved the seat forward, rubbing my belly absently as I scanned the fields and mountains beyond the gate.

Not a fly flickered out there.

"Let's go, baby Ciel," I said, to make myself brave.

I pulled down the sun visor and a little piece of paper fluttered into my lap.

"What's this? It's got some numbers on it."

Hugo grabbed it and snorted.

"Just like my idiot brother. Looks like we won't have to actually ram the gates at all. He's left the security code here."

What a lucky break, I thought. . .

The code opened the doors immediately, and I drove out almost wonderingly under the gates that had kept me prisoner for so long.

My hands trembled with excitement. I didn't drive very often. It just wasn't done in my family.

But what else *hadn't been done* and for what reason?

Just as I took my first breath of free air, something hit the right front tire with a terrifyingly loud *pop* and the truck pitched wildly in that direction.

CHAPTER 13

Léonie

“**S**teady on!” Hugo cried, but I’d already stomped in panic on the brake, the truck spinning sideways and stumbling off the gravel road, headed directly for a massive, thick tree trunk!

Hugo’s hands were on the wheel, trying to steady it, and we just barely managed to avoid the tree, the lower branches scraping across the windshield and the trunk snapping off the mirror on my left side.

As we shuddered to a halt, the passenger side window exploded and I saw my cousin Laurent, big, broad-shouldered, *looks like an ox* Laurent, reach through and unlock the door.

I had last seen him as my baby shower and for a moment I stared dumbly at him.

What the hell

“Léonie, run!” Hugo ordered, sliding a tire iron across the seat at me.

Laurent wasn’t here to help me at all.

My heart pounding, I scrambled out of the seat just as my cousin Margot reached my side of the car.

Foolishly, I couldn’t stop a shocked gasp. Margot was almost the exact same age as me, the pair of us so similar with our long red hair and freckled faces that our Mme used to dress the two of us alike and try to fool the rest of the family, make them guess which of us was which.

It felt like a wound deep in my flesh to see her with a knife pointed at me.

The girl who had chased fireflies with me. The girl who had hunted for fiddleheads. The girl who had sat beside me on fall evenings shelling peas,

our freckled legs side-by-side.

“What are you doing?”

Margot only gave me a sharp smile.

“Your luck has run out, Pinoteaux princess.”

At 18, our paths had diverged. My father ran the Pinoteaux, so I was raised to be soft, innocent, and ignorant. Margot’s *da* had been caught skimming money off the top of the family profits, so she had to work as a guard or in transport. As much as I’d wanted to stay friends, it hadn’t been allowed.

“Look at me! I’m no threat to you!” I protested, one hand gripping the tire iron, the other on the door.

And for a moment, I was a fool, such a fool, to think she wouldn’t kill me without blinking an eye.

It wasn’t until she lunged that cold panic filled my veins.

Unless I could be stronger and cleverer than I ever had been in my life, my cousin was going to kill me.

Wake up, Léonie!

“Did Réjean tell you that you could be a house girl if you killed me?” I said, grabbing the door and shoving it toward her. “He lied.”

She dodged the door easily. “No, he’ll have to pick up his end of the bargain,” she said, her eyes gleaming.

I was already backing away, around the SUV and heading for the forest.

But Margot had that knife pointed right at me, and I couldn’t move fast enough.

“Otherwise Étienne has him over a barrel. And Réjean hates that. . .”

Twisting sideways so my belly could fit, I backed up so I could squeeze in between two big trees. Maybe I could lose her in the woods somehow. . .

But Margot was faster, stronger, and she wasn’t nine-months-pregnant.

Her knife hit the tree bark a millisecond after I moved my hand.

And the thing was that I couldn’t call on any of my fight training.

I had none.

I’d been trained to be a docile wife and nothing more.

Margot kicked me in the back of the thighs and I stumbled forward, my belly making me ungainly and awkward, my cheeks and hands scraped up by a sharp, jagged rock face as I desperately tried to keep myself upright.

Ciel kicked my ribs, his little fists pummeling my organs. Making me breathless.

He would love the mountains so much, love the feeling of summer showers on his skin, love how much his Uncle Hugo was looking forward to holding him.

No! I wasn't dying here.

A piece of rock broke off in my hand and I tightened my fingers around it.

"Everyone thought you were such a clever girl getting a man like Étienne Bastide interested in you," Margot said, advancing forward as I desperately scraped my way down the rock face. "But *I* saw through you. You're nothing more than a little greedy slut."

I stumbled forward, barely out of her reach.

Grandmother, please help.

Margot had her knife out, the sharp point gleaming at me, and there were only a few seconds left—between her life and mine.

Pushing off the granite, I flung the rock as hard as I could at her head and miraculously, like the ancestors themselves were guiding my aim, or maybe it was all my rage and a burst of crazy pregnancy strength, it hit her right on the temple.

My cousin staggered.

Desperately, I sprang forward and hit her with my tire iron, my stomach churning at the savage violence in my own fingers.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Laurent struggling with Hugo, his big meaty hands squeezing Hugo's throat, my brother-in-law's cane fallen out of the car and onto the ground.

"Let him go or I'll kill her!" I screamed.

It was a shot in the dark. What did I know about them? Or any of my family? But Laurent paused, and strode forward, a big cudgel in his hand.

"Don't do it!" he growled.

The moment he dropped Hugo, I grabbed at the rest of that crumbling rock and yanked at it, sending a mound of rubble onto my cousin with a sickening, violent thud.

My stomach gave a nauseated heave. *I killed Margot.*

The blood rushed red-hot in my ears and I barely had a chance to run before Laurent grabbed me and dragged me out of the woods.

Gripping me painfully by the hair, his knife flicked out to run down my cheek.

“Fuck you, Léonie. Bitch. But I guess it’s gotta be blood for blood now.”

“No!” Hugo barked, ripping at Laurent’s other arm. “Take me! Let her go. Think of the baby!”

My heart gave a painful anguished clench at the look on Hugo’s face.

“She’s who we were sent to kill!” Laurent snarled. “I don’t give a fuck about the baby. One less loose end to take care of.”

My belly hung heavy and swollen as panic clogged my throat.

No no no

“We can pay you!” I cried desperately. “Come back to the lodge and we can pay you off.”

“Nah. I’d rather get the reward from Réjean. And besides, you just made it personal.”

He dragged the knife along my cheek again, and this time I felt it break the skin.

Hugo tore at Laurent’s arm, trying to pull the knife away from my face.

But with one massive foot, my cousin kicked Hugo in the mouth.

I heard his nose break, but Hugo only rolled over, dug his elbows into the ground, and began to crawl back toward me.

For your next romance novel.

Visit [Lokepub](#) and find a story to read.

But it was going to be too late.

Laurent raised his arm to plunge the knife into my heart, and I had my hands splayed out protectively over my belly, my last instincts, as always, to protect my son. . .

I spat out in my cousin’s face as his muscles tensed to strike the killing blow.

“Fuck you and your bloodline!” I screamed as loudly as I could.

So *something* in the hills could hear me. So the trees and earth could witness my unjust murder. So any ancestors would know we were coming, my baby and me.

“Fuck your bloodline, curse your family, curse your cowardice!”

Laurent only snorted.

And just as his arm swung forward, I heard the sharp *crack* of a gunshot.

Laurent’s arm faltered, and he had the strangest look of utter shock on his face as blood dribbled out of his nose.

I screamed, tearing my hair out of his fist. But I didn’t back away. With the palm of my hand, I hit him in the face. Once. Then again.

His knees crumbled and Laurent fell heavily to the ground.

And behind him—Armand stood with a raised shotgun, Tilly behind him.

My scalp ached, but I moved even closer as he fell.

“Curse on your bloodline, curse on the ground where you fall, may you wander forever in the afterworld, may you never find the ancestors.”

Hugo crawled the last few feet and he had a rock in his hand—but Laurent was already dead, his mouth sagging open, my curses sitting pretty on his skin.

“Are you all right?” Tilly cried out, hurrying toward me.

My ears were ringing, blood pounding in my temples.

“Thank you, thank you,” I could only gasp. “Why—”

“It ain’t right what’s been done to you,” Armand said, and I felt my heart threaten to burst from my chest.

My husband might have abandoned and cast me aside, but there were people in this world who loved me.

“You won’t get in trouble for this, will you?” I asked as we helped Hugo up.

“Where are you planning to go?” Tilly asked, not answering my question.

When Hugo began to explain our plan, Armand shook his head.

“You’ll never outrun him that way.”

He didn’t even need to say his name, because we all knew who *him* was. *Étienne*

“He won’t want to chase me,” I protested, wincing slightly as a hard Braxton-Hicks contraction gripped my belly. “He doesn’t love me. He has a new woman now.”

Armand grunted. “Better safe than sorry. I have a better idea.”

“What? What is it?”

“The Savatier clan.”

Wait, *who* was that?

“They don’t really get involved in our affairs,” Hugo said slowly. “From what I’ve heard, they’re practically hermits. And why would they want to help us?”

“They’ve been left alone for many years,” Armand said. “But they have a nice little territory over by Blue Sky Lake. And I think with the right *inducements* they might take you in. Inducements like everything you could tell them about the Bastide family business. . .”

Hugo and I looked at each other.

Would they take us in?

Tilly frowned as she looked behind me.

“I see the dust of those trucks the *monsieur* must have sent. Better get going, you two. We’ll take care of the bodies.”

I looked down at Margot and Laurent.

Would knowing they’d tried to kill me spark even the tiniest shred of regret in Étienne Bastide’s cold, dead soul?

If he wanted a wife who was dead to him, why not make that official. . .

“You know,” I said. “Who would know this body was Margot and not me? We look a lot alike. It would be easier to hide if everyone thought we were dead already. . .”

Tilly’s normally stoic mouth twitched up.

“Just as you wish, Miss Léonie. I’ll make sure when your husband comes back, he finds you right here.”

“Thank you. *Thank you*,” I gasped. “We can’t thank you enough.”

“Mention my name,” Armand said, “My *Da* has worked in the house there for decades now.”

“We would love for you to come too,” Hugo assured him. “Your loyalty will go both ways, I promise.”

“Go now,” Tilly said, and they hurried us back to the truck as Armand quickly changed the blown tire.

“So grateful,” I whispered, running on adrenaline, knowing I couldn’t afford to crash yet.

Then I had to get in and drive quickly, the sweat slick on my chest as the sun pounded down on us, since the dust of the oncoming trucks was close now, and closer.

But Hugo's calm strength guided me unerringly across the unmarked mountain trails, his clever, logical brain able to follow Armand's hasty directions even though he'd been locked away.

It was his first time in the world in many years, but his eyes stayed fixed on the road, concentrating carefully, because we had no time to lose.

Would they take us in?

We drove over steep hills and down sharp switchbacks as the sun beat down on the windshield and Ciel rolled in my belly and my gut swam with unease.

Until at last I felt the taste of fresh water on my tongue, and we rolled through the trees and up to an iron gate with old-fashioned scrollwork, gently dappled with moss.

It looked like some abandoned fairy home, a beautiful jewel hidden away from the rest of the world.

I reached over and gripped Hugo's hand, my heartbeat fluttering like a hummingbird's.

"What do you think they'll say? We come from two notorious families they probably hate."

He looked disheveled and bloody, but the grin at his newfound freedom almost split his face as he winked encouragingly at me.

"Let's go. Who could resist you, Léonie? Even covered in blood."

And together we got out and rang the doorbell. . .

CHAPTER 14

Léonie

A few days later I could barely believe my change of fortune and my pulse still hadn't gone back to normal.

We had been greeted by a wizened old man who looked skeptical at our bloody appearance until Hugo mentioned the magic name of Armand.

And then we were brought in to visit Jeanne and Odilia Savatier.

They were in their mid-70s, tall and elegant, with gentle faces and old-fashioned, well-made clothes.

The Savatiers had clearly been hidden peacefully away for a while, their beautiful green-gabled home facing the lake, bound on one side by a steep cliff and the other side the docks.

But they still loved beautiful things. They still loved comfort. And Hugo was very persuasive.

They began to think about the beautiful things they could get with the eldest son of the Bastides who had been running the logistics for their entire operation. . .

Jeanne and Odilia were lazy, indolent, and kind, and at night they told us stories of when their families had been aristocrats.

They had never had children, but still had a network of nephews and great-nephews and cousins and nieces, all living around them.

All ready for any plans Hugo had. . .

I sat in my pretty room with the spring-green wallpaper and rested. Took baths in the massive clawfoot tub.

Took deep, free breaths of air and didn't think about my husband.

Only late at night, as the days crawled closer to my due date and I had to get up and pee once and twice and three times.

And then I wondered.

If he ever thought of me.

If he had moved Faustine into our old house. Was she sleeping in our old bed? Did it feel the same when he came in late at night and slipped a hand between her wet thighs. . .

Mostly I didn't think about him at all. I'd be giving birth with a new doctor who didn't know how I had been humiliated by my husband.

Now I could choose a new name. Not Léonie Bastide. And not Léonie Pinoteaux.

Someone in my family had ordered the hit on me. And it could only have been my own *Da* or my brother. The betrayal burned, but here with my feet up and a cup of iced spicewood mountain tea with extra honey, it was only a lingering throb.

On these lands I could be whoever I wanted. Not a dutiful daughter, dutiful wife, dutiful little pawn between families. Not a follower, not a lover, not the girl who would believe anything.

Who was I without that?

One thing my husband had forbidden me to do was learn to ride a boat. And so that was the first thing I wanted to learn.

Accordingly, Hugo and I were out on the water a few days later, him teaching me to drive a pretty little Savatier vessel.

The lake was fed by powerful rivers, and was a deep, crystal blue. Out here I could almost forget the bloody reality of the other mountain families, the breeze cutting through the stifling heat and whirling my long curls around my face.

"Be sure to tell me if you feel any contractions," Hugo said as he guided my hands over the wheel.

"None at all," I laughed. "I think Ciel isn't in any hurry to exit."

I rubbed my belly affectionately.

Despite everything that had happened, he was safe inside me. And that was all I cared about.

Today I was filled with a strange, wild joy as the little boat practically sung over the waves. All my life I had been a part of the background, raised to let others do the big things, the bold things.

Now I was a girl who drove a *boat*. It was a start.

“Did they never think of marrying you off?” I asked. Even though we tried not to talk about the past, something about the way the sun sparkled over the waves, the way the trees clustered around the edge of the lake, made me want to draw just a little of our pain out so maybe it wouldn’t hurt as much.

I didn’t feel so oppressed here, without Étienne’s mountains pressing down on me from every angle. Here I could see new land in every direction. Land that didn’t have his stamp on it.

Hugo stroked his beard and settled back in his seat. Even the pain in his leg was better out here at the lake.

“Mme did at one point,” he said, looking out into the distance. “I refused. There was someone else I wanted to marry.”

I waited. We had all the time in the world out here now that we weren’t trapped in Bastide jail.

“She—the woman I loved—was—is—a very remarkable person. I’ve never met anyone like her. But Mme was firmly opposed. I think Da would have consented. In many ways he was a much gentler person than Mme, you see. But, she—my mother—had means of getting her own way.”

“What means?”

“Threats. Mme threatened me. There were—things I had to do, to the woman I loved, things to make sure she broke up with me and didn’t come back asking questions.”

“I see,” I said.

The pain stretched heavy and thick between us, the kind of pain that didn’t ever entirely go away.

“Well, now you’re free,” I said quietly. “You could go look for her.”

“No, oh no,” Hugo said quickly. “She got married, I believe. To a very nice man. Best thing that could have happened to her, of course. There’s only trouble and ruin to be found with the Bastides.”

I knew that was damn true.

“And how does Ciel like being on the water?” he asked, changing the topic.

I laughed, one hand on the wheel and the other on my belly, where I could feel my baby in there kicking and wriggling around.

“He loves it.”

I took a long drink of water and shook my hair out in the breeze. “Want to have some more of these apple hand pies? They’re delicious.”

But there was a frown line between Hugo's brows.

"Looks like there's another boat on the lake. This place is so out of the way, I wonder if they've gotten turned around. And it looks like we're in their direct path, so let's go to the east a bit, let them pass us by so they can turn around."

I obeyed him, but I glanced up to see the boat still headed toward us. Even as we cut to the east, so did they.

"Shit," Hugo said, squinting. "They're coming in hot. Let's get back to the dock."

And I think I felt it on the back of my neck first. Cold goosebumps rising on my skin, terror crawling down my spine.

I didn't even let myself look closer at the other boat, skimming straight over the waves. Right at us.

The other boat driver was going too fast, too reckless.

"Let's go, Léonie. Hurry."

I jammed the throttle down and headed back for the dock.

But the other boat was catching up quickly.

"Fuck," Hugo hissed under his breath. And I knew he had seen what I had instinctively known with every crawling cell of my body.

Someone was chasing, hunting us down, with mathematical precision.

I pulled power to our engines, but the other boat did too.

I pulled to the east, veered away.

They veered too.

And they were going faster, creeping up on us second by second until—the boat drew even with us, and he must be pushing that engine way past what was safe as he shot in front. . .

He was right in my line of vision now, right between me and safety, so I couldn't *avoid* seeing him.

My husband.

Étienne was wearing a white shirt, rolled up over powerful forearms, the buttons undone down to his chest, the white stark against his tanned skin, his strong hands twisting the steering wheel—and our eyes met.

"Slow down, Léonie!" he called out, the spray splashing over him, soaking the shirt to his chest.

But he wasn't that man anymore.

That man I'd *do* anything for, follow anywhere.

Instead, I pulled the boat even further east, but Étienne didn't let me escape, swinging his boat in front of ours, cutting off the route back.

"Léonie!" he shouted again. "I need to talk to you! Stop that boat!"

"No!" I called back, and I saw his dark eyes harden at my disobedience, his brows draw together in angry confusion.

"Get out of here!" Hugo shouted. "This isn't your territory, Étienne!"

But Étienne only jerked his head at Mano to take the wheel and then sprung to the prow.

"Every place my wife's foot lands is *my* territory."

I jerked the wheel to the left, trying to get around him, but with a sudden, risky leap he jumped into our boat.

It was a mountain lion's leap, with a lion's cool, arrogant confidence in his own power.

My heart pounded as he towered over me, pulsing with heat, and I grabbed a boat hook and pointed it *straight* at him.

"What are you doing here?"

If I pointed this hook right at his chest, it was like I could keep that pulsing, restless energy away too, keep it from *infecting* me again with foolishness and delusions.

"Léonie! *Ma chérie*! I've been hunting you for *weeks*!"

"Léonie who? Léonie is dead. Didn't you find my body?"

His jaw dropped and he reached out for me as I knocked his arm away with the hook.

"What the hell were you playing at? It almost goddamn killed me when I thought that body was yours!"

His fists were clenching and unclenching, a muscle pulsing low and tempting in his throat.

"I *am* dead. To you."

"No! I need to talk to you. I need to explain everything to you."

"Don't bother," I spat out. "Mano already *explained* enough. You know, you could have just married Faustine in the first place. And saved me having to go through this."

He winced.

"I have never, *ever* wanted Faustine. Never, ever wanted anyone but you."

"Why was my ring on her finger then? Why were your hands all over her?"

“That was to fool your family and force them to return the bride-price! Just let me explain!”

I scoffed. “*You* are a liar, Étienne. And I know that now. You aren’t the man I thought you were.”

His face looked lined, dark purple shadows under his eyes.

“Put that hook down and listen to me.”

He took a step closer, but I raised the boat hook to his throat.

“No! I don’t just do what you say anymore. You lied to me and manipulated me. I don’t need to hear any of your explanations. You go your way and I’ll go mine. Everything is over between us.”

Étienne struck his own chest with his fist, then made as if to jab the boat hook through his throat, the sharp edge cutting through his fingers and making blood drip down his arms.

His eyes looked wild, almost feral as his bones curled around the hook.

“It’ll *never* be over between us. Léonie Bastide, I’ll love you *past* my dying breath. I’ll love you through the underworld and back. I fucked up, sweetheart. Fucked up like Hell. I should never, ever have used you like that. I lied on you and lied on your name. It was fucked up and wrong. Please forgive me.”

I only shrugged, and looked my lying husband right in the face.

“You were right, though. *You* aren’t the father of this baby. Your brother Mano is.”

CHAPTER 15

Étienne

“He is not,” I snarled, glaring at Hugo, who had risen from his seat and was watching me warily.

I flicked my eyes back at Mano. Hell no.

“I think I would know,” Léonie said, and I couldn’t believe this was her tone. I couldn’t believe that was her scornful curl of the lips. “You said my baby wasn’t yours. So you win, Étienne. This baby *isn’t* yours.”

Her hands were so steady on that boat hook, and she was absolutely glowing in the sun. Even the horrific *léger* I had written on her forehead, thankfully fading now, didn’t diminish her glowing strength and confidence.

After all these days running on the fine edge of sanity and insanity, so impatient to find my wife that it felt like I was peeling out of my own skin, like it was going to roll off me in strips, now she faced me without any excitement. Any relief to see me.

Only revulsion.

I had to fix this.

“*Léonie*. Please. I know that’s my baby.”

“Why do you know that?” she countered. “Like you said, you were gone a lot. You don’t know what I was doing.”

The bottom was sinking out of my damn soul, dark devastation was crawling over every inch of my skin.

“Because you love me,” I said. “You have always loved me.”

She shook her head, and her eyes never left mine. That boat hook never left my throat.

“I don’t love you anymore. Not after what happened. This is what *you* wanted, Étienne Bastide. You cast me aside. You called me a lying whore. You publicly rejected each and every attempt on my part to explain. Now give me my divorce and get the hell out of here.”

Divorce?

“I will never give you a divorce,” I bit out, grabbing the boat hook and jabbing it toward my throat. “Kill me fucking dead now if you want me to stop. Because I won’t stop until I get your forgiveness.”

Her eyes widened, and for a moment I thought I saw a spark of something deep inside them, but then she juttied her chin over to Mano.

“Let daddy back over here so he can see how his baby is doing.”

“If I thought you were telling the truth I would fucking send him to the bottom of this lake before I let him have you! You are *mine*. I claimed you a long time ago.”

“It’s too late for that dick-measuring stuff. You publicly rejected me.”

As I watched in horror, the boat hook at my throat, Hugo went to stand by my wife, putting an arm around her waist, hand spanning her baby bump. But she *never* wanted anyone to touch her but me.

And now Hugo was doing it?

“You need to leave,” he said. “The child in her belly knows *my* voice. Knows my songs. He knows my love. Not yours. You weren’t here to protect him. So you’re no kind of father at all.”

Rage and despair filled me—at my brothers, *at myself*.

My fingers itched for violence and the boat hook scraped by my throat as I grabbed Hugo.

My brother had no room to escape, but he leaned in right before I lowered my shoulder into his chest, with a neat little uppercut to the jaw.

Oh, my brother had more of a bite than he claimed, fake-ass scholar and gentleman that he was!

In my rage I was foolhardy, reckless, idiotic as we grappled together, and I felt Léonie’s boat hook stab me in the back as Hugo and I toppled off and into the lake.

My brother ended up with a blow to my chin just as we hit the water that fucking rattled my teeth, and there was a hard smack as Léonie threw the life preserver out. Right in front of Hugo.

“Just leave her alone,” he said. “You’re a break shit up guy, not a fixing it guy. You never have been.”

“I am not.”

“Yeah, the fuck you are. You don’t know how to fix shit because you’ve never had to.”

He grabbed the preserver and made his way back with powerful strokes.

Mme had always insisted he was weak but I didn’t think so anymore. . .

“Léonie!” I shook the water from my ears and swam closer to her boat, trying to grab a hold of it before she started the engine.

“I lied! I didn’t mean anything I said. I swear on all the ancestors that I didn’t!”

That was a serious oath, and I didn’t make it lightly. In fact, I’d only ever made it one other time. . .

“I’ve heard you say that before,” my wife said, glancing over at me, and there was something in how she was so calm while I was a maelstrom of chaotic emotions. “You swore by all the ancestors on our wedding day that you’d always take care of me. You lied then, so why should I believe you now?”

Hugo was already back in the boat and Léonie turned on the engine.

And then she was gone. Without another backwards glance.

“Léonie!” I roared again, waves from her wake slamming into my face, and I swam toward the docks for several minutes before realizing I was being a fucking idiot, and got back in my own boat.

I was dripping with water, filled with baffled fury and confusion.

She hadn’t believed me. She didn’t even want to hear my explanation.

I knew she would be angry, but I hadn’t expected this refusal to even listen to me. Or trust me.

I’d thought my *word* would have been good enough for her to begin to see what had happened, even if I’d been a selfish bastard.

“Don’t say a goddamn word,” I warned Mano as I shook the water out of my hair. “What did you offer the Pinoteaux for her?”

He looked away. Then he told me a number.

“You’re a fucking idiot,” I said savagely. “I would never have allowed you those funds.”

“*You* spent ten times that much to get her,” Mano said. “And you couldn’t find a better way to take down her family than shaming her. You’re a fucking dipshit.”

“She’ll forgive me,” I said.

But for once I didn’t feel so confident in my precious wife.

I ordered the boat back to shore, skirting their boundaries, and told my men to patrol carefully about the borders of the Savatier lands.

Why the fuck was she here?

I was beginning to realize that there was a lot I didn't know about my wife.

Why did she think *they* could protect her more than I could?

Her disdain and rejection was like a crawling, growing monster under my skin.

If I could only get her alone. . . if I could only talk to her without Hugo there. . .

As I prowled around the outskirts, my eyes sharp for any vulnerabilities, I saw it.

If I let myself down the cliff, if I could find the handholds, I could make my way under the iron gates and then climb back up once I was past them. And then I'd be inside the grounds.

There was a lot better security than I had expected here. That must be my brother's doing. What was his goal here?

I waited until nightfall, every muscle in my body aching to move as my soaked clothes dried to my skin. The last thing I wanted was for my officious brother to interfere.

Lucky for Hugo that he never came outside, because I would have been tempted to strangle him with my bare hands.

What exactly was their relationship?

It was *impossible* for any other man to threaten what Léonie and I had. Even though I had wronged her, with our love for each other, we could work through it.

Unless. . .

This time. . . I'd gone too far.

When it was dark, I swung down the cliff face, waves crashing against the beach below, then moved carefully under the fence and pulled myself up on the other side.

I crept to the house, carefully feeling where the best handholds were, and I began to climb, pressing my body against the stones, moving carefully so I wouldn't slip.

Léonie wasn't anywhere on the first floor, and I had to traverse the entire second floor to find her, trying to control my breathing, but when I

reached her balcony I couldn't help it, inhaling her mountain-sweet scent in massive gulps of air.

Peering through the window, I saw the shape of my wife in the bed, the curve of her waist a seductive pull in the moonlight.

She was so trusting, sleeping with such peace on her face that my stomach wrenched to see the damn outline of the *léger* still written on her forehead.

What the hell had I been thinking? I needed to take that off.

The lock was easy to break, quietly, silently, and I crept forward, my fingers outstretched toward her. I was going to rub that hateful mark off her forehead.

But before I was able to touch her, to my shock Léonie rolled over to face me.

Her expression was completely blank and cold.

"How—"

"It was very reckless of you to come here. But I knew you would. Because you're reckless. With everything that matters."

For a moment I was completely stunned. I would have put money on the fact that she was sleeping.

There were depths to my wife that I knew nothing about. . .

But I fucking *craved* knowing them.

The thin little strap of her tiny nightie fell off her shoulder, and I bent over her anxiously.

"Let me explain, Léonie! Goddamn it, I know I fucked up! Let me get that damn mark off! I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry."

She backed away, one hand on her belly, the other connecting with my thigh.

"Don't you fucking dare touch me, Étienne!"

I stood there foolishly with my hands dangling, blood throbbing in my cock at the feeling of being so close to my wife after days of feverishly searching for her.

I wanted her so badly my mouth was filling with drool. And she didn't want me to touch her.

"You came to find a sweet, forgiving wife, but you no longer have one."

"Let me get the mark out!" I bit out. "Please. It shouldn't be there. It's wrong. It's shameful."

“No, it’s not. It’s enlightening. Because it means I have a husband who was willing to do anything except put me first. So go away and be with Faustine. Mano already told me everything I need to know.”

“I *did* do what Mano said. But I didn’t do it because I wanted some other woman! Or because I didn’t love you anymore. I needed to get you safely out of the way for my revenge. By demanding the bride-price back, it would have destroyed the Pinoteaux name, their honor, and have fulfilled my vow to my Papé.”

“And what about *my* name?” she demanded, her lips set angrily at me.

“*Your* name is Bastide.”

“What was your plan after calling me whore in front of everyone?”

Shame burned down my throat.

“Mano would have told everyone that he was mistaken, of course. That he meant to meet someone else there. The paternity test would be redone, and everything would be as it ought.”

She stared at me.

“You think Mano is going to go along with that?”

“Mano will do what I tell him to.”

“Did your grandfather *even ask* you to make this vow?”

I paused, every muscle tensed to the point of explosion.

“No. But I know the sound of blood calling to me.”

Léonie sat up, so close that my skin was pounding with lust, my hands itching to grab her and hold her tight. Her scent was in my nostrils, burning down my throat, my cock throbbing in my pants, and it took everything I had not to take her in my arms.

“I don’t think you know *what* is calling to you. You *think* it’s mountain honor, but your Papé never asked for that. He told you to run, leave the place where he died. Maybe he didn’t *want* you to bind your spirit up in revenge.”

My face burned.

“In fact you wanted this revenge because it would increase *your* lands and *your* power.”

“*Chérie*, no.”

My hands were almost shaking now with the craving to kiss her, so close I could see every tiny pulse and kick on her belly.

“I want my wife back. I want my family back. I wanted to make sure you couldn’t be retaliated against while I finished my revenge. I have the

power to change anyone's mind about you. They won't dare to say a word against you."

"But do you have the power to change *my* mind, Étienne? No, you don't. You've thought of everyone but me."

"Please! I will tell you everything and anything you ask! Just let me get a little closer. I feel like I'm dying without being able to touch you."

For a moment there was silence. I could see that her chin was raised proudly, but her heart was pounding, nipples taut in her nightgown, and she looked ripe and swollen all over, from her belly to her heavy breasts.

Then she nodded her head and I could have gnawed through my knuckle.

"All right. Tell me then."

How could she be so tempting and delicious, yet look so utterly unconcerned with my presence?

I pounced forward and kissed her, loving how soft her lips felt under mine, and felt myself spilling out all these details.

"Who else even knew about it? Who else was in on your plan?"

"No one besides Mano! No one, I swear! I knew at some point you'd have to go back to the bedroom, but I didn't direct *that*. I just waited until you left."

"I don't know if I believe that."

"It had to look real! I couldn't let up the deception even around them," I groaned in her ear as I sunk my hands in her hair. "Mano was the only one who knew. It had to convince everyone if I was to succeed in bringing down your family."

"And Faustine, too, of course?" Léonie asked, turning away from me.

"She knew nothing except that I would hold her hand and pretend to be interested during negotiations with your family! I told her very clearly that I loved my wife."

"Oh," she said, and below me Léonie was as cold as a statue.

"Faustine means nothing to me!" I cried passionately, burying my hands in her hair. "She was only used to put pressure on your family, to convince them I could move on so they would agree to give back the bride-price."

I felt her still under my feverish kisses.

"You were wrong," she said dryly. "Instead of paying the bride-price, they would have preferred to kill me. And if you had ever given me back to them—I would have died that day."

“I would *never* have given you back! What they did will not go unpunished,” I said tightly. My whole body felt heated, each inch of my skin burning with how close I was to my goal. How close I was to her forgiving me, letting me take her home again. “The fact that you were vulnerable to attack at the lodge is going to fucking scar me for life. And the fact that Hugo was the one to help you, not me, means despite my own issues with him, he has my *permanent* goodwill. I won’t make him go back to the lodge.”

“That’s big of you,” my wife said. “But Hugo is free now, and I think you would find it difficult to imprison him again.”

“I don’t *want* to imprison him again. I want you to tell me who you want me to kill and how you want me to do it, and I’ll bring you their head on a platter. I’m not going to let the Pinoteaux family go free for what they did to you. I don’t care about any agreements, truces, or keeping the peace.”

My cock was leaking down my pants, because this was always how it had been between my wife and I. My desire for Léonie had always been explosive.

Our wedding night I had barely been able to contain myself, nails digging into my flesh so I would go slowly, carefully, making sure not to hurt her. But that first feel of her silky sweet pussy had been enough to make me howl like a wolf.

And I knew I had been right to wait for her, have her be my first, because there was no one else who could compare.

I didn’t settle for second-rate shit and no one could be more of a prize than my wife.

My hand was on her belly now, fingers splayed wide, wanting desperately to feel my son moving.

But before I was able to, Léonie gave me a firm push.

“Guards! Hugo! Come quickly, I have Étienne in my bedroom!”

What the hell, what the fuck?

I could only stare open-mouthed as my wife slid gracefully from the bed to lean against the vanity.

There were sounds in the hall, the noise of tramping boots, and in baffled fury, I spun her bookcase around to block the door.

“What are you *doing*?”

“Getting you out of here. You’ve served your purpose. You conspired with Faustine to make a fool out of me, and that’s enough. Just tell

everyone the baby is your brother's and don't come here again."

She looked cool and unconcerned but her words were like being trapped in a nightmare.

"Léonie, you know damn well that isn't Mano's baby! You know damn well I don't love anyone but you! How can you doubt that?"

She jutted her chin defiantly at me. "You wanted to convince everyone my baby wasn't yours. So I give in. I admit it. You win, Étienne. Your wife was a *slut* and slept around on you, and you can tell anyone you want. Anything that makes you look better. I don't care."

It felt like I'd been punched in the gut.

"Those were all lies!" I snarled. "I know you would never do something like that."

She shrugged.

"Leave now with me."

I held out my hand to her.

"I can get us out of here safely. Together. And then I promise I'll make it up to you. Do you trust me?"

Scenes flashed before my eyes. Léonie with her fingers stretched toward mine, following me through mountain paths, her hands trailing by slippery moss and pretty trilliums. Coming out into hidden waterfalls, then guiding her into the cool water with me.

Trusting eyes. Parted lips.

The water streaming over her bright hair, as my hands were all over her, pulling up her dress, tipping her hips up so my cock could slip inside to that perfect tight fit, that silky wet grip.

But this time her face was closed, her eyes shuttered.

How could my heart still be pounding in my chest and it seemed to have no effect on her?

"No."

"Come with me," I tried again, striding over and opening the window. "Please. I was a bastard, but I promise I *never for one moment* intended to abandon you and the fact that you were threatened without me there to protect you is the biggest regret of my life."

I hadn't lost a fight in a long time, and I remembered the last time. I'd been in kindergarten and mouthing off to some of the older teens.

I'd ended up flat on my back with the air knocked out of my lungs, vowing I'd never lose again.

And that pain was nothing to the look on my wife's face. Utter contempt and disdain.

"Never. I will *never* trust you again."

It was like she'd punched a hole in my chest, it was aching so hard.

I could only stare at her as the door was practically bowing open with the force behind it, my hand stretched out foolishly in front of me.

Was Hugo in love with her?

Was she in love with Hugo?

And for the first time I had to accept—Léonie was no longer my sure thing.

I had to believe somewhere, deep down, she still loved me. At least a little bit.

Or I'd go completely mad.

"You better go," Léonie said. "They're about to break down that door."

I could hear the wood snapping behind me.

"No!" I said.

My fingers were shaking, but still I held them out.

"I'm not leaving until you forgive me! I'm not leaving until you believe me. That I know I was wrong and I know I fucked up, but I still love you, and I always will."

"You might be here for a while then," she said, as the door splintered open behind me.

And then someone hit me hard on the back of my head and for a time the pain and desire and agony was wiped from my blank, unconscious mind.

CHAPTER 16

Etienne

As soon as I woke, I felt it again. Before my fuzzy brain could even put a name to the pain, I felt aching loss, and each moment I shook the unconsciousness away, the pain grew.

Léonie. My love. Our baby.

I waited as I blinked in and out of consciousness. Time passed, and I had no idea how many hours it had been. All I knew was each ragged breath made me more determined to win my wife back.

My mind went back through my favorite memories. The day Léonie told me she was pregnant.

The way I'd *gloried* in how fertile she was, how many babies I could put in her. The way I knew she was going to be an amazing mother.

But what fucking kind of father was I?

Even on days when we'd been working on the nursery together, if a work call came, someone with information on how to increase my power, my wealth, complete my revenge, I'd drop everything in the nursery and go.

Go get another shipment, pressure another supplier, hunt down a trespasser.

I had started fucking up a while ago. How could I fix it?

I'd fucked up and lost the one thing I should have taken the most care with.

I'd thought of everything except the possibility that she wouldn't forgive me.

Had my revenge ever been necessary? Had it been my honor that drove me to destroy the Pinoteaux family? Or was it just my own selfish

ambition?

Would Papé have wanted this outcome? Me lying on the forest floor with dirt in my mouth? Too stubborn to escape without my wife?

Who could be more shamed than me?

If she wouldn't let me take off the last marks of the *léger* then I'd make mine bigger than ever.

I got up, my body aching, and made my way down to the road where my men were waiting.

With savage, jerky motions I pulled the knife from my pocket and carved the letter into my forehead. L é g e r

As they stared open-mouthed at me.

These words had never been on my forehead before. Because I had *never* lost a fight. *Never* showed weakness.

I should have put my family before my ambition.

Because now I had everything in the palm of my hand to destroy the Pinoteaux.

And *it still wasn't enough*. Not without Léonie.

Now I had to convince her. And for the first time, I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure of anything anymore. I wasn't sure what my wife was thinking. I wasn't sure what would convince her I had repented of my bastardy. I wasn't sure what would make things go back to the way they had been.

I went home to search for something, anything, that would convince my wife to forgive me. Or at least give me a second chance. I would have given her anything she wanted. *But what did she want?*

"What the hell have you done?" *Mme* asked in a shrill voice, the glass dropping from her nerveless fingers. Her mouth was agape and her eyes wide with horror as she saw what I'd carved on my forehead. "We are about to destroy the Pinoteaux dogs and you plan to do it with *that* on your face?"

"If Léonie has a mark, so will I," I snarled. "It means nothing on *her*, on her the mark is an eternal shame to *me*."

"My son, that *léger* is used for weaklings, for whores!"

"I whored myself out to power," I said savagely, turning to the rest of the household, to make sure everyone could hear my words.

"This is my shame and my penance. And I want to make it very clear that our first priority as the Bastide family is to get my wife and child back here. Nothing else is more important than that."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 17

Etienne

I was back for forgiveness. I was back for a second chance. I was back on the Savatier land and my brother Hugo had his gun aimed at my throat.

The light was blinding, burning as I stared up into the sun.

“How the fuck are you getting on to this property?”

I couldn’t even watch the man with the gun pointed at me, because my eyes were anxiously scanning the yard for Léonie’s beautiful pregnant shape.

“You must help me plead my case to her,” I rasped. “I know you can’t be seriously trying to steal my nine-months-pregnant wife from me.”

“Why would I do favors for a man who has keep me jailed in the lodge for years?” Hugo asked in a darkly amused tone.

That was another bitter pill.

“I’ll make it worth your while.”

“What the hell do you have to bargain with, brother?” he snorted, waving me toward the gate with his gun. “I’m free because of Léonie. Not you.”

“I made a mistake agreeing to lock you up.”

Hugo’s lips were twisted, and how the hell could I blame him for hating me? I’d feel the same way.

“Let me guess, Mme told you I was a liability to the family?” Hugo asked. “That no one would respect us if they knew you had a brother with a cane? Funny, how much healthier I feel now that I’m not under her control.”

“I want to make that right,” I said. “I want to fix what I fucked up.”

“There is no way you can fix everything she took from me. In fact, you’re only living because the Savatier don’t like a mess. Now get out of here.”

“Not without seeing my wife!”

And then I did see her—to my horror there was a frown on her face as she walked outside, one hand on her lower back, the other on her massively swollen beautiful belly.

“*Léonie*. How are you?”

I didn’t say anything about what was on my forehead, but I knew she saw it.

Her eyes were cool, assessing, then flicking impersonally past me like I was just a part of the scenery.

This wasn’t the same girl who had followed me trustingly, the same girl who would have stepped out into the sky because I said I’d catch her.

“Ooh, oh! Hugo!”

Her eyes closed tight as she stopped to catch her breath.

“I think I’m going into labor. The contractions—they’re coming faster now. The last one was less than five minutes ago.”

“Let’s go inside,” Hugo said instantly. “I’ll call the doctor. He’ll bring everything we need.”

He hurried her inside, then down the hall to a room that had been clearly prepared for this—a big ball for her to gently bounce on, different chairs and beds and even a large bathtub.

Léonie gripped the side of the bed and groaned. There were beads of sweat on her forehead as Hugo rushed a cup of ice over to her.

“Eyes on me,” I said, not sure if I should rub her back or what to give her. “You’ve got this.”

“No—*Léonie*—eyes on me,” Hugo ordered firmly, and she popped her blue eyes open and fixed them on him. “You’ve got this. Your body is strong and powerful. You can do it. Just like we said. Breathe, girl. Breathe. In and out, just like we practiced.”

“*Léonie*, no, I’m here for you—breathe—” I tried to say.

And I realized as my knees gave way and I barely missed hitting the bottom of the bed.

That *I* hadn’t been the one practicing breathing with her.

I didn’t have the first fucking suggestion for her.

That it wasn't me at all. It had been my brother to support her through one of the most vulnerable times in her life.

If I thought every moment leading up to this was my lowest, it was still nothing to the feeling of watching my wife in labor and have her *not look at me once*.

I wasn't her rock—my brother was.

Her eyes never wavered from his, only breaking their eye contact when she closed hers in pain.

The doctor came. Nurses came. They set up a bewildering amount of equipment.

And I didn't recognize them. Didn't recognize any of them. Didn't know anything.

Even though this was *my* wife. My baby.

I waited in an agony, my voice unheeded, unremembered, unneeded.

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to [Lokepub](#) to pick your next novel.

Hour after hour her labor progressed, Hugo encouraging her to go into different positions, bounce on the ball, then she ended up on all fours on the bed.

And I wasn't needed at all. She didn't care that I was here for her.

The last thing I remembered was the sight of a dark, jet-black head of hair emerging as my wife pushed, clutching Hugo's hand so tightly that the veins stood out under her pale white skin.

My child, my son.

“Léonie—“ I gasped, but there was an arm around my throat and I felt Mano choking me.

“What do you want me to do with him—” was the last thing I heard before all was darkness.

I woke on the forest floor again, staggering to my knees on the other side of the gate.

Locked away from my wife and child.

Mano was sitting on a tree stump smoking.

"I could have fucking killed you while you were out," he said. "No one could have blamed me for killing a man with *léger* written on his forehead. Fucking lunatic."

"Why didn't you, then?" I asked savagely, grabbing the cigarette and taking a long, painful drag.

My head was throbbing and my lungs burned.

"Our fucking weak brother Hugo had to tell me some story about when we were kids—how I fell into some ravine and everyone was looking for me—you were the one to find me and pull me out."

I looked away.

"Hugo is soft," I said.

"Yeah," Mano said.

But I remembered it. Later I'd acted like it hadn't mattered—like plucking your little brother out of a deep ravine didn't affect me at all.

But at the time—tears had sprung to my eyes and when I wiped them away with the back of my hand Mme had frowned at me. I couldn't have been more than 4 or 5, but I still remembered it clearly.

"*No tears*," she'd told me. "Those aren't for Bastides."

"You are welcome for dragging you out of that ravine, though," I said, shaking away the memories. "Idiot."

I heard the low snort of his laughter.

"What's your plan?"

"I don't know."

What could I bring the woman who needs nothing from me?

I turned to face the house.

And—through the bars I saw her.

It was like the inverse of what I had done—now I was barred from her, me in the prison of my own making.

The curtains of her room were drawn back, and she was facing the other direction, pulling her long curly hair up into a loose bun. I would *kill* to get my hands on her, to be able to bury my face in her curls, take her in my arms so she melted against me.

"Léonie," I whispered.

She couldn't hear me, but I wondered if somehow she could *feel* my presence, with the way she suddenly turned, scanning the treeline.

At first I was too busy looking at her beautiful profile, the elegance of her long neck, to notice.

And when I did, my gut dropped and it didn't stop.

Her belly—her swollen, bursting belly—was gone. *Gone!* I would never be able to get that time back.

Then she bent down and picked up our baby. Tiny, perfect, swaddled in a soft blue blanket, with so much thick, midnight-dark hair that it was practically a mohawk.

And as I looked at my wife holding our baby my heart began to shatter, and I let out an unearthly, inhuman howl as I clutched the gates so hard my bones began to crack. . .

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 18

Léonie

The last days of a mountain summer were always hot, like summer didn't want to let go, didn't want to stop baking the earth to a fine, crispy finish.

A thunderstorm rumbled in the distance as Hugo and I sat on the front porch, my nose resting on the milky-sweet scent of Ciel's head.

The most beautiful baby in the whole wide world, we all agreed, as Tilly brought out cups of tea and Armand and Hugo consulted about some security measures.

With Hugo and his big brain now in charge of Savatier business interests, they were already nipping at Bastide heels, trying to figure out how to undercut Étienne with his suppliers, wondering if there was a direct route they could bring some motorcycle parts through.

I was learning so much more about French family business than he had ever told me before.

It was a risk to go against the Bastides, but if anyone could do it and keep his hands clean, it was Hugo.

Without even missing a beat, he took Ciel from me and burped him gently, carefully.

"Oh, Hugo, you're the best uncle Ciel could ever have. You rock him when he's fussy, you bring me food when I'm nursing him. I'd do anything for you. I only wish I could help make right what was taken from you."

"It's enough to be able to help you, sister. And my nephew."

But no, it wasn't, I insisted to myself. I could never repay Hugo enough. I would find *some* way to get him what he deserved.

It was so bittersweet to know that *if* Étienne had truly been fooled into believing I was unfaithful, that one sight of this perfect baby and he *couldn't* have denied it. They looked so alike, both with the same dark hair, the same shape of their eyes and lips.

My sweet Ciel represented the best of my love for my husband.

But it was a love that hadn't been returned. Not really.

Maybe with how hard I had loved him, this was always going to be the result. It meant finally I had to face the disparity in our emotions.

My husband thought he could win me back, and with what?

Power, control, manipulation.

He had manipulated all my reactions, made sure they were genuinely broken-hearted and sincere. That was only because his arrogant ass knew how I felt about him.

Étienne had known exactly how much I adored him, and played me for a fool because of it.

He had been to our front gate many times since Ciel's birth, begging to be let in, pacing back and forth until Hugo had to shoot over his head to get him to leave.

But I would never allow it.

He really thought once he had blackmailed that bride-price out of my family that we could have gone right back to how we were. That a few kisses would have smoothed weeks of heartache over.

That was how he saw my love. Instead of protecting it, or treating my heart like something precious and fragile, he treated it like his due. Something he had paid and purchased so he'd own it forever.

Cocky, arrogant bastard.

Tilly had said he acted very broken-hearted to discover my body. That he'd even *cried*.

But I felt unmoved by his emotion. By the *léger* on his forehead.

He was sorry for what? Sorry that I wouldn't wait around in the hopes he'd someday change his mind?

The part of me that had an endless reservoir of patience, endurance, and love was empty.

He claimed he always loved me, but what did that even *mean* to someone like him?

I wasn't the woman he had married anymore. I didn't know what had changed, or when it had changed, but I wasn't *her*.

Just as Ciel began to stir—

We smelled smoke.

Hugo immediately got up to make sure none of it was on Savatier property. After all, we didn't know when my family might be back for more, we didn't know how deep their commitment to murdering me was.

And there was no way I could relax my vigilance with Ciel here now.

Although of course he still used a cane, Hugo had grown in so much strength and power since we had escaped. It made me wonder if my mother-in-law hadn't kept him weak on purpose.

But the fire wasn't in the house. And it wasn't along the grounds.

Ciel slept on, with cute little baby half-snorts in my ear as I rested my cheek gently on his head.

Smoke began to plume over the treetops and my eyes were glued on it.

What the hell?

"*There*," I said. "It's coming from over there."

"What's that?" Odilia gasped in surprise, adjusting her old-fashioned opera glasses. "What has happened?"

"Isn't it coming from the Pinoteaux lands?" Tilly asked, darting a sideways glance at me.

"Yes," I replied. "Yes, I think it is."

I forced myself to stay calm as thunder rumbled, Ciel still sleeping soundly nestled on my neck. No worry or fear, just total trust in his mother and uncle to always protect him.

But that *fire*. Who would set a fire in the mountains? Who would take on the Pinoteaux compound, protected with high gates, guards, and bars?

That fire could only be one person. One reckless, dangerous, wild person.

One person who would have timed a dangerous, violent raid right before a thunderstorm so the fire didn't spread. . .

I forced myself to eat normally, try to act normally. After all, I didn't know what had happened for sure.

After lunch, a few Savatier scouts came back to report that the Pinoteaux compound was on fire, the grounds covered in Bastide men leaving destruction in their path.

Ciel and I watched the rain from the porch, as it soaked the billowing smoke. But had it extinguished Étienne's burning revenge?

He had timed it right. He had kept the fire contained.

But what had happened back on my homeland?

"I think that's your husband now," Hugo put in, nodding at the road as SUVs began to descend the muddy driveway.

"Coming to buy my forgiveness with blood," I said, although my emotions felt chaotic and unstable.

"Want me to order him chased away?"

"No," I said. "I want to see what he has to say, or he'll just keep coming back."

Who had been killed? And why should I congratulate him for adding my family's lands to his own?

Snuggling Ciel in his wrap, I picked up an umbrella and walked slowly down to the gate.

Étienne was pacing back and forth, and every time he passed the entrance, he gripped the bars, the tendons in his arms standing out starkly as the rain soaked his skin.

"*Léonie*," he breathed as soon as he saw me. "I have a present for you. I've conquered the Pinoteaux lands for you."

He held out his hand and in it was my Da's heavy gold ring.

There my husband was, stretched tall and arrogant, his eyes ordering me to open up the gate.

To jump into his arms and forgive him for everything.

"Here it is. Some of men are combing through the bodies. Making sure we've killed anyone who could be a threat to you. I've taken all their lands away, I've destroyed their dominance. They don't deserve any of it for what they were they were willing to do to you."

"I can't believe you're here wanting praise for expanding your own lands."

I stepped closer, and he looked *hungry*. Like a man who hadn't had nourishment in a while.

He even looked like one thing I'd never imagined.

Desperate.

"I didn't do it for me."

"You never do anything that doesn't profit you."

"It's for you. To do whatever you want with these lands."

"What?"

"The lands are yours. They belong to you. It's your choice what happens to them. They won't be added to Bastide territory."

I glanced back at Hugo, but his eyes were full of the same confusion I felt.

"I refuse your bargain," I said.

"What bargain?"

"I will not take these lands in return for forgiveness. My forgiveness is not for sale."

"They are yours anyway," he said. "The compound has been burned to the ground. Your father has been killed. I've avenged the threat to your life."

The intensity rolled off him in heated, urgent waves.

My husband wanted to have that power over me again. The power I refused to give him.

"Please, Léonie," he rasped. "I'll give you anything. Anything you want for forgiveness. Any land on the earth. I will make sure you get it."

"I don't want a thing you could murder to get," I almost snarled, stepping closer as the sun began to break through the clouds, and me matching him beat-for-beat, wild, untamed emotions spilling from me like feral things.

"You don't even begin to understand what you'd need to do."

"Then show me!" he groaned, pressing his body through the bars. "Show me what I'd need to do."

"I have no idea."

"I have a proposal for you—you and Ciel come back to the Bastide compound."

I laughed.

"No. I can't think of anything you could bargain with that I can't get myself. I have *everything* I want."

His eyes watched me hungrily. How sharp his cheekbones looked. Like he hadn't been eating.

"*My brother* doesn't. And I think you'll bargain to get him what he wants."

Oh shit

Hugo was beside me. "It's already a no, brother. Why don't you worry about your southern supply route?"

"If you come home with me, Léonie, and give me an opportunity to earn a second chance, I will strike a deal that would make the Savatier family, and my brother, wealthy beyond their wildest dreams."

“No deal,” Hugo said instantly. “We will grow our business without you.”

“That’s not all. *In return for you coming home, I will tell him how to find his lost love Romy.*”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 19

Léonie

Hugo sucked in his breath so hard he almost stumbled, white-knuckling the iron gate.

“You’re a liar,” he rasped. “You’re just desperate for any leverage to get to Léonie. I won’t fall for it. I hid Romy’s tracks. Even from myself. I made sure no one in our family could find her.”

“I *am* desperate,” Étienne growled. “But I’m not a liar. Open this door and let me in and I can show you proof. All I want is a chance to convince my wife I’ve changed. And in return *you* will have a chance to find the woman you lost.”

I could have strangled my husband. How *dare* he play with Hugo’s emotions in this way!

My brother-in-law was already shaking his head and refusing to listen.

“Fuck no. I’m not falling for that.”

But looking at Étienne’s face, I had the horrible, sinking realization.

He wasn’t lying. *He was telling the truth.*

“I have all the information you need to find her,” Étienne said, holding up a pack of folded papers. “Your true love is within a few days’ reach.”

His words were for Hugo, but his eyes were on me.

“You’re a liar,” Hugo said.

“I’ve verified it’s really her. And she’s not that far away.”

“Romy is married.”

“But what kind of a man is she married to?” Étienne countered, and I couldn’t stand it anymore.

“You manipulative little shit!” I snarled, stalking up to my big husband, my hand around his throat even though I couldn’t have strangled him if I wanted to. I wanted to tear him limb from limb so he felt a *fraction* of the pain Hugo had for years.

Étienne’s breath caught in his throat as my angry hands closed around his neck.

“Choke me!” he insisted fiercely, his hands on mine, trying to tighten my hold. “Take what you need—punish me how you want—do what you need to forgive me!”

“My forgiveness isn’t something to be bargained for! And how dare you come here and taunt Hugo like that! Get the hell out of here!”

My husband’s face was white with jealousy, the carved *léger* on his forehead standing out in stark white lines.

“Oh, so you’ll fight for *Hugo*?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” I shot at him. “Hugo has always been there for me. Are you scared he’ll take me away?”

“No one could ever take you away from me!”

“Oh, really? I guess that’s true. You lost me all by yourself.”

His high cheekbones under the tan were almost bone-white, and he was pressed against the gate, every tendon in his arms standing out as he yanked at the bars.

“Look me in the eyes and tell me you feel nothing for me,” Étienne demanded.

I took a step closer and looked right up at him, trying not to breathe in his familiar scent.

“You’re right. I don’t feel *nothing*. I feel absolute loathing for the way you treated me.”

“I fucked up, I—”

“And Hugo,” I added, as he tore at the bars like a panther. “You *imprisoned* him for years.”

“Léonie—” my brother-in-law said, putting a gentle hand on my shoulder, to encourage me to come away from where my husband and I were in a bitter standoff.

But I wouldn’t let him sacrifice himself for my happiness when his own was in reach.

“Hugo,” Étienne put in quickly. “I apologize for what I did. I shouldn’t have listened to *Mme*. Truthfully, I was too ready to be persuaded that you

were a liability to the family. I was too jealous of my position, too willing to do anything to solidify it. That was the cause of everything I fucked up.”

Hugo frowned.

“You saw me as a liability, yet you came frequently to where you imprisoned me, to get my help with the Bastide business. You are a *bâtard*.”

“I apologize,” Étienne said again. “Unreservedly. I am trying to make it right.”

“No, you aren’t!” I countered.

How had this been a man I was willing to follow blindly?

“All you care about is manipulating everyone to make me take you back.”

“I told you I would use every tool at my disposal,” he retorted, a muscle throbbing in his jaw. “I will stop at *nothing* to get you back.”

“All right,” I demanded, holding my hand out impatiently. “The proof, if you please.”

“Open the gate and promise to come home with me.”

I hated the shiver that went through my body at the low, gravelly tone in his voice.

“No. The proof first and then we’ll see if I open this gate.”

“That wasn’t the deal,” he frowned.

“I know, but it’s *my* deal. And Hugo will walk away from this. Take it or leave it.”

Étienne scanned my set face.

“*Who are you, Léonie?* I crave so badly to know who you are. The woman I knew would never have spoken to me like this. I want every bit of your fire. Let me in and fuck me up if you need to. I don’t care as long as you *let me in*.”

“If I take this deal, it’s about Ciel only. Not the two of us. The two of us are through.”

“Léonie, we will *never* be through. I made a vow in front of the ancestors. You belong to me in every lifetime.”

“*I never belonged to you*.”

“You’re lying to yourself,” he growled.

The memories intruded on me, the hard but careful feel of his fingers on our wedding night, the way even when he came in late, he would do a little work on the nursery, the way he would shower and crawl into bed beside me, smelling like mountain soap.

And sometimes he'd sing me a little song. Mostly when he thought I was asleep already. Just snatches of old French folk songs, nursery rhymes, lines that sounded almost like poetry.

I ripped the proof from his fingers, my own burning, and I scanned the documents.

They confirmed exactly what I had suspected. Étienne was a manipulative bastard but he wasn't lying about this.

"This will give you everything you need to find her," I said to Hugo, handing him the information.

"No. No. It's not worth it, Léonie. I don't trust him."

But I only looked at Hugo, at his kind, intelligent face, the dark lock of hair over his eyes, the way he no longer looked exhausted and drawn. At the ache and longing in his eyes. *He* at least should get a happy ending.

"You have to try."

I glanced over at Étienne.

"If you're lying about any of this, or if this is a trap, I'm going to make damn sure you never find me again."

"I am not a liar," my husband said through gritted teeth, his heart pounding through his torn T-shirt. "Never again. You don't understand how much I regret every fucking thing I did that led me to this. How fucking feral I am to make sure this never happens again. How I can't sleep at night. All I do is pace the living room floor and think about how to get you back."

"I sleep just fine," I said through narrowed eyes, because I wanted it to hurt and I could see that it hurt. "*I* don't need *you*. Remember that. I'm doing this for Hugo. Because I owe him so much and I want him to be happy."

I reached up to open the gate, and my husband burst through it.

I could feel each step through my chest, reverberating through my toes.

"Léonie, Léonie, forgive me."

His hands were on my face, searching my eyes with his wild dark ones as he kissed me, and I could feel, taste, touch him after being denied for so long.

But I didn't want him anymore. No matter what my muscle memory felt like.

So I shoved him away with all my might.

"You thought you were so sure of me. That you could do *whatever* you wanted and I'd come begging for one single crumb of your attention. But

you can't."

Étienne reached out for a lock of my red hair, his hand almost shaking. If I didn't know that was absolutely impossible. . .

"No, *chérie*, you're wrong. *I'm* the one here begging. I'm here promising you that I've always loved you so much. I just fucked up bad."

I came home with him.

Of course I did. I would have done anything for Hugo.

But my reception there was hardly warm.

Placidie was standing like a beautiful, frozen statue, a look of cold disdain on her face, Faustine beside her, eyes wide.

"What is she doing here?" Faustine squeaked out, and Étienne bared his teeth like something feral.

"What are my wife and child doing here? That should be obvious. They belong here with me."

"And—Hugo?" Placidie bit me.

"Hello, *Mme*," Hugo said in a low voice.

I felt a flame of pride in him that he was meeting her face to face—as a free man this time.

"He's free to visit here anytime—as my guest," I said.

"Étienne, what has gotten into you?" she cried. "Why—*why* can't you see her for who she is? How can a woman who forces you to shame yourself be good?"

For your next romance novel.

Visit [Lokepub](#) and find a story to read.

"I know what I see," Étienne snapped. "I see a woman who I will go through fire for. Who I will never wrong again. Do not *ever* speak badly of her or you will no longer be living under this roof."

"But—"

"I wronged my wife. Even if she'd slept with all of my brothers, it would have been nothing to how I whored myself out to greed and selfishness. That is all. What did I tell you, *Mme*, before I married her?"

There was silence.

“*What did I tell you?*”

Two spots of scarlet burned in her cheeks.

“You said nothing on earth would keep you from making Léonie Pinoteaux your wife.”

“And?”

“That you would move mountains for her.”

“Thank you. Let us speak no more of this matter.”

“Your brother’s weakness—”

“He didn’t seem weak to me,” Mano said, with a crooked smile, “when he choked that information out of me and fucking locked me in a supply closet.”

Placidie shot a murderous look at him, but I could not resist a small smile at the expressions on their faces.

“Let me show you our son’s nursery,” Étienne said, ignoring them and leading me down the hallway.

“Here—the crib is finished. And I—laid out some clothes and diapers for him.”

My husband’s eyes widened as I undid the baby carrier and he saw that Ciel was awake.

“My son!” Étienne cried hoarsely, and his arms were gripping the doorway so hard I could see bone through his fingers.

“Oh, so now he’s your son? When you disavowed him in front of the ancestors and everyone?”

Étienne seemed to stumble against the bars of the crib, gripping them fiercely, like they were the only thing holding him up.

“Forgive me! *Forgive me*,” he rasped, his eyes blazing at me out of his skull-like face. “I was an arrogant fool. An arrogant, selfish bastard. I never meant it to go this far. I always meant for it to end before our baby was born. Always. I swear to you.”

“And our baby has a name. It’s Ciel.”

There were jagged splinters of pain in Étienne’s eyes, the dark color pooled and grim.

“It’s a beautiful name, Léonie. I love it so much, and I love you both so much.”

His fingers were reaching out to stroke Ciel’s head, his hand trembling. “Give me another chance. Give me another chance to be a better father. And

husband.”

His chest was heaving, the rain and blood had soaked him to the skin, pooling in rivulets on his cheekbones.

“You aren’t on the birth certificate.”

“I don’t care. I’d know my child anywhere. Just like I knew you were mine the first moment I saw you.”

His voice was low, throbbing with intensity, and I couldn’t believe I’d heard him properly.

“*What?*”

I couldn’t repress the shock that rippled through me.

“You think the day the boar charged at you was the first time I noticed you? Oh no. . . I was watching you long before that.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, although I felt a strange tingling heat ripple over me.

It couldn’t be true. It had always been true that I loved him so much more.

“*I love you,*” Étienne growled. “Those lands are yours. No strings attached. They’re bloody and barren and free of enemies for you.”

“*Well, I don’t love you.*”

My husband’s fingers convulsed on the top of the crib and he was unable to control his face, the way his muscles flinched like it was a hit.

“*I will always love you.* And I won’t stop saying it. I’m going to say it until you forgive me.”

Were the Pinoteaux lands really mine? Had he really killed or captured anyone who might want to harm me?

What would I find when we went to inspect the lands?

If only I had my Gran here to help! She would know what to do with the Pinoteaux lands. She had always known how to manage the family businesses, boldly telling my Da exactly where he had gone wrong and where he was being lazy. . .

That was probably why she had disappeared. Had my father killed her? Was she still alive, but imprisoned somewhere?

I wanted closure on my Gran. That was one thing he couldn’t give me by destroying the compound.

Étienne’s face dropped at my rejection, his sunken eyes standing out starkly against the tanned skin. His cheekbones were so sharp they looked like they could cut.

My husband had always been almost too beautiful to look at, but a strange, wild mountain beauty, the kind of beauty that's dangerous, because when he looked at you, you could see that he wasn't tamed, he wasn't *safe*.

But he swallowed hard and stepped aside, gesturing at the crib.

"Look what I've made our son."

It was the same wooden one he'd started a long time ago, and hadn't quite finished. Because he hadn't quite been at home enough every day.

But it was beautiful, like he had poured every ounce of his passion into the smooth, beautiful wooden curves, the bright colors, even the carefully drawn trees and animals he had labored over.

"Léonie, I want my family back."

"What about the DNA test?" I asked coolly around the hole in my chest. "Seemed like up until a few weeks ago you were saying that it showed I was a whore. In fact, you *told* everyone I was a damn whore. That I'd had another man in our bed."

He flinched.

"Looking back, I—can't believe I did that. I can't believe I thought you would just forgive me easily for it. I took you for granted, Léonie."

"Yes, you did. I always knew I loved you more than you loved me. But this showed me you don't care at all."

"*You love me more?*" Étienne bit out, and his whole body was vibrating. "I've always loved *you* more."

His voice was low with barely-suppressed agony.

"You put together this whole plot without ever considering trusting me. I had to find out from Tilly how deep the rivalry between our families went. You kept me in the dark."

"Let me change that!" he cried passionately.

"You might think you loved me, but really you love power. Much more than you ever loved me."

"After what I went through to secure your hand," he growled through clenched teeth. "You couldn't possibly say that."

"When have you ever not got exactly what you wanted?"

"Sweetheart, *I didn't even bargain*. People talk about Étienne Bastide like he drives a hard bargain. Like he could squeeze blood out of a stone. Not when it came to you. Whatever your father asked for, I gave him."

"Lies."

“He had *nothing* beyond you. Nothing of value. You were the only thing of value in that entire damn household. He drove the Pinoteaux business into the ground and he knew what I feel for you was his only chance out.”

I wanted to say this was a lie, too, but I knew it wasn't.

“That's why he guarded me so closely,” I said bitterly. “That's why my brother was always watching. Because they couldn't risk giving Étienne Bastide anything less than a perfect, untouched virgin.”

“No! Léonie, I swear that's not what I care about. I love you. I still would have been at your feet begging for your hand in marriage. All I care about is getting you back and being a family again. Getting to hold my son. Kiss my wife again. Goddamn it, I miss you so much!”

If I just looked at him, I might be tempted to think he was sincere, arms encircling me, his dark eyes boring down on mine.

But I knew he was a liar.

“I don't believe you. I don't trust that you won't do the same thing again, if something happens that means you would get more money. Or more land.”

“Never again, Léonie! I can promise you that. Come with me. Let me show you the business—”

“What I *wanted* was a husband who wouldn't use me as bait. A husband who thinks of me first and not as an afterthought.”

He stared at me.

“Léonie, I'm not a good man. I'm a criminal, and I've been a criminal for a long time. *But I am going to be that man for you.* The man you can trust. And I warn you, I am going to use every tool at my disposal to convince you to give me another chance.”

I turned and walked away.

“I can't think of anything you could do that would make me change my mind.”

CHAPTER 20

Etienne

I felt bone-weary and it was late at night, yet there was something I had to do.

Apologize to my son.

And when I entered the nursery softly, Léonie sleeping on the single bed, while Ciel lay beside her in the crib—he was already awake.

I carefully lifted my son from his crib and cradled him in my arms.

“We don’t have to wake mommy up yet, do we? Let’s let Mommy sleep for a little while longer.”

He looked at me like I was a little crazy, but he didn’t scream.

“Son, I’ve already apologized to your mother, but I want to apologize to you for not being there like I should have. Yes, you’re not going to remember this, because I’m going to do everything I can to make sure you only remember the good times. And how much I love your mother.”

My throat was tight, my muscles working over and over.

What if Léonie never forgave me? What if she never wanted anything else to do with me?

What if I had to go the rest of my life *without her in it*?

The casual way I had treated the most precious thing in my life sickened me.

How had I been so cocksure she would always forgive me?

Ciel began to fuss, and I quickly changed his diaper, then snapped his onesie back up.

“I love you,” I told him, trying to rock and keep him quiet. “If I ever mess up, I will promise to make it right.”

Just then Léonie began to stir.

“Hugo? Hugo?” she asked, her voice thick with sleep.

“No,” I said, my heart sinking, cold despair in its place. “He’s back with the Savatiers. It’s Étienne, your husband.”

“Oh,” she said, sitting up and rubbing her eyes. “Where is Ciel?”

“He’s here,” I said, holding the warm, precious bundle out to her, and she leaned back in the bed and put him at her breast.

“Can I get you anything?”

“You could fill up my water bottle.”

I obeyed, and came back with filled with ice and cold water, and Ciel was already asleep again.

“Why were you in here?” Leonie asked.

“I just wanted to make sure the two of you were doing all right,” I said. “This is your home, and I want you to be comfortable here, as you always were.”

“All right,” she said, and there was no expression in her voice. “Thank you for the water. You can go now.”

Pain seemed to settle like an heavy, unendurable weight on my shoulders.

“Remember, you can always come to my room if you need anything. Don’t worry about waking me up. Any time. Day or night. I love you so much.”

“All right,” she said, then she turned away, taking two of Ciel’s fingers in hers and looking down at him with such love in her eyes.

I wanted so much to see love in her eyes when she looked at me, but I swallowed hard and went back to my own lonely room.

I would not give up.

“H e’s so tiny,” Étienne said the next morning.
“Yes,” I said. “But he’s growing so fast. I love the little rolls he’s developing. Hugo has had the doctor in to check on him as much as I want, and he says Ciel is eating good and growing perfectly.”

Étienne’s shoulders seemed to slump as the evidence of how his brother had taken over all the roles a father traditionally would have done.

“You’ve done such a perfect job,” he said hoarsely. “I knew you would be an amazing mother. Oh—it looks like he’s waking up!”

As if in a dream, I handed my warm, snuggly son to my husband.

But my eyes were dry as Étienne held my precious Ciel. I thought I would have cried the first time they met, but I hadn’t. It was like a stranger holding him.

Ciel was just waking up from his nap as he settled into the crook of Étienne’s arm and I had to bite down hard on my lip to stop my scream of rage.

To see my little baby nestled in the crook of my big husband’s arm, his rough finger gently stroking his dark curls—it was everything I had dreamed about for so long.

And Étienne had ruined it. *Ruined it.*

His face looked transformed, the skull-like visage lit up as he looked at his son.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t here before,” he rumbled as Ciel looked at him with big, wide blue eyes. “That was on me. *I will be here now.*”

But my heart with him was hard as a rock.

“Léonie, in the light I can see he has your eyes! That exact color of a Heartleaf flower.”

I turned away, my restless hands moving to fold some of Ciel’s little onesies. He was growing so big he was already moving into 3-6 month clothes.

Étienne rocked Ciel and talked to him, about things he wanted to take his son to do, places he wanted him to see, then he talked to him about how much he loved me.

I wanted to leap at him again, scratch his handsome face. But I didn’t. Instead I said nothing. This was Ciel’s daddy.

After our baby got fussy, I sat down and arranged my nursing shirt so Ciel could comfortably drink, sucking the milk in with huge, hungry gulps.

“Can we talk about us?” Étienne asked.

“No.”

He knelt in front of me, one hand on the rocking chair, the other on my ankle.

“Sweetheart, you’re breaking my heart. I’m here begging, *fucking begging*, for another chance.”

“You can’t get it back,” I said. “No matter how you try, you can’t get those first moments that should have been ours back.”

“I know,” he pleaded, gritting his teeth together. “And I’m so goddamn sorry about that. But we can still have all the future moments together.”

But I turned away.

“*Why should I have them with you?*” I asked as he made a low, anguished noise.

“If you were a good man,” I told my husband, “you would have just given Hugo that information about Romy without any conditions.”

“You know I’m not a good man,” he countered. “The only thing I care about is getting my family back. And I told you I was willing to do anything to get that.”

A good man? Certainly not. Had he ever been. . .

That night I’d gotten pregnant we’d been up in the mountains with a picnic and a deer had stumbled into the clearing. Étienne’s hand had instantly gone to his bow. You didn’t waste perfectly good meat, and my husband was an excellent hunter.

But something about the doe’s face made me pause, put a hand on his arm.

“Wait,” I said, and Étienne glanced over at me.

“Why?”

I didn’t have a reason at all.

“Please,” was all I said as his dark eyes scanned my face. Then, with a twist of his lips, he lowered the bow.

“How could I deny you anything with that sweet face?”

His hand was on my throat, pulling me closer, because we were like two magnets, and it was easy and it was beautiful and each evidence of his desire was precious to me, but when another animal came shyly into the clearing I gave a crow of triumph.

“Look! Her fawn! I’m so glad you didn’t shoot her.”

“How did you know? Mountain witch,” he said affectionately, gathering me in his arms and we watched as the mother and baby ate a few bites of sweet mountain grass, then pranced away with elegant little leaps.

Then my husband flipped me onto my belly and entered me with long, sweet thrusts and I was mewling with eagerness and desire, gripping the ground to keep from being pounded under the earth.

Now Étienne had our son on his shoulder and he put the other arm around me, caging me against him, his eyes imploring me to give in.

“You were willing to do anything anything except put me first,” I retorted, crossing my arms across my chest.

Étienne blinked for a moment, then a slow, seductive smile spread across his face.

“Who are you, Léonie Bastide?” he marveled, stepping closer, his legs brushing mine, his shirt clinging to the lines of his chest and down to the pants that hung low. “I want to know this side of you.”

“I’m not the woman you thought you knew.”

“Then show me. I want to know you in every lifetime and every form you take.”

Amazing that even with the potent cocktail of my hate and his animal magnetism that my hands still stayed firmly at my side.

“What’s one thing you want more than anything else in the world?” he asked. “Besides the best life for Ciel?”

I hesitated, but there was no harm in telling him. Because he couldn’t do anything about this.

“I want to find where my Gran is. I haven’t seen her in years, and now I suspect either my father or brother killed her. I want to know where she’s

buried.”

Even the thought of her being dead made a lump rise in my throat, but I had vowed not to look away from anything that was the truth.

I wasn’t that girl who was sheltered from everything brutal. I refused to do that again.

My husband’s hands tightened around mine.

“Réjean’s is the only body I couldn’t identify in the compound. I will find out. One way or the other. We are hunting him, and when I found out where she is? I’ll bring her bones home for you to put her to rest. That I promise you.”

“We’ll see. Was there no one of her description there?”

Étienne shook his head. “All elderly people, women, and children were outside the main compound in another cottage and none of them were harmed in the raid. I went there myself personally to make sure none of your other relatives were there. I will find out more information about her death.”

“Thank you,” I said, my voice sounding choked.

Placidie ignored me now, stiff and frosty and obeying Étienne, but Faustine’s eyes still followed me.

She had lost something she wanted badly, and I knew even with Étienne’s orders, she would find a way to let me know how she felt.

One day after supper, when Étienne had served me dinner as I held Ciel in my arms, it was too much to keep her disgust inside.

“I think you’re so selfish,” she hissed after the men had left the table. “Look what you have him doing. *Serving* a woman her dinner. Acting like he’s weak. He needs a woman beside him who will give him status and honor, and you aren’t that. He’s only with you because he got you pregnant. Otherwise, he would’ve stayed with me. I had a ring on my finger, and it’s only gone now because of the baby.”

I could go back and forth with her bullshit, but suddenly I felt exhausted and my milk was leaking through my breast pads.

“All right,” I said. “You think he’s only staying with me out of obligation? Let’s find out.”

Without another word, I put Ciel on my shoulder and walked down the hall to where Étienne was standing around the table, pointing out something on a map.

“Léonie, wait,” she protested, but I was done with her bullshit.

“Étienne,” I called out. “Faustine here thinks you’re only staying with me because of Ciel.”

He turned with a snarl, his eyes boring into hers.

“What did I fucking say about disrespecting my wife? Was I not very fucking clear?”

“But she said the baby is your brother’s—”

He slammed his hand down on the table.

“Enough. I want you to stay in my mother’s quarters. I don’t want to see one fucking inch of you. Stay in there and do what she says, and if *I* see you, you’ll be out of on your ass.”

Faustine’s face was crimson with the rejection, but she didn’t dare to say another word.

“I apologize I ever gave this woman a reason to lord it over you,” Étienne said. “I promise it will never happen again. Now would you like to come in here and see the inventory I’ve drawn up of the Pinoteaux lands? Remember, they are yours now.”

Hm, involving me in *any* family business matters? Informing me about what was going on.

That was new.

“I would like you to come back,” Étienne told his brother, as he readied his men to go and search for Réjean. “To lead the family with me and get the respect you deserve this time.”

“No, thank you,” Hugo said with a wry smile. “Come back to be under your thumb? I know you, brother. You won’t be happy unless you’re running the show. I think I’ll stay with the Savatiers.”

I could smell fall in the air now, the Sugar Maples just starting to turn color.

Étienne turned to me. “We’ve found some evidence of a fire nearby. I’m hopeful we’ll be able to capture him today.”

“All right,” I said.

His fingers stroked down my cheek.

“Stay inside the gates of the compound, please. Promise me that. Just until we find him.”

“I promise,” I said.

His fingers tightened around my chin, and I knew he wanted to kiss me, but I turned away, my heart pounding faster.

I hoped he would find Réjean soon. I didn’t like knowing there was still one person out in the world who wanted to harm me.

Hugo and I sat on the front porch and chatted. He didn’t mention Romy, and I didn’t ask.

But I knew she was on his mind.

A few hours later, when we had gone back inside to get a cup of tea, Mano appeared at the door.

“Your husband sent me back to make sure you were all right, and that you don’t leave the secure compound area.”

“I won’t,” I said.

“Can you tell Étienne I’m not the father of your baby?” Mano added, leaning a hip on the counter. “If you haven’t noticed, my brother is extremely jealous of anyone who gets your attention, and I’d rather keep my ribs un-broken.”

“You were perfectly happy to go along with his deception a few months ago,” I retorted. “No, I’m not going to stop.”

He groaned. “He is going to fucking kill me one of these days.”

“No loss to me,” I snapped, drawing a reluctant smile from him.

“I wish you loved me, Léonie.”

“I don’t.”

Étienne knows I’m not the father. He knew that all along. He still might end up killing me sometime.”

“Don’t do what he says next time, and maybe you’ll be able to find a wife the normal way.”

Mano’s dark eyes dropped.

“There’s no way I can find a wife the normal way.”

But before I could figure out what that mean, Hugo interrupted us.

“Look,” Hugo said. “The gate’s ajar. Did you leave it ajar when you came in?”

“No,” Mano said. “Étienne already beat the shit out of me the last time I failed a safety check.”

Fuck

Before I did anything else, I ran down the hall to the nursery to check on Ciel.

Still sleeping soundly in his crib, thank the ancestors.

And there was no way in the house itself, it was always locked and guarded at every entrance, with each gate requiring a fingerprint to get in.

When I came back out, Mano and Hugo had already done a check of the yard.

“What the hell? Are you sure you didn’t leave it ajar?”

“Yes!”

“Well, let me check and see who last put the code in.”

Hugo’s fingers flew over the control panel.

“Well, who was it?” Mano demanded, craning his head out the window.
“I don’t see shit out there. No one’s out there.”

Suddenly, Hugo’s fingers stilled, his tendons frozen over the controls.

“*Who was it?*” I cried. “No one is supposed to be coming or going while Étienne is gone.”

“Mother.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 23

Léonie

At my insistence, Mano ordered the remaining guards to patrol the house, make sure no one had gotten inside, even though I couldn't see how that was possible.

"How dare she use the code!" Mano gritted out. "What the hell was she thinking with Réjean out there?"

Hugo was moving very fast with his new cane.

"*Mme* has always had a—very rigid idea of how the Bastides should behave, and I very much fear—"

And he said no more, but only moved faster until we stood at the door to her suites.

Hugo put a finger to his lips and Mano nodded, pulling out a tiny, slim length of steel.

Then he placed it at the edge of the door and there was a crack.

Hugo pulled it open, and through the wild staccato of my heart I saw the back of my brother Réjean, hips thrusting as he pounded into Placidie from behind.

"*Merde* and fucking hell," Mano swore, and he charged toward them.

Réjean barely changed expression, his cock still buried deep in my mother-in-law as he drew out a pistol and shot Mano.

My brother-in-law staggered sideways, then fell to his knees as a murderous bloom of blood burst through his shirt.

"Stay back, the two of you," Réjean warned as he cocked the gun at Mano's skull.

There was blood soaking through Mano's shoulder, but I couldn't see his face.

Was he going to die here?

What the hell were these two rivals doing in bed together?

And how had I been blind for so long to the fact that my family saw me only as a bargaining chip? My virginity as something that could be sold off?

"What are you doing with him?" I cried as Hugo took a few careful, sideways steps toward his mother. "You know he wants to kill Étienne!"

"Let him," Placidie said, and I looked into her bitter brown eyes, and it was like all the sanity had receded out of them.

"All my sons are dead to me. Every single one of them is weak. Hugo with his leg—Mano unable to beat his brother, and Étienne, Étienne my darling, brought down by a wet and sloppy cunt. Carving *léger* into his own forehead—he could never come back with me after that. So why not let Réjean take it over—burn the whole place and give me more sons. Sons who will be *strong* this time."

"You're fucking insane. He will kill you."

"Give it up," Hugo warned as Réjean shoved Placidie aside with an audible *pop*. "Étienne will be heading home soon. You won't get away with this."

My brother snorted.

"I'm in his home, with his whole family under my power. I can get away with anything I want."

There was a bulge in Mano's back pocket, and I know he had a gun there.

If I could just get to it. . .if I could distract him. . .

"Where is Gran, Réjean? What did you and *Da* do with her?"

He flicked his eyes back to me.

Why should I tell my whore sister anything?"

But I was past there being any bitter sting in that word.

"Where is she buried?"

He shrugged. "She's where all mouthy women go—to live with the ancestors. You, Léonie, you were supposed to keep Étienne interested with your cunt. You've failed."

"Come away from him," Hugo was trying to coax his mother away. "This is wrong, *Mme*. You cannot want to betray your family like this."

But she was unglued, slapping at him.

“My family are all dead to me, without honor we are nothing! Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! And soft men are nothing to me.”

She had a knife in her hand, slashing at him and forcing Hugo to stumble sideways to avoid it.

“Calm down, bitch,” Réjean snarled, trying to drag her away, and in that moment I reached in Mano’s back pocket and pulled out a gun.

“You have no lands to return to,” I said, hiding it behind my back.

I knew how to shoot this, didn’t I? My fingers were slick on the cool steel.

“I tried to kill you before, you know,” Placidie said in an artificially chipper tone as she straightened her skirt. “I can’t abide weakness. But, for some reason, one of your god-damned brothers was always around.”

From her tone, you would have thought she was discussing the menu for a picnic instead of cold-blooded murder.

“Shoot him, Réjean,” she said. “It would give me pleasure to see him die in front of me.”

My brother shrugged, dropping Mano’s limp body to the ground. Then he aimed the gun at Hugo.

The blood rushed into my ears in a great, thundering storm and I pointed my gun at Réjean with trembling fingers. And shot him.

The bullet missed his chest, but buried itself deep in the flesh of his upper arm. Réjean roared in rage as his gun clattered away on the marble flooring, and Placidie picked up a heavy vase, like she was going to hit Hugo with it.

He put one hand out to block her blow, and the vase slipped from her fingers and landed, in horrifying slow-motion, directly on her skull.

“Give it up,” I screamed at Réjean as he advanced on me and ripped the gun from my hand. “You won’t succeed. My husband won’t let you.”

Réjean snorted.

“Étienne can’t outthink me. You weren’t there when he was negotiating your bride-price. He was *weak*. You could smell his desperation to marry you. Da took him for all he could and Étienne barely made a peep. Maybe the rest of my family is dead, but *I’ll* be able to take over the Bastides. Your husband went belly-up.”

Réjean aimed a blow at my skull, like he was going to pistol-whip me, and I stumbled backwards, almost falling before a strong hand gripped me and set me on my feet again.

“I laid down belly-up because I’d do anything to keep Léonie. You confused that for weakness.”

Étienne didn’t hesitate.

He stabbed Réjean in the gut and tore him open.

As my brother blinked in confusion, Étienne kicked his body backwards and spat on his forehead.

Then he whirled toward me.

“Léonie! Are you all right? Did he hurt you?”

Hugo was stumbling toward Mano, checking his throat for a pulse.

“I’m fine, I’m fine.”

Étienne slammed his fist into the wall as he looked at the bloody, broken bodies of Placidie and Réjean.

“I enabled this. I should have foreseen it. I swear to all the ancestors, Léonie, that I thought your family would be furious at me. That they’d want to protect *you*.”

“That was foolish,” I said. “I could have told you they didn’t have the regard for me you thought. If you’d only asked me.”

He pulled me into his arms.

“I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. All this fucking bullshit about our family honor—it went too far. No more. No more. We aren’t doing this shit anymore.”

He smelled wild but comforting, his strong arms around me and I almost melted into them. . .

Who knows what would have happened if I hadn’t been on edge, if some deep mother-instinct hadn’t made me sensitive to sounds.

But I heard, from somewhere in the other wing. . . a thump. Like a door opening and shutting.

And some primal sense of danger prickled my skin and I turned and raced from the room.

As soon as I moved my husband was already running too, his speed outpacing mine as we ran toward Ciel’s room.

There were screams from somewhere in the house. The sound of a revving engine.

But my baby had been safely asleep—Réjean hadn’t been in here—Placidie was dead—

And then, his room—the door—stumbling inside to find—

The crib was empty.

OceanofPDF.com

I never knew how I decided which way to go. There were so many entrances and exits to the great house.

Where had they taken him

Some sixth primal sense sent me east.

Some primal sense kept me quiet as my feet raced, my mind pulsing with sheer animal panic.

There was only my need to find him. Protect him.

And then—shadowed in the easternmost door was *Faustine*.

And she had my baby.

In her hand was a car seat and she was hurrying down the path to where the gate stood wide open, with an SUV running in front of it.

And I realized then that more than one person knew exactly what Étienne felt for his family.

And more than one person's hopes had been dashed at his reaction to my death.

Placidie's reaction had been to fuck my brother and replace my husband as head of the Bastide family empire.

Faustine's reaction was to take something she knew would shatter Étienne and I. . .

"Stop!" I cried, and I was moving fast, but it wasn't fast enough.

She was leaving with my baby

Faustine was almost to the SUV now, the car seat swinging carelessly in her hands, barely missing the heavy, iron bars of the open gate.

But what was she going to do with Ciel?

On the other side, the big black SUV waited. Just a few feet away now. .

“Faustine,” my husband called out, his voice steady, controlled, deep.

And where she had ignored my voice, at this Faustine turned back, her beautiful face twisted with bitterness.

“You should have chosen me,” she said, and now her hand was outstretched, the car seat swinging in a circle. “If I can’t have you, you can’t have *anything*.”

Blood rose in my eyes, sheer, total, panic, my hands outstretched, and I was still running, so fast my lungs were bursting but it wasn’t fast enough, I’d never be able to reach her in time. . .

“Now who says I care about them?” Étienne asked, his voice rolling out smooth and hypnotic. “Don’t you think *you’re* the one I really want?”

Time seemed to stop, crystallize in front of me.

And for one last fatal moment, Faustine hesitated, turning back and taking two steps toward us, her hope outrunning her sense, and he struck.

A tiny blade, fast, so fast it was only a blur, flying through the air and striking her dead and true in the throat.

“Fool!” my husband spat as he strode forward. “Fool to fall for such a thing! My heart is all for my family. No one else.”

Faustine was reaching for the blade, trying to pull it out with trembling hands, and my husband stalked forward, slashing a final blow across her throat.

But I only had eyes for the car seat, tumbling out of her hands and landing on the ground, the rest of my world narrowed down to that one point.

The SUV in the driveway tried to drive off, but Étienne Bastide had already sprung, reaching the massive vehicle with a taut, angry stride.

He tore the door off it and dragged the man inside it out, but I was already falling to my knees in front of the car seat.

Ciel’s eyes were wide and curious, blinking his dark lashes as he looked up at me.

Oh, ancestors, oh my gods. He was all right.

With trembling hands, I unsnapped my baby and drew him out. Safe and snug.

Somehow, not a hair harmed on his head, not a curl turned.

It looked like a few Bastide men had tried to turn on him, must have foolishly believed the lies Placidie had spouted—that my husband’s love for me had made him weak.

It had only made him more savage.

I turned as his loyal men began to swarm in from the forest beyond, but I couldn’t stop watching the bloody trail of my husband’s killings, my eyes drinking in every wave of his destruction.

With trembling fingers, I pulled out my breast to nurse Ciel, then tucked him securely in his wrap.

And I walked toward the gate.

Faustine was lying dead on the ground, her eyes frozen with shock.

I spat on her body and moved to the car.

Bodies lay everywhere, sprawled over the backseat, falling onto the ground. He had done enough with his bare hands and that tiny bloody knife to equal an army.

“I thought you were at work?” I asked, feeling on the edge of hysteria.

“Sweetheart, it’s going to be a long time before I go more than a few hundred feet away from you again without leaving an armed guard,” he said, and something about the response pulled me back from the brink, made me gasp on a laugh that was almost a sob.

“Let’s take Ciel inside,” Étienne said, his tight jaw relaxing a fraction as he saw the baby’s tiny fists pummeling the air happily.

“Is everyone all right?” he asked, his arm around my waist.

It was wet. There was something wet and sticky on his arm.

And thank all the ancestors everyone inside was all right. A few concussions, some bumps and bruises, but Mano would live, and it could have been worse.

Then Étienne strode over to me, took my cheeks in his hands and turned my face this way and that.

“You all right?”

“Yes,” I said, my knees trembling so hard I had to jam them together. “Yes.”

“And Ciel?”

There was blood on my face from his fingers, I could feel it sticky and wet on my chin.

“Yes. He was safe in the car seat. He barely even got jostled.”

There was a drop from his fingers that landed on the soft blue cloth of my carrier, rolling down the fabric to pool on my chest.

"They were going to take him," I said, my voice sounding strangled.

"They didn't," he assured me. "They didn't. They're all dead now—everyone who would have hurt him."

It was like my brain was shutting down, and then I felt a spoon with broth between my lips, and Étienne was feeding me, holding Ciel on his shoulder.

Tilly was there too, and I knew Étienne had sent for her, that she could stay as long as I wanted her to, and Hugo was reading to me, something funny, and Hugo and Étienne were taking turns rocking the baby as I slowly came back.

I knew there was no threat, I knew there was no danger.

But that night when I laid Ciel in the crib in my room, my hands were shaking.

There were heavy steps and I could feel and smell him behind me. Mountain scent and something raw and deep, and that iron tang of blood.

"I'm so sorry, Léonie. We didn't get any information out of your brother. I couldn't let him take another breath after what he did."

"It's not about that."

"I'm sorry I didn't find out where they buried your Gran. At least you know she's resting with the ancestors."

"Yes," I said on a sob.

"I was wrong to blindly trust my own blood, my own people," he said, gripping my shoulders, his scarlet fingers reaching around, smearing all over my bare skin. "I have been a fool. It's not about your blood after all."

"What if you hadn't been here?" I burst out, running into the attached bathroom so I could cry out my rage and fear without waking my sleeping baby. "I couldn't have stopped them. Ciel would have been kidnapped and then what would they have done with him?"

"*I was here*," Étienne said fiercely. "I will always be here to protect you and our baby."

"I wish I could believe you."

My heart was pounding as he pulled me flush against his body.

"*You can!* Please, Léonie, please give me a second chance with my family. To show you I will always put you and Ciel first."

My face was upturned, tears running down my cheeks as I scanned the ferocity of his gaze.

I could not stop thinking about the what ifs. About what would have happened if Étienne hadn't been here.

"It was all about me," I sobbed, my legs giving way as I slid down the wall, but he was there, his arms around me, and we slid down together in a pile of limbs, my legs wrapped around him, our bodies sticky with sweat and blood.

"If only you hadn't chosen me—if you hadn't put *léger* on your forehead—all this could have been avoided—"

"No," he said fiercely. "Never think that way. There is no universe in which I do not choose you. Ever. I only wish I hadn't tried so hard to keep you sheltered. I shouldn't have kept so many things from you. If I had told you everything, working together, we could have seen what was happening sooner."

"Next time I will do better."

"Next time!" I cried, and I didn't even want to look at him. "There can never be a next time! Too much has happened. We can never go back to what we were. It was broken beyond repair."

"It was broken," my husband said gently. Gentler than I had ever heard him talk before. Such a contrast with how bloody and raw his hands were. "It can be remade."

"I don't know—" I cried, but then his hands were on my face and he was carefully, gently, raising my lips to his.

"Let me try. Please."

Suppressed desire and uncertainty boiled inside me as he captured my lips with his, his tongue eager, longing.

I grabbed angrily at his shirt, ripping a long, jagged gash in my fury.

"You had no right to do what you did! Feckless, selfish, arrogant bastard!"

"I was," he growled, his hands cradling my face, his hands and body slick, sweaty, bloody, his hard cock pressing against the thin fabric of my skirt.

"But after this, believe me, sweetheart, I will never take your love for granted ever again."

I could feel the full length of his arousal as the rough tips of his fingers scraped by my soft flesh.

My husband's life was more violent, bloody, and dangerous than I had imagined. The choice to be gentle with me was deliberate.

I put my hands on his face, tried to span the width of his granite jaw.

"You're desperate for this, aren't you?" I asked, tightening my fingers.

There was a flicker deep in his eyes, something that made every inch of my skin heat, like it was too hot and tight to sit over my bones.

"Yes," he rasped out. "I want this, I want *you*, more than I have ever wanted anything else in my life."

His cock was pressing hard against the thin length of my panties, and I tipped my hips backwards, his dark eyes widening, that muscle throbbing in his jawline, and the panties tore with a rending rip, as I sunk straight down on his cock, all the way down that thick length, until my butt hit his thighs and he hissed with pleasure and kissed me.

Then we were moving against each other, our bodies jerky, urgent as I wrapped my legs tighter.

Étienne's lips were on mine, his hands frantic for connection, pulling me tighter, closer as he ground my body down over his.

His kiss was almost a wound, his fingers gripping my hair, teeth and tongue and a hard, bruising length inside me.

He was chasing love and forgiveness, and I was chasing. . .what? What was I chasing?

The mere carnal pleasure my husband had always given me? The physical release? The feeling of a cock so big it stretched every inch of me, pressing me full to bursting?

Was that all I was chasing?

Or was it something more?

I could feel my skin tingling, belly tightening so hard it was almost painful, as I gripped his shoulders. His cock was going so deep, his fingers were so hard it was making my hips ache, and still I wanted more.

"I love you," he groaned against my lips, his tongue in my mouth, and then his fingers hit where our bodies met, and I began to shake, my thighs trembling, my heavy breasts full to bursting as my release hit me, milk leaking down my breasts and rolling in rivulets down to my belly.

I cried out, gasping my pleasure as I felt that wet gush of his release in me, cock twitching as he pumped jet after jet into my trembling cunt.

My body felt wrung out and limp as he carefully lowered me to cradle in his arms, kissing my face all over.

Then Étienne dug around in his pocket. His face was streaked with blood but there was the strangest mix of hope and joy in his expression.

As I blinked away the last waves of my orgasm, he held out my wedding ring to me.

“I beg you, Léonie, love of my life, light of my heart. Please forgive me. Please come home.”

OceanofPDF.com

Once upon a time, I fell in love. . .

He was the kind of man you couldn't take your eyes off.

He was the kind of man you *couldn't* fall out of love with. . .

Or could you. . .

"I do not want a ring you put on another woman's finger," I spat, shoving his hand away so hard that the ring clattered onto the floor.

"You went too far when you played happy families with her. I can't wear that ring again! It *disgusts* me."

Fists clenched, I turned away angrily.

Had it been a massive mistake to have sex with him? Even if nothing about the carnal, raw magnetism that pulled us together had changed—that didn't mean I was going to change my mind. Or forgive him.

I was here at his home because he'd blackmailed me into it, after all.

And trying to give me a ring that had even briefly been on that dead woman's fingers? That showed he didn't understand anything. That he couldn't comprehend the hurt he had caused or how much he would have to work to rebuild my trust.

Arms folded tight against my chest, I flicked my hair angrily back in his face and made to leave.

Étienne bent and picked up the ring, then a strong, tanned arm snaked around my waist, the color deep against my pale, freckled skin as he pulled me back onto his lap.

"It's *not* the same ring."

"It's not?"

I gasped as he turned it around. Instead of my old diamond ring, which had been part of the marriage negotiations, this one was formed to look like a beautiful mountain laurel flower, each delicate petal carved from different pink stones.

He turned it this way and that, each side sparkling with the loveliest shades of pink, going from pale softness to a bright floral pink, then a deep almost scarlet color.

“How—” I began.

The effect was *stunning*, almost absurdly delicate and beautiful.

For a moment my finger *ached*. Wanting that ring. *Knowing* it belonged to me.

“There’s nothing I won’t do for you,” he rasped. “Nothing I won’t get to show you how much I care.”

I couldn’t say a word, still staring at the ring.

“Stop me,” Étienne said, his breath ragged and raw, one hand tight on my waist, fingers digging into my flesh, the palm spanning my heated skin.

“*Stop me right now.*”

But I didn’t, my hand just frozen in place as he slipped the ring on my finger, his much bigger ones not quite steady.

Oh ancestors, it fit just perfectly. Like it was made for me. Like he *knew* me.

“Let me have another chance,” he whispered in my ear. “I promise it’ll be different this time.”

“I’ve heard your promises,” I said, the shine from my ring casting a light all down the walls.

“I vow it. I’d rather *die* than disappoint you again,” he said fiercely. “Strike me through the heart now, Léonie. You will have to kill me to get me to stop trying for a second chance.”

His arms caged me, those bloody, brutal arms that had killed how many people for me and my son? But now they held me gently, carefully. Like I could break.

But I wouldn’t break. No matter what happened. And I knew that now.

“Ask me tomorrow,” I said.

And he did.

And he asked the next day. And the next.

Every day Ciel grew bigger, stronger, his eyes staying open for longer. And he *loved* looking at his daddy, having his daddy gently pat his back to

burp him, and hear little mountain songs sung in Étienne's deep, gravelly voice.

And Étienne was true to his word. He did not stay away for long. He was back for dinner. He did not shut me out of his world, but shared what was happening and what he had done that day.

This is what it could have been all along. This is what it *should* have been all along.

But without what had happened, would I ever have been able to look my husband boldly in the eyes as I could now, or would I always have been that wife who thought her husband was doing her a favor by glancing in her direction, who was so grateful for any scrap of his attention that she would overlook anything for him?

I didn't live like that anymore.

I could live without Étienne Bastide. And not only live, I *could* thrive without him. Ciel and I could go anywhere and be anything. Hugo now had the power and ability to make us disappear, and we could go back to the Savatier home whenever we wanted. We had the money and resources to live without him.

But could I ever love another man as much as him?

As much as that once-upon-a-time god, the one who had massively fucked up and was trying to fix it?

Could I take away the daddy Ciel loved? Didn't Ciel see what was real and true in Étienne? The loving father and husband who would kill to protect us?

Come back to me.

Come all the way back.

He begged, he pleaded, but I didn't give in right away.

Was this my husband who could be so gentle and kind, not just to me, but to the Savatiers too, when we visited, sitting and listening to their long stories at night, staying longer and longer each time until they knew to brighten up at his arrival?

And soon he was a part of the household too, bringing in beautiful rainbow trout or ruffed grouse for Tilly to cook.

Étienne had offered terms to Hugo and the Savatiers, a generous, unthinkable partnership with them. Riches, wealth, power. The keys to his kingdom.

There would be peace between our families, he told me.

The mountain feuds could all die here.

The man of blood had become the man of peace?

And one day Hugo asked Étienne for all the information he had on Romy.

“It’s not that I—can ever hope for a second chance,” he said. “There are some things—I had to do—that are heavy on my conscience. I just want to ask her forgiveness for them.”

His dark eyes were haunted, and I had to bite my tongue not to ask what my gentle, kind brother-in-law possibly could have done to merit the guilt he carried?

But it was not my story to pry into. When he wanted to share, he would.

“And you’re coming with me, idiot,” Hugo told Mano, who only shrugged but didn’t complain.

What would both of them look like when they came back?

“*What do you think?*” I asked Tilly one day as we shelled peas. “*You saw his cruelty to Hugo for years. Could a man such as he ever be redeemed?*”

She hesitated, fixing her eyes on her work.

“Étienne—he has never been a *moral* man. He has always had tunnel vision for whatever he wanted, and the consequences be damned.”

My throat seemed to close. *What had he done?* What I heard next might determine my forgiveness.

If he had harmed—abused—Hugo—

“Mme—she was the one who first imprisoned Hugo. She was the one who convinced Étienne to keep him there—and—”

Her throat seemed to convulse and she swallowed very hard.

“I should have done more. I should have tried to get Hugo out of there long before. I felt trapped, feared the power of the Bastide family. But some of the things they did to him—”

I waited.

“You did get him out,” I said gently. “I know he doesn’t resent you. But—*what things did they do to him?*”

“There was one time—Hugo refused to do something for his Mme, and she asked Étienne to make him do it. Your husband refused, point-blank. Said it was small prick behavior to hit his brother over that.”

I felt a tiny flicker of hope, almost swamped amidst my sorrow for what Hugo had endured.

“After Étienne was gone—Mme called Mano over—got him to do it.”

Tilly turned her head. “Hugo—you know how he is—he held out as long as he could. But at last he was forced to give in. It was around the time of your wedding, so your Mme knew Étienne would not be there to check on his brother. You know, as much as she favored Étienne there were times I thought—she secretly wanted Mano in charge. He was much more suggestible, more willing to do whatever she wanted.”

It was a relief to know my husband had refused to torture Hugo, but what about my sweet, intellectual brother-in-law? Was he safe with Mano? What had it cost Hugo to kill his own mother, even if she was his tormentor?

I had tried not to worry over Hugo’s trip, not to pester him with texts, but I couldn’t resist checking in.

How are you doing <3

Ciel and I love you so much <3

everyone misses you here <3

I got a response almost immediately, rapid fire texts one after the other.

Love you too, Léonie.

Kiss Ciel for me and give my love to everyone.

Don’t worry, but something bad has happened.

Don’t be too angry if I don’t get out of here with my conscience intact.

If I’m not back by spring, send Étienne. Love always.

Spring? Send Étienne whom he hated? But that was still months away! And not a word about whether he had found Romy or not!

The next day when I called, the line went dead and there was no response.

Was he ok?

I prayed to my Gran as hard as I could, that she would send him protection and safety.

For a while, I wrestled with myself, desperate to send a party after him now. But I would do as he had requested. If he wasn’t back by next spring, Étienne must go after him.

Back at home, the summer lingered on, but there were signs the seasons were changing. But what was changing inside me?

One day Étienne persuaded me to go out into the mountains again while Tilly watched Ciel, and we hiked for miles through the woods to make it to a rocky peak where we could see the leaves changing to brilliant red, yellow, and orange colors.

“It doesn’t feel the same,” I said as a soft autumn breeze swirled around my hair. “I don’t think we can go back to what we were.”

“That’s all right,” Étienne said. “It can be different and I will still love you.”

“I might never fully forgive you,” I warned him, my gaze fixed on the distant mountains, the way fog wreathed around their tips. “What if there’s a part of me that always holds resentment and bitterness?”

For your next romance novel.

Visit [Lokepub](#) and find a story to read.

“That’s all right,” Étienne said again. “I will take any part of you that you can give me, Léonie.”

“You were unforgivably selfish, arrogant, and greedy,” I said, looking right up into his harsh dark face. “You thought you could treat me as cruelly as you wanted and it didn’t matter, because I loved you so much that I would forgive you easily.”

He didn’t argue. “Yes,” my husband said as he stepped closer. “I was too sure of you, and I was a fool and a bastard. No one would ever blame you for hating me.”

“All the Pinoteaux land and resources are mine now to do with as I wish. They are not yours, and I want them to be a place where people who have been harmed by my family will be allowed to live in peace.”

“They *are* your lands,” Étienne said, drawing a rough finger across my cheek. “*You* are the head of the Pinoteaux family. You decide which of your ancestors are remembered and which are forgotten and who deserve graves and memories.”

“I’m not the girl you once knew,” I said defiantly. “I won’t go back to being meek, sweet little Léonie Bastide.”

Étienne cupped my face in his hands, looking at me with such desperate, pulsing longing.

“I love you even more this way. I want you in *any* form you take, my angel. You can transform and re-emerge like a butterfly every single year, with a new way of being and I will love in every way you choose to be.”

Once upon a time, I fell in love with a god. . .

Did he still have my heart when he fell from the heavens?

Ciel and I stayed in the house, back where it had all began. At first, I justified it to myself that it was about his nursery, that beautiful nursery we had dreamed and worked for so many months on.

I could always go right back to the Savatier home, whenever I wanted they’d be there for a visit or a stay, warm hearts ready for us.

And then when I fell into my husband’s open arms at night, gave myself up to his passion, I told myself it was just about our bodies, nothing more.

Not my heart.

“I am sick of blood,” Étienne told me one night, as my head rested on his chest, his heart pounding fiercely in my ear.

Our bodies were sticky, fused together.

“Your Papé is resting well,” I said. “Réjean did kill him, and you avenged his death.”

“You were right. Papé would not have wanted me to spend so many years plotting revenge,” he said, one big hand stroking my hair. “Réjean could have been killed in a simple fashion. I could have avenged his death in that way. But, like you said, I was arrogant. I wanted the destruction of the entire family. I wanted all their lands for myself. I wanted even more than mountain justice demanded.”

Was I honest with myself about how it had felt to see Étienne burn the bodies of his own people, to kill without thinking twice the woman I had been so jealous of? The woman who would have stolen my child?

He had burned them and taken the remains to throw far away from our lands, so their bodies didn’t pollute the soil or disturb the ancestors.

He had been gone every day this week, making sure these people’s bones didn’t lie anywhere near us.

“You killed your own people, too,” I said, feeling that warm, wicked-sweet heat deep inside me. “You killed when you needed, Étienne. You

were strong and brutal when it mattered. I only regret you didn't trust me enough to tell me the truth earlier so we could found a different way."

His hands tightened on me and then he was kissing my overheated face passionately.

"My greatest, foulest mistake, and one I will atone for every day for the rest of my life. When I think that I dared to use you as a bargaining chip, I can't believe my own stupidity."

He pulled me on top of him again, and as our lips met, my body slotting down over his whispered wicked words, begging for my cunt over his, I knew he was bloody and he was brutal, but it had been needed to keep Ciel safe.

But what would be enough for me. . .

Since we did not know where Gran was buried, and Da and Réjean were dead, Étienne asked me where I wanted to build a memorial to my grandmother.

Did I want it on Pinoteaux land or here?

Here, I said decisively.

I did not want to remember her on the land where so many Pinoteaux had died, where they had killed her.

So Étienne and I worked day and night to build her a memorial. It was carved out of granite and stone, in the form of Pegasus, her favorite constellation, and because I remembered how much she loved to ride across the mountains on her trusty horse Nightwalker.

I sat on the front porch with Ciel as the leaves began to turn, to crunch under my feet as I looked out over the land, and watched the muscles in my husband's back pulsate with power as he worked carefully at the curve of the Pegasus' neck.

For such a brutal man, he could have such a tender, delicate touch when it came to creation.

As a break, I wandered in the woods, gathering the sweet paw-paw fruits, green outside and bright yellow custard inside, always with my husband's protective presence behind me, picking the high fruits, brushing back stinging nettles, carrying Ciel when he grew too heavy in my wrap.

But there was something I still held back from him. It was almost like I was waiting for a sign.

What are you waiting for? he asked me one night as we lay together in a sticky tumble of limbs in the bed. *You haven't given me your whole heart*

yet.

I am waiting, I said.

For what?

I do not know. Maybe a sign from the ancestors.

When do you think they'll give you a sign? Please, I'm begging.

I don't know. Maybe next week. Maybe next year. Maybe never.

I will take it. I will take whatever you give me. Your hate or your love. I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

I never replied, never responded in kind, but he still said it.

I wanted Hugo to be back for the full memorial service, but I also needed to say a few words about Gran before the first snowfall, so I decided we would bring more pawpaw fruits to her grave at twilight the next day.

But when twilight arrived, Étienne still had not arrived back home.

Now where was he? He was always home by dinner. He had never missed an evening at home yet.

A mix of unease and anger grew inside me as darkness slid over the mountains.

If Étienne couldn't make it back in time for *this*, it was over between us. I was going to move back to the Savatier household permanently.

Ciel was starting to be able to hold up his head on his own, and I was delighted to see him poking his head up and pushing off my chest to look around with his bright blue eyes.

I absolutely melted at the sight.

Beautiful, perfect, looking just like his daddy with that clever look and those bright, sharp eyes.

What was Ciel looking at?

He was attuned to his daddy, that was for sure, because I turned in the direction my baby's eyes were fixed, and there was my husband striding toward me, his tall body, those broad shoulders cutting through the autumn fog.

I felt a stab of emotion, something painfully bright in its clarity.

I knew then that I would love Étienne Bastide until the day I died. Whether I let him know it or not was another question.

And then—someone beside him. But who was that? Hugo? Mano? Where had he been and who had he seen?

No, it was someone shorter—much shorter.

And then my breath caught, painful, jagged in my throat.

But it *couldn't be*.

It was absolutely impossible. She was dead. *Dead*. Réjean had said so!

This was impossible. A *trick*. An illusion.

And then I was running, holding Ciel tight against me.

It couldn't—couldn't—

It must be a trick. Mountain fog sometimes played tricks on your eyes, showed you will-o'-the-wisps that weren't there.

Was I going crazy now, to see such things?

"Léonie!" she cried, running toward me with her arms outstretched, her long gray braid flying behind her.

Oh, *ancestors*! It was too much!

"Gran!"

I was crying, tears streaming down my face, when I finally caught up to her, almost still disbelieving it even as I gathered her in my arms.

She felt frail—so frail—thin, weak, feather-light like a bird.

"How—Réjean said you were dead!"

"Honey, he was a lying bastard," Gran said, with a ghost of her old spirit.

She was very thin, her cheeks sunken, and her hands clawlike as they embraced me. I would have to get good food and bone broth into her immediately.

"How did you find her?" I cried, turning to Étienne.

"Armand and Tilly have been working with the older people on the Pinoteaux lands—the ones who were too weak to flee when I came through. One of the oldest there was a man, oh about 100 years old. He told Armand about an old Pinoteaux hideaway down in one of the hidden hollers out east."

"A *holler*? Gran has been hidden this whole time?"

"Imprisoned by your Da," she said. "I knew it would always happen with my mouth. I'm just sorry I couldn't be there for you."

"Oh *Gran*," I wept.

"I went looking, and hell, sweetheart, there were a fuckton of old hollers out there. But I kept going. Every damn day. Didn't want to tell you in case it wasn't true. And finally—I found her."

“Honey, I knew he was trouble,” Gran said. “Never knew when to quit, that man.”

My heart was so full to overflowing I couldn’t speak, and for a minute I thought I would faint, but my husband put one strong arm around my waist and guided all of us gently back to the house.

I knew exactly where to take her where she’d be the most comfortable, and just as I suspected, Jeannie and Otilie Savatier and Tilly and Armand greeted her with open arms and moved her right into the bedroom where Ciel and I had been staying.

Étienne brought us over every day so Tilly and I could compete with nourishing broths and stews and soups, as I just sat for hours, my arms around my beloved grandmother, and every day my Gran was just a little bit healthier, a little more shine to her cheeks, able to sit for longer, and one afternoon she was even asking about a horse to ride when I left a sleeping Ciel in his crib with Tillie and walked out with Étienne.

This time we had no destination in mind, just held hands and wandered, like we used to do, our only goal foraging what we could with the cold snap coming next week.

Étienne stretched for a particularly plump pawpaw.

“I love you so much, Léonie. Come back to me, come all the way back, with your whole heart. I promise I’ll be so tender with it this time.”

He twisted the pawpaw open and scooped the seeds out with his fingers, then held half the fruit out to me.

“You’re going to get me all sticky,” I protested, but my heart had started to hammer as he dove into his half of the pawpaw, sucking all the juice out as it gushed around his face.

There must have been something in my eyes, because as soon as he saw it, he dropped the fruit and kissed me, his tongue eager, teasing at my entrance.

“Fuck, when you have that expression on your face. . .I can’t resist you. . . I never could. I loved you the first moment I saw you standing all shy and sweet as a berry in that field. And I’ll love you to tomorrow and the next day and every day until forever.”

“I love you, Étienne,” I said back, half-laughing, half-crying, as I put sticky arms around his neck, pulling him closer, that powerful body, all coiled energy and suppressed passions.

He laid me down on the soft meadows, and as I looked up into the mountain skies, a perfect, bright red leaf fell, drifting down gently on the breeze as my husband moved from my lips down the front of my dress and under my skirts, where he pressed a sticky tongue into my wet and dripping heat and began to swirl. . .

Once upon a time, a god fell in love with a woman. . .
And they decided to stay together forever. . .

Thank you so much for reading! Reviews are always appreciated <3

Do you want Étienne's epilogue and a teaser for Hugo's story?

Subscribe to my Substack for free [HERE](#) and get the epilogue sent to you,
or you can read it on my Substack [HERE](#)

OceanofPDF.com

Afterword

Want more OTT betrayal and grovel stories? Check out all my books on Amazon [HERE](#)

[TikTok](#)

[Instagram](#)

[OceanofPDF.com](#)