

1 Leaving St. Dismas
2 St. Dismas Plantation, Barbados
3 19 May 1649
4

5 She felt dirty. The filth and shame slithered from her body and slicked the friction
6 of her thighs as she stumbled down the stairs leading to the front lawn of the great
7 house. The angry bellows of Owen Craig pursued her down the halls. Emerging from
8 the grand Jacobean mansion, she looked over her shoulder to see if the slave master
9 had followed her.

10 The mansion's white walls loomed like a pale wraith cloaked in the shadows of
11 the nearby mahogany trees. Howls of rage followed from the darkened arches. She
12 feared the screams might incarnate at any moment into the human form of retribution.
13 Nevermind the vile assault she had endured at her master's hand, she could be boiled
14 alive for defending herself.

15 "I should have killed him," she whispered to herself over and over as her feet
16 gathered speed. She left the path of the carriageway and ran to that place in the wall
17 where well-worn gouges hidden by the creeping flowering clematis served as footholds.
18 During the more carefree days in her childhood, she used these to escape the main
19 house to go on some adventure with her twin brother who lived in the slave quarters
20 with their parents.

21 The path leading away from the grand house lay in silent gloom, save for the
22 whisper of wind through the sugarcane. She listened for the overseer and his men.
23 They had not yet been set after her as she ran away from the great house. The road
24 before her forked. One path led to the sea where a ship waited for her. The other curved
25 northward towards the slave quarters where her ma' and da' lived. For the first time in

26 her life, she wanted to find shelter among those rubble houses. The desire to go to her
27 ma' muddled her steps as she came to the crossroads. She only needed to continue
28 forward along the path to the slave houses to find comfort in Saoirse's arms. She would
29 soothe her daughter's hurts and smooth her shredded dignity. She would fix the tatters
30 with a sweet stickum of blandishments formed from love and esteem--mostly love. Her
31 ma' could put her back together.

32 She imagined her parents' hut made of found coral and thatched roofs. Her
33 mother must already be dressed in her shift with her ash-blond locks straying from her
34 nightcap. She must be just about to settle on the sleeping pad next to Da'. Daddy. He
35 could never know what Craig had done to her, for he would have to avenge his
36 daughter and kill the slave master if he did. A black man who killed his owner would
37 meet swift and gruesome retribution.

38 A sob escaped the young girl. She would have to put herself back together now
39 and quickly.

40 Geraldine took the road south.

41 The smell of cherry blossoms cloyed at her. She ran beneath dark and twisting
42 branches covered in leafy stalks and furred blooms overreaching the road to the sea.
43 She usually loved the sweet fragrances on Cherry Tree Hill, but now the sweetness
44 suffocated her. And like some restorative released into the darkness, it roused
45 agonizing visions. Memories of bony fingers digging into the flesh of her arms like talons
46 stopped her in her tracks. She had struggled. Craig held onto her, still believing he
47 could cajole her into acquiescence. They stumbled. A decanter filled with rum hit the
48 floor with such force, the stopper fell out. Spirits spilled and soak the rug. How could he

49 overpower her? Craig was a skinny thing compared to Geraldine's tall and robust frame.
50 Yet he wrestled her to the floor. Her head landed among the rum-soaked fibers. The
51 sticky sweet smell of it filled her nose. It choked her as she gulped air to scream. His
52 hand crashed against her cheek with such force blue sparks appeared and throbbed in
53 deliquescing opaque amoebic globs which dimmed her vision. Geraldine kicked and
54 flailed yet still he managed to trap her mouth with his wet lips. His thick and slimy
55 tongue filled her mouth. She pried his face away from hers as his hand groped at her
56 skirt. Geraldine slapped him.

57 "Ye wee bitch!" Craig gasped. He punched her hard in her side. It knocked the
58 wind from her. He pried her legs apart with his knees. When she felt her undergarment
59 tear, she gathered the strength to struggle more forcefully. She tried to close her legs to
60 push him off when his knee crashed into her privates. Geraldine felt agony. It spread to
61 her stomach, wrapped around her, and squeezed her kidneys. She groaned and writhed
62 in pain and tried to catch her breath when Craig thrust himself inside her.

63 These memories overwhelmed her now. They brought her to her knees. Her
64 father knew this would happen. Geraldine, though sickened by Craig's attention, never
65 imagined he would actually.... She had believed her father overwrought and distrusting
66 when he sent his letters to his buccaneer friend to have her removed with such haste.
67 But he knew. Her father knew. *How could I have been so stupid?* She collapsed.

68 Out of the darkness, a pair of hands grabbed her. As Geraldine opened her
69 mouth to scream, a broad palm and long fingers clamped themselves over her lips.
70 Black eyes glared at her from folded lids. Sheets of long black hair framed the cheeks
71 and strong jawline of the stranger whose skin took on a golden cast in the moon's light.

72 Geraldine clutched at him until her hands felt the hilt of a dagger he wore in his belt.
73 She drew it and placed the point beneath his eye. The man released her. Geraldine
74 scooted back. She held the dagger in both hands and clambered to her feet.

75 "What in the hell are ye doing!" came a voice from behind the tall stranger.

76 The blade of the dagger sliced the night air with a low whistle as she pointed it
77 towards the voice. The large figure of a man rushed towards her. The haze of terror
78 receded as his broad frame came into focus. The tawny features of her twin brother,
79 Jimmie, came close to her. A passing breeze tossed his ash-blond curls. She dropped
80 the dagger.

81 He stooped to pick it up. "Where were ye?"

82 The stranger approached and stood beside her brother. Was it her fright, which
83 caused his terrible beauty to take her breath away? Tall, his skin glowed an unearthly
84 shade of gold. The curve of his dark eyes and the line of his wide mouth brought to
85 mind the wild brutal beauty of a predator. His long black hair spilled over his broad
86 shoulders like liquid onyx. The sinews of his smooth and sculpted chest shown where
87 his black shirt fell open above the red sash which secured it. He reached for her.
88 Geraldine recoiled and threw herself into the safety of her brother's arms.

89 "'Tis alright, lass," said Jimmie " This is Leixiang. He and Duff came to fetch us."

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91 Lei saw the girl before her brother did, for Jimmie gabbed on about Eleanor, the
92 master's daughter and how sad she would be to see them go--him especially. "Ye kin,
93 I've been grinding her corn for a fortnight. The lass can't seem to get enough of ole
94 Jimmie..."

95 On he went. Lei crouched behind the trunk of a cherry tree and peered from
96 undergrowth searching for his second charge to arrive. He looked at Jimmy impatiently.
97 Did the boy ever shut his mouth? But when Lei saw Geraldine, he stopped listening. Her
98 long and slender form hurried along the road as her mass of light brown curls gamboled
99 on a passing breeze. Lei thought her a vision until she sank to the ground as if weighed
100 down by some unbearable grief. It was then he realized it was her. The girl he had been
101 waiting for had arrived.

102 But something was wrong.

103 She stared blankly into the darkness. Lei hid close enough to see her large eyes
104 swimming with tears. She clutched her chest. Her shoulders shook as she cried silently
105 while this fool beside him blathered on about Eleanor Craig being in the pudding club.

106 "Her fucking father'll be in for a big surprise, he will."

107 Lei went to Geraldine. It was Geraldine, was it not?

108 Now that she sat before Lei, her face streaked with tears, he was dumbfounded.
109 All this time he had imagined her a little girl—not this glorious woman with such pain in
110 her eyes. He did not mean to frighten her. He regretted holding onto her so roughly
111 when his only impulse was to hold her, console her, and give succor to her suffering
112 which caused such grief in her lovely face. Her eyes were unfathomable. They caught
113 the moonlight and dazzled him with their beauty. His regret increased when she held his
114 own blade to his eye.

115 That dolt Jimmie took no notice of his sister's distress as he scolded her.

116 Approaching hoofbeats cut him short.

117 "Ye eejit! Are ye no smart enough to leave without alerting the whole plantation?"

118 "We must go!" Lei said. He dared not reach for the girl again, though he did want
119 to sweep her up in the cradle of his arms and whisk her away from danger. Jimmie
120 dragged her along as they ran.

121 They could not outrun horses. Neither could they outrun musket balls should their
122 pursuers chose to fire on them. They left the road and ran through the bushes and
123 undergrowth and navigated the forest of cedars and palms. Lei wondered why Jimmie
124 did not carry the girl. He made the firm decision to do so if her brother would not. Then
125 the girl ran past him. Skirts gathered and hitched in her hands, her long legs stretched
126 as she took broad, quick strides. She bounded over obstacles with the grace of large
127 wild cats. Geraldine outran them despite the weight of her dress and the constriction of
128 her stays. Then suddenly, she stopped.

129 "What's the matter?" whispered Lei.

130 Geraldine brought her finger to her lips. She slipped her dress over her head and
131 loosened her stays. As she undressed, the horses ran past, parallel on the road. She
132 looked at Jimmie, and they nodded at each other. As if he were privy to the twins' secret
133 language, Lei understood as well. They would double back and take another route to
134 the sea.

135 Jimmie led the way. Geraldine ran after him. Lei hesitated. He saw her blood-
136 stained pantaloons and the tear in the crotch as her legs stretched to keep up with her
137 brother. Lei struggled to keep pace. Having been at sea for weeks, he could not master
138 the grace of these two jaguars. Growing fatigue caused him to trip and fall. He broke his
139 fall with his hands. They landed in a bed of thorns that sliced his palms. He scrambled
140 to his feet. But he could no longer see Jimmie nor Geraldine. They had left him.

141 Lei ran in the direction he had seen them headed when he heard a rough voice.
142 He slowed and moved forward with caution. He saw the white of Geraldine's
143 pantaloons. She and Jimmie stood, arms raised as two men stood dismounted from
144 their horses holding the twins at gunpoint.

145 Lei crouched behind a tree. Quietly, he circled the group. He came behind the
146 larger of the two men. Best to neutralize the strongest. The weaker would be easier to
147 dispatch afterward. Lei only hoped the smaller of the two was also the more stupid and
148 less vicious. He would be less likely to fire on the twins when he saw his mate in
149 danger.

150 Without a sound, Lei came up behind the larger man and drew his dagger across
151 his throat. It came as such a surprise; the man dropped his weapon. He made wet
152 gurgling noises, which Lei found all too familiar, as blood spewed from his neck. The
153 smaller man turned his musket on Lei just as the Chinese flung his dagger. It landed
154 true, burying itself in the slave catcher's skull.

155