

# The Rhythm of Secrets

*A Novel*

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*The Rhythm of Secrets: A Novel*  
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Scripture taken from the King James Version.

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*To my family at Grace Church in Normal  
for not only loving this weird writer,  
but for liking me*

*And to my agent, Natasha Kern,  
for nudging me toward the precipice  
so I can spread my wings and fly*



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Chapter 1

# Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

*Spring 1969, Chicago, Illinois*

*Stormy days call for Rachmaninoff.* Rain thrummed the window and blended with cantata chords Sheila Franklin coaxed from her piano. Soon she'd be done with the choir piece and could continue her Rachmaninoff affair. Or maybe she'd play jazz, wild and free, though Edward had forbidden it. But Edward wasn't here . . .

"Jesus is love." She sang as she played, but her movements jerked rather than flowed; a second-year music student could do as well. Eager to be done with it, she glanced at the clock. Ten more minutes, that would do it. Ten more minutes, and she'd play the jazz she'd heard when Papa set a needle on a scratched record in their marvelous Esplanade parlor. Or Rachmaninoff. Yes, Rachmaninoff would be better. Safer. Sheila sat up straight, precisely positioned her hands on the keyboard, but her past refused to be disciplined. Her past . . .

Oh, New Orleans! Images of the noisy French Quarter and Maman's heart-shaped face pulled her into a keyboard promenade, slow and sassy, toward the Mississippi. A tugboat sounded . . . or a wrong note. She glanced at her hands, again heard the musical hiccup. She hadn't missed a key. It was that darned phone, threatening to shut down a riotous Mardi Gras parade. Irritation clapped through her. She continued to pound the keys, but the wretched thing buzzed insistently.

When icy resentment froze her hands, she stared at them. Her diamond solitaire dazzled her eye and reminded her of her commitment eighteen years

ago. She'd agreed to interruptions like this when she'd married Edward Franklin . . . and his congregation. Life, death, or a dozen things in between waited at the other end of the line; the knowledge propelled her toward his phone. She and Edward had battened down their marriage with the surety, the safety, of Christ. And it was enough, Lord. Yes. It would have to be enough.

As she moved to his study, she kneaded her knuckles but could do nothing for the memories. Beautiful memories. Painful memories. The lonely Russian composer understood—his music affirmed it—but Rachmaninoff would have to wait.

She picked up the phone from its perch on Edward's rolltop desk. "Hello?"

Static answered, and a noise like the wings of a large bird taking flight. She leaned against the desk, reminding herself to be polite, even if it was Mr. O'Leary, ringing up Edward from the pay phone outside the neighborhood pub. Or someone who needed money. "Franklin residence. Can I help you?"

"Is this Sylvia Allen?"

She tried to breathe; nearly choked. Her elbows banged against solid oak. Nobody knew she'd once been Sylvia Allen except . . . What was this? Blackmail?

The room whirled, rows of Bible commentaries reduced to smears of gold and blue against a wash of brown. Only the solidity of Edward's desk kept her from crumbling to the floor.

When Edward found out about Sylvia Allen, her marriage would crumble, like a mansion built on sand. She would crumble, all her secrets exposed. Who would dare do this? She gripped the phone and stumbled into Edward's chair. The telephone cord stretched taut, but the connection held. Her mouth opened. Nothing came out.

"Hello? Are you there?"

*This is a man's voice. Could it be?*

"Mrs. Allen?"

*It's not a blackmailer. It's . . . him.* Intuition set a wildfire ablaze in a heart accustomed, with his absence, to a sputtering light. He'd found her, after all these years. Heat raced to her limbs and set off sparks in her fingertips.

"Y-yes. I'm Sylvia Allen," she whispered, though she longed to burst out in song. *He's alive!* As if she'd put on glasses, Edward's study came into brilliant focus. She took in the glorious words on Edward's book spines, the glowing face of a portrait of Jesus. Even the rain let up to gift a window view of scarlet Japanese maples and budding tulips. *Alive! Like . . . him.*

"This is Samuel."



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*Yes. I know, baby.* An inner symphony began, the chords so dramatically chromatic, her slick hand struggled to hold the phone. “Y-yes,” she managed.

“I’d like to see you, if it’s possible.”

*If it’s possible? I’d give my life for it.* “Of course.” Somehow she managed to answer in a controlled way. She cradled the receiver against her shoulder, wanting him to speak again and fill the tinny void. He wanted to see her. Could that mean he’d forgiven her?

“I hoped we could have dinner. Friday night. Do you know a place?”

She closed her eyes to concentrate. He had such a lovely voice!

“Ma’am? A place?”

His business-like tone muffled her music. She’d best gather her wits. “Y-yes.” She cleared her throat to stall for time. Somewhere discreet. Out-of-the-way. “Yes,” she repeated, “Etienne’s.” Her voice sounded shivery, distant. Like it belonged to someone else. And *wasn’t* she somebody else? *Three* somebodies?

A time was arranged. Forty-eight agonizing hours away. The dial tone sounded, and she fell to her knees, shag carpet cushioning the phone receiver as it plunked next to her. “God,” she prayed, “thank You.” Whispery words fought their way out. “Make him understand. Make him love me.” Her heart thumped the pleas until her chest ached, but she gladly accepted the pain. How long had she prayed for this moment? Twenty-two years, two months, and five days.

The chiming clock reminded her of choir practice, prayer service, and the shirts that needed to be pressed and hung in the clothes bag for Edward’s three-day meeting in Dallas. An amazing coincidence, that meeting. A coincidence allowing her to arrange this other meeting with her Samuel.

She rose from the floor, hung up the phone, hobbled to the kitchen. As if she were in a stranger’s home, she grazed the chair arm, the counter edge, yet she was ushering in hope, joy, and something else. Something looming, now that she’d had decades to pay the price for what she’d done. With one call, God had sent a precious, dangerous gift her way. Something akin to the explosive power tucked into an atom. As she gathered her things, she prayed that she could harness that power which had been stored up all these years and keep it from destroying them all. Her Edward. His church. Most of all, her Samuel.



“Good morning, darling.” Edward stepped into the kitchen, his face cleanly shaven, a robe belt cinching his waist. Flushed cheeks and alert eyes

evidenced yet another sound night's sleep. Pulling her into the smell of old-fashioned shaving powder and deodorant soap, he pecked a kiss on her forehead and then sat before his cereal bowl and favorite mug. "Come pray with me," he ordered.

Nodding, she sat across from him, clasped his solid, sure hand, and listened. A man who preached twice on Sunday, Wednesday nights, had slots on radio and television, and had been invited to keynote in Dallas had mastered the art of prayer. Even with a traitor as a wife.

"What would I do without my Sheila?" He spooned yogurt and berries onto his cereal and smoothed a napkin into his lap. "I'll miss you."

Though she smiled a dewy morning smile, deception weighted the corners of her mouth. She'd laid out his packed garment bag on the spare bed, like she always did the morning of his flight. But today she couldn't wait for him to leave, couldn't wait to implement her plan.

"Would you mind if Thelma dropped off the bulletin Saturday morning? I'll review it Saturday when I get in."

Sheila nodded past a cringe. Though she generally avoided Edward's busy-body secretary, agreeing to his request lightened the concrete slab lodged in her gut. She'd do anything for this husband she was about to betray. Except stop the betrayal.

"Do you really think the blue shirt works?" He rambled on about his suit, the weather, in a manner uncharacteristic for the confidant to senators, a general, ambassadors, even one president.

She nodded, patted his arm in the way he liked, though icy chills ran up her arms. Edward hadn't been worried in years. "Our foundation's okay, isn't it?"

"Never better. We've sat back and let the nation march to the beat of 'Make love, not war.'" Gray eyes settled on her. "High time we're heard here at home. Thank heaven the president and his men aren't wearing tie-dye and smoking weed. With their support, we'll return to the fundamentals that built this country. God in government. On campuses." Edward took her hand. "We're going to the top, Sheila."

Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. "Wh-what do you mean?" she eked out. That lawyer and their Washington friends had wanted a "feminine touch" on the foundation board. Of course she'd agreed. She'd given input when the men shut up long enough so she could be heard, the one soprano in an alto section bent on relegating "different drummers" to the practice room. Sure she'd formed alliances, in her quiet way. Quiet or not, every legal document bore her

name. What they *thought* was her name. With her past, she never should have accepted a position. “What do you mean by the top?”

“We’re speaking out against draft dodgers. Cowards masquerading as proponents of love and peace.” He shrugged toward a rolled-up copy of the *Tribune*. “Stuff we read about every day.”

“That’s what this Dallas thing’s about?” She toyed with a piece of toast, hoping a bite would settle nausea. She’d kept mum on Vietnam even though TV images of lumpy body bags made her question the entire mess. But if Edward made his bed with this so-called Christian Right and reporters started digging, her dirty little secrets might be unearthed and ruin everything. For Edward. The foundation. For the life they’d built. The old familiar grip of anxiety made it impossible for her to eat. She set down the toast. Her napkin. Tried to keep from falling apart.

“It’s time for politics and religion to mix. At least on big things.” Edward put down his spoon, reached over to brush a curl off her brow. “Don’t worry your pretty little head about it. Things will work out fine.”

As he set his dishes in the sink and left the room, she stared at toasted crumbs and prayed that he was right.



*A pastor’s wife shouldn’t use a valet.* To avoid the appearance of a grand entrance, she wheeled past the attendant and maneuvered her car into a parking spot. She checked her face in the rearview mirror, noting half-moons under her eyes that makeup hadn’t concealed. Not surprising. She’d barely slept in the two days since he’d called.

Trembling fingers dug through her purse, found a tissue, and dabbed at her lips. Might he see her as presentable? Pretty, even? Unlike Maman, she’d never been pretty. But she’d been strong, hadn’t she, thanks to Maman? “You can do anything, little Sheba. With God’s help, anything.” Maman’s words covered her like a shawl. She stashed her keys and the tissue in her purse and got out of her car.

Wind off Lake Michigan plastered her skirt to her legs. She staggered, but that memory of his blue eyes cemented her resolve. All had gone according to plan; she couldn’t stop now. She smoothed the crisp linen of her best suit and hurried to a cobblestone path that wound through a dense stand of maples. Lights twinkled from stately branches and created a fairyland for the Gold

Coast clientele who frequented Etienne's. Those disdaining the sixties craze to see and be seen. Those prepared to pay dearly for velvet-covered, mahogany-backed anonymity.

She had joined their rank.

A canopied entrance beckoned her. A uniformed attendant opened massive doors and ushered her into a paneled lobby. Prickles frolicked across her arms. "Ma Vlast," one of the world's greatest musical achievements, burst intoxicatingly from a budget-breaking sound system. Etienne's served only the best food. The best drink. The best privacy, especially at the "quiet table for two" she'd reserved, though Etienne's patrons wouldn't likely include any of the fourteen hundred congregants Edward had pastored for twelve years. Of course one never knew what a person cloaked behind a nice suit and a pleasant Sunday greeting.

"Welcome to Etienne's." With narrowed eyes, the tuxedoed maitre d' appraised her bargain basement suit, simulated leather purse and shoes. "Reservations?" His every gesture shouted, "You don't belong here!"

"Yes." She lowered her head, as if that would stop the ringing in her ears, glanced toward the doors. She could still leave . . . and waste the twenty-two years spent praying for this. Giving the maitre d' her best smile, she pitched forward on rarely worn heels. "The reservation's under the name Sylvia. Sylvia Allen." The old name rolled off her tongue, and she envisioned that frightened young girl . . .

Oboes heralded their appearance in "Ma Vlast," infusing the motif—and Sheila—with new life. Spring had marched through the Midwest and brought the buttery scent of daffodils, as well as a salty smell to the warming lake. Right now, Sheila Franklin, the pastor's wife, didn't care whether this meeting was of God or of man. It was enough to know she would see him again.

"This way, madam." The maitre d' led Sheila toward what she hoped was the out-of-the-way table she'd requested.

Again she smoothed her suit, her heels sinking into plush maroon carpet. Feeling the highbrow stares of the rich and famous pierce her cheap suit, Sheila locked her gaze on the maitre d's slim back. Surely they wondered why she had entered a place like this. She wondered the same thing.

She sat down. A waiter sidled up to their booth. "Would you like something from the bar?" In perfect synchronization, the maitre d' slipped away.

As if to encourage her, glasses clinked at a nearby table. A smartly dressed couple drank deeply from champagne flutes.

Though internal fires had parched her throat, she shook her head and averted her face, hoping her thirst wouldn't be noted by this waiter with questioning eyes. She hadn't taken a drink in over twenty years, but she craved one now.

"Ma'am? Are you all right?" The waiter managed to keep his eyes on her as he lit a votive. His hands were steady. So unlike her own.

Sheila nodded, but of course she wasn't all right. After going to the trouble to find her, would he stand her up? Again she checked her watch, fiddled with her wedding ring. Six fifty. Ten minutes from the time she'd agreed to meet the son she'd given up for adoption. Ten minutes from the time she would set eyes on the baby she visualized first thing every morning, last thing every evening, and countless times between. Eyes . . . his were china blue. *Little boy blue, come blow your horn*, she'd sung to him in that taxi. Little boy blue. Samuel.

She bent her head. Again checked her watch. Six fifty-one. A blur to her left quickened her pulse. The rarified air in Etienne's took on weight, moisture, as if a storm had seeped through the casement windows. Yet this storm bore the scent of citrusy aftershave. Her pulse hammered at her temples. She turned. A gasp slipped from her lips.

Blue eyes pierced into hers, their gaze neither cold nor warm but hovering dangerously in between. A uniform emphasized a tall, slim physique. Shiny medals and colorful ribbons assured her he'd demonstrated courage and perseverance. A tic at his jaw betrayed his otherwise cool demeanor and infused her with hope that he, too, wanted to be here. She pressed her hand to her breast. Surely not as badly as she did!

Two feet from her stood the baby she'd held that one time, a week after his birth on January 8, 1947. Oh, she remembered every clock tick that day! The hospital had discharged her and sent her, clenching the precious blue bundle to her breast, back to the Home. "Go slow, please," she'd begged the cabbie. Eyes heavy with unexpected compassion had met her gaze in the rearview mirror. With a nod and a soft smile, the cabbie had stretched a six-minute ride into twelve glorious hellish eternal split-second minutes. Twelve minutes to give a son a lifetime of love. Before others stole him away.

The room hushed, yet the votive—and her heart—fluttered with abandon. She drank in the curve of lashes against his café au lait skin, again thinking of Maman. Caught the hue and shape of his eyes, inherited from his father, also a soldier, though in quite a different war than the one now splitting the country apart.

God had let her see her baby again. If He took her now, she would die a happy woman.

"Ma'am, are you Sylvia Allen?" The unwavering gaze, the straight back, told her he already knew the answer.

She nodded, but couldn't speak, couldn't move, thanks to the music that engulfed her. But she kept right on looking! Well-manicured hands. A musician's slender hands. Her Papa's hands. High cheekbones, casting shadows on a strong jaw and chin. Maman again. In Samuel, God had melded the grace and refinement of both her parents, the blue eyes of her lover, the piercing gaze, the thick, dark hair of . . . a thrill rippled through. Of *her*.

Her son slid into his seat. "As you surely realize, I'm Samuel Allen." He folded long limbs into his chair with such elegance, tears filled Sheila's eyes.

"He grew in wisdom and stature," she thought she whispered, but not an eyelash moved on her son's face. Perhaps she hadn't voiced it. But the words . . . and her son . . . had captured her heart.

A manila folder appeared on the table, right next to the votive, which sputtered ominous shadows across Samuel's face.

Hope plummeted. What secrets did that folder contain? What would he do with them? "They tell me you're my mother." He eyed her but pointed to the folder.

"Good evening." A waiter, his smile professionally calibrated to show just the right amount of interest, appeared and pulled a leather order book from a back pocket.

Sheila battled a grimace. She didn't want this man—or anyone—to interrupt them. Even if Samuel brought news that would slay her, she would take that over being separated from him again.

"Shall we start with drinks?"

"Mrs. Franklin?" Samuel glanced at her, only courtesy in those eyes.

*Mrs. Franklin?* Sheila's throat clamped like a vise, yet reason loosed the irrational grip. What would she expect him to call her? To feel for her? She should just be glad he was here.

"Would you like me to order for us?" The eyes got bluer, the voice softer.

She nodded wordlessly, her mind reeling backward in time. Papa would have loved Samuel's way of taking control. And Maman would have positively swooned over him. Maman always liked handsome, well-mannered men.

"Club soda with a twist of lime. For both of us."

"The menus." The waiter thrust one into her hands. Set another by the folder.

"We'll order a bit later, if you don't mind," Samuel said. "I'll let you know."

Nodding, the waiter disappeared.

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“Thanks for meeting me.” The folder flopped open. A sheet of paper was removed. “If you don’t mind, I have a few questions for you.”

His inscrutable expression muted her soul’s music. She eyed the folder warily.

The paper shook as he shoved it close. “According to . . . my sources, you are both Sheila Franklin and Sylvia Allen.” His shoulders grazed the leather booth when he leaned back. Ice glazed his eyes. “If that’s true, then who is Sheba Alexander?”

The question tore open a lockbox of memories. A blazing fire. A one-armed prostitute. Maman. Papa. A thirteen-year-old girl who thought she could conquer the world, thanks to her parents’ gift of that name she’d had to abandon. A name she just might have to reclaim . . .

“Sheba Alexander was . . .” Words fought to escape her cottony mouth. “. . . a silly girl.” A *very foolish teenager*. She swallowed hard. How could she explain things to a man she’d just met, even if he were her son? Again she studied him, and then made up her mind. To show him her love, she would’ve picked up the steak knife in front of her, stabbed her chest, pulled out her heart, and handed it to him. But he hadn’t asked for that. He just wanted the words. The truth. Would she, could she, break her lifelong rhythm of secrets? Perhaps, with God’s help. She gave her son a sad smile and began her story.

Chapter 2

# Jazz Me Blues

Summer 1942, New Orleans, Louisiana

“Can I go to the Quarter?” Thirteen-year-old Sheba danced across the planked parlor of her Esplanade Street home. The Jackson Square artists, with their scraggly beards and paint-stained fingers, the saxophonist with the soulful eyes, called to her with the sneezes and clangs and wheedles of jazz. Mellow notes fluttered in Sheba, and she twirled about until hair teased her eyes. The French Quarter in early summer was the most exciting place in the world.

Louise, a basket of laundry gripped in her chubby arms, glared at Sheba. “No’m, Miss Full of Youself.” Louise’s red kerchief flapped and snapped like her tongue. “Got no reason to go in dat Quarter. Ain’t no place for a lady. Dey throwin’ folks on boats, shippin’ em all de way to China.”

Louise’s sour notes interrupted Sheba’s secret melody. Why did the maid who cooked her favorites, cheese grits and *etouffe*, who dusted her books, who even let her play in the old slave quarters out back, get ornery when it came to Sheba leaving the house? Why, Louise was twice as strict as Maman and Papa!

Maman floated down the stairs. “*Non, non*, Sheba. Louise is right.”

Sheba stomped her foot. How could they trap her inside on a day like this?

Maman pulled a pendant watch from its bosom nest, checked the time, and pointed toward the parlor. “Your piano calls, *chérie*.” She smoothed marcel waves from her heart-shaped face. “The new tutor will expect dedication.” She touched Sheba’s cheek and then glided toward the stairs.

Victory gleamed in Louise’s eyes. Humming a gospel song, she shuffled away. “But I don’t want to play the piano!” Sheba huffed across the room, taffeta



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skirts and nylon petticoats swishing against her legs. Without jazz, the afternoon loomed bleak. Why didn't Maman, who also loved music, see that she wasn't meant to be a pianist? That it was the clarinet that captured her breath and transformed it into magic when she blew into its ebony tube? Spurning the hard piano bench, she plopped onto a salon chair, folded her arms, and made a face.

Her little tiff was wasted; Louise had sung her way to the courtyard laundry line. Maman had disappeared up the stairs. Sheba and her bad mood were alone.

The walls burst with color and light, thanks to the paintings of Maman's friend, the Impressionist painter. Her last tutor said Impressionists brought the outside in. But they sure didn't take Sheba outside! Splashes of color seeped off the canvases and threatened to drown her. If Louise had kept quiet about the Gallatin disappearances, Maman would have relented.

Strains of "Blue Danube" streamed from Maman's room and trickled downstairs. Sheba sank back into brocaded silk. As she listened, bows shivered across violins to produce just the right tone. The music was wasted on gilded tables, cloisonné vases, a mahogany armoire hiding decanters of sherry, fifths of whiskey, Papa's money bags, and lottery tickets. Sheba harrumphed. On a day like this, classical music congested her soul. Oh, for air cleansed by the strum of the street musician's banjo, the wheedle of Irish flutes! The music beckoned with such insistence, she flew to the window and peeked past drapes, half expecting a spasm band to pass by. She would have followed, despite what Maman or Louise said.

The door banged open. In came Papa, impeccable in a white linen suit.

The closed-in feeling ebbed. Sheba flew across the room and flung her arms about Papa, who was ten times better than a parade.

"How's my girl?" Tickets and green bundles peeked out of the satchel Papa cradled. Sure strides carried him to the armoire, where he stashed their rent money, their music money . . . their life. Business done, he turned to Sheba and swooped her off the rug and into his arms.

She didn't speak but buried her face in a jacket smelling of imported cigars. Just by the bent of her head, the intensity of her hug, Papa would understand how confinement on such a lovely day choked her spirits.

As she expected, Papa patted her head. "What is it, my sweet?" He gently pried her away and studied her face.

"It's Maman."

Thick brows furrowed. Papa glanced toward the stairs. "Has she been taken ill?"

Sheba pursed her lips. With Maman, she could never be sure. Vials of pills, bottles of absinthe, even voodoo powders had been stashed in the oddest places, just in case headaches took hold of Maman's pretty head. Louise said constitutions like Maman's "wasn't made for no heat." Maybe Louise was right. Or maybe Sheba's headstrongness drove Maman into her bedroom refuge. "No, Papa," she finally said.

"Then what, *ma chère*?"

She daren't mention Maman's insistence on her practicing the piano, for Papa lived to please Maman. And Louise had ruled out a Quarter visit. "Would you give me a clarinet lesson? Please?" If only she could explain with the clarinet, Papa would understand.

Frowning, Papa stepped to the window, shoved back the drapes, and peered outside. "I'm not sure we have time," came out squeaky. Very unPapa-like.

Callers never arrived until after supper, which Maman insisted was for the three of them—four, if she counted Louise. So what, or who, had placed furrows in Papa's brow?

Papa smoothed the drapes in place, put on his company smile—one that didn't touch his eyes—and moved toward the chest where he kept his instruments, his sheet music, his stand. Nimble fingers unwrapped his clarinet from the blue velvet that shielded against humidity. Freed it for music. For her soul.

The reed's tweedle stilled Sheba's nerves. Papa, one of New Orleans' best musicians, was giving her a beginner's lesson! She whirled her skirts about and tapped her feet against wood planks. Like Sheba, Papa was at his best with music around.

His real smile in place, Papa unfolded his stand and waltzed across the floor with the funny-looking metal dance partner. After a deep bow, he set the stand by the piano and offered Sheba his hand.

Sheba beamed. Papa was the handsomest man in the world!

Someone banged on the door, rattling Maman's vases. Rattling Papa, too, from the look on his face. Sheba gripped his hand.

"Upstairs, Sheba." Papa broke from her grasp, his tone cutting off pleading. The clarinet disappeared into its case. Sheba moved to the stairs, her eyes fixed on the door.

"Who is it?" Papa strode forward. "Who calls?"

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Sheba froze on the staircase, straining to hear. To see.

A man growled an answer, but she didn't understand a single word.

Bolts clicked open. The door creaked. One, two, three men barreled into the room.

Sheba crouched down, peered through banister rails, cringed when the stair creaked. Surely Maman's music would trump her sneaking-around sounds. Even if it was eavesdropping, she had to see this!

The uninvited guests hunched up padded suit shoulders and ringed around Papa.

Sheba's arms prickled. *Ring around the rosie, pocket full of posies* played in her head as she watched the circle formed by the men and Papa. But this was not a nursery rhyme. She itched to rub her skin but dared not move. Over the strains of Maman's music, flowing from upstairs, she *had* to hear every syllable.

"We need to talk, Thomas."

Papa laughed his company laugh, cocked his head so she glimpsed his company smile. Things Papa did to pretend all was well. Lies. "Surely not here in my home."

"Ah, home, sweet home. Bought by the boss's money."

A man pulled out a gun and stroked it as if it were a lap cat.

Violent waves rocked Sheba's stomach. Guns meant trouble. Police. Danger. She doubled over but kept her eyes glued to the deadly metal.

"Let's step outside, gentlemen." Bowing low, Papa swept his hand toward the courtyard doors. "The slave quarters will lend privacy to—"

A stocky man shoved Papa with his meaty arm. "Ain't no time for privacy. The boss wants to see you. Now."

Papa smoothed his coattails, which still had the perfect creases Louise and her iron had steamed into them. Her papa was a perfect gentleman, unlike these men with tight suits and scuffed shoes. Sheba darted glances about the parlor. The men had muted the colors of Maman's paintings, the shine of Papa's piano, the glow of their safe home. She glared at the men, trying to match their ugly expressions.

"That's not possible, with the run behind schedule." Papa made a show of pulling out his pocket watch and studying it. His gaze fixed on the men, he stepped back, opened the armoire, pulled out the satchel.

Sheba opened her mouth. Clamped it shut. The contents of the satchel proved Papa had made the first run, picking up bought tickets, selling new ones. They never made the second run until after lunch, when the bordellos and bars

yawned awake. Papa's lie coiled about her throat. With the lie, things had gone from bad to worse.

The stocky man thumped toward Papa and shoved him.

Sheba's nails dug into the rail.

The satchel thudded to the floor. Lottery tickets and bundles of money swirled browns and greens onto the rug's crimsons and golds. "The run will wait." One man scooped up the cash, leaving ticket bundles on the floor. The stocky man stepped over the tickets and stuck his gun into Papa's side. "The boss won't."

Sheba cupped her hand over her mouth. Papa had gone too far! And so had these men!

"The run can't wait," Papa insisted, his voice unwavering.

"You can do it later. Least you better do it later, you or one of your colored flunkies. Or Johnny, that drunken Irishman."

"Drunken Irishman?" sneered another of the men. "What a waste of a word. For a waste of a man."

"I happen to like Johnny," the first man said. "But only when he's sober."

"You mean never." Laughter swelled to shake the room. Needles jabbed Sheba's skin. Now they had attacked Johnny, Papa's right-hand man. Her friend. She hated these nasty men.

"Ledger gets opened tonight, Tommy boy. Better hope your books ain't cooked."

Again Papa smoothed his lapels. "I assure you, everything will add up."

"Ain't that fine and dandy? You tell that to the boss, you'll be back here for tea."

So . . . Papa would be okay? Then why hadn't that prickly feeling gone away?

One man opened the front door. The other two sandwiched Papa with their shoulders and hips. As they dragged him forward, Papa somehow got his watch back into his pocket. He brushed his suit as if these men were no more irritating than the mosquitoes plaguing the city. "At least let me inform Madame," he said.

"Madame? You mean the two-bit tramp?"

A lightning bolt skittered down Sheba's spine. How dare that rat slander Maman? Why, she'd pound that ugly face, kick those cheap pants. Her fists clenched.

Catcalls engulfed the room and threatened to drown out the final codetta of Maman's record. Had the music shielded Maman's delicate ears from such ugliness? Sheba squeezed her eyes shut. *I hope so.*

“Don’t worry, Thomas. We’ll bring you back to the lovely Valerie Ann.”

“You cough up the rest of the dough, Tommy boy, and you and the missus’ll be dining in that nice, safe courtyard with Miss Priss, just like usual.”

Sheba relaxed her death grip on the balustrade, felt her lip pooch. So she was Miss Priss? Then she straightened. The neighbors had called her worse things. Besides, it didn’t matter what they called her. They said Papa would be all right, so he would. But dirty rats would lie, and apparently spied as well.

Shoes slapped the front porch steps. Then the noise faded. Papa, and the men, had disappeared.

Silence rang through the house. A rare silence, in a house usually drunk on music. Sheba pricked her ears, hoping for Maman’s soothing voice, the scratch and hum signaling the start of another of Maman’s records, but silence reigned.

Sheba huffed as she climbed the stairs. The second run had to be made. But who would do it? Not Maman, who surely napped behind her closed door. Their hoity-toity neighbors would not lift a finger to help. They had sucked in Creole cheekbones as Maman’s antiques had been uncrated in the front yard, had hurled a *lagniappe* of curse words when Papa’s colored friends hefted their piano inside. Louise, who was just a maid, could not do anything, either. But Sheba could do something. *Would* do something. Wasn’t that why Maman had named her after the daring African queen?

Suddenly notes from a ragtime ditty seeped under Maman’s door, whirled Sheba about, and pushed her downstairs. Gritted teeth and a new beat pumped resolve through her. For Papa, for their family, *she* would make the second run! Her imagination sprinted ahead as she gathered up ticket bundles, straightening those whose corners had been bent. Hadn’t she helped Papa a hundred times? Why, her nose would pied-piper her past fruit and flower vendors, coffee shops, the macaroni factory, the bakery. Her ears would prick for saloon guffaws and drunken roars. Every ticket would find its proper home. When Papa returned, he’d beam. Maman, stuporous from her headache, her music, or both, would never know she had been gone. Fire would blaze from Louise’s big eyes, but Maman and Papa would be so proud, they would pooh-poo Louise’s tiff. Besides, Louise was just a maid.

She would complete Papa’s task, for all of them, and he would simply *have* to reward her with a music lesson! Humming the last notes of the ditty, Sheba paused from her work to peek out the courtyard doors.

Louise, bending and stretching in her laundry dance, filled the air with her

“Amen” choruses, which seemed to take Louise’s mind off everything . . . *thank goodness for that!*

While a rare breeze fluttered the drapes and stirred gumbo-thick air, Sheba scooped up the last of Papa’s scattered bundles and stuffed them in the satchel. She’d start with Johnny’s bar. Distribute the tickets. Collect the money. Save Papa. Now that she had a plan, the tight feeling in her belly disappeared. She grabbed the satchel, her pink straw hat, and hurried outside.

Handsome homes, their yards lush with oleander, clematis, honeysuckle, and hibiscus, rose from both sides of Esplanade to greet her. In spite of Papa’s mess, the hope of a New Orleans summer day unfolded like delicate moonflowers and released a heavenly-sweet smell. With each step past latticed porches, wrought iron balconies, her confidence grew until it crowded out the men’s nasty smiles. Bells rang out from the city’s steepled churches, affirming her plan. With the surge in kidnappings, the war rumors from exotic-sounding places like El Alamein and Guadalcanal, she had been confined too long inside their courtyard, which hid old slave quarters, deep wells, dark secrets. Today she had gotten out. To help Papa, she could do this. After all, her name was Sheba.

## All That Meat and No Potatoes

The breeze, and Sheba's determination, pushed her down Esplanade and over the ridge. As she waited for the policeman to whistle-stop rattling trucks and chugging cars, the breeze vanished. Sweat beaded her forehead and trickled down her back. She wiped her brow and leaned against a live oak to catch her breath.

The metallic odor of the river, with its cargo of oyster loggers, barges, and steamboats, joined the sizzling-tar smell of hot pavement and blared news of exotic ports, just steps away. Dangerous. Exciting. She gripped the satchel and tapped her toes against the pavement. Just like this day. Never had she dreamed she would deliver the tickets herself!

After the policeman motioned her across the street, Sheba sidestepped broken bottles, old gray men reeking of stale cigarettes, and women dressed in nighttime colors of scarlet and blue. Near the Mint, a man stood, glaring at her like he knew about her secret mission. *Did a city need dirty rats to survive?* She broke into a run and sprinted past the barrelhouse, the final landmark en route to Johnny's saloon, as if the rats were chasing her. Then she stopped and composed herself.

She had never been in Johnny's without Papa, yet she shoved open double doors like a regular. Her skirt swished and lent her a march tempo. She had to convince Johnny she was a businesswoman.

Johnny's curly head disappeared behind a bar scarred with cigarette burns and beer mug rings.

Sheba checked the back door before approaching the bar. Police, with their potbellies and bulging shoulder holsters, stood out like masked revelers.

Though the boss man managed them with bribes, it wasn't a foolproof system. Sometimes people landed in jail. Papa had taught her to exercise caution. Her eyes and ears informed there were no police, just a snoring old man who had made the back table his bed.

Sheba climbed onto a stool, heaved her satchel onto the bar, opened it, and found an order form. "Hey, Johnny. You can come out. It's only me."

Jack-in-the-box-style, Johnny popped up. "Sheba, whatever are you doing here without your pa?" He grabbed a rag near the cash register and set to scrubbing the bar.

Sheba drummed on the pocked wood. If she told Johnny the truth, he would never give her the money. But she hated to lie, especially to an old riverboat captain. "Papa is . . . tied up," she said, then grimaced at the thought. "So I am helping." She forced a smile. "After all, I'm nearly fourteen."

"Yer Papa okay?" Bleary eyes met hers. Then Johnny grabbed a bottle, sloshed liquor into a shot glass, and tossed it down. He guzzled another, then slammed down the glass.

*No river talk? No Irish yarns? What does Johnny know?* Sheba checked both exits, but no one was there. "Why wouldn't Papa be okay?" She hooked her feet around the stool rungs to keep them from trembling.

"Well, he ain't here, is he?"

Sheba crossed her fingers so the lie wouldn't count. "He's running an errand, Johnny. That's why I'm here. He asked me to help."

"That ain't what I heard." Johnny opened his mouth, as if to say more. Shut it. Slopped more liquor into his glass.

Sheba leaned across the bar, ordering her hand to quit shaking as she reached for his freckled fingers. What had jittered happy-go-lucky Johnny? "Tell me what you heard." She tried to purr like Maman did when she coaxed things from men.

"Boss man came 'round." The quaver in Johnny's voice seemed to call for another drink. "Asking questions none but yer Papa knows the answers to."

"Qu-questions about what?"

"What does the boss always ask about?" Johnny nodded toward the register. "Collections ain't addin' up. Like someone'll be havin' their hand in the till." He leaned so close, she saw gold in his prickly red whiskers. "Tell yer Papa I won't be a middleman anymore." He licked his lips, as if tasting more drink. "Now, you'd best leave."

Her veins throbbed at the harsh words. Johnny had been Papa's right-hand man and their friend. But shaky movements and strange answers signaled



change. Why would he quit a good business like gambling? Because of police? A rival boss? It didn't matter; she couldn't trust him. She slid off the stool. "You'd better give me the money." She sandpapered her voice. "Now, or your name is mud." She ducked so he couldn't see her face, which surely burned red. She hated lying, but it was the only way to collect for Papa.

Johnny laughed, but it wasn't the rollicking sound that usually shook his shoulders. "Just last week, a grown man got robbed, not five feet from the Absinthe. I'm done with this, ye hear? I won't be involving a child in this mess."

She jutted her jaw, folded her arms. "I'm not a child. I'm almost fourteen. Unless you want Papa breathing down your neck, you'd best hand it over. Now." She stood still as Andrew Jackson's statue and mimicked the hero's steely gaze though she longed to collapse on the bar floor like a payday drunk. Having to do her father's work was awful.

Johnny ducked behind the bar, reemerging with bundles of money. "Whatever am I doin', throwin' ye to the mob? Aye, more skeletons in my cupboard." He slapped the loot on the bar. May ye help me, Blessed Mary." He crossed himself, then emptied his glass.

Pressure released from Sheba so she could breathe—and smile. The rest of the pick-ups should flow like the lazy Mississippi.

The door swung open, allowing raucous laughter, men, and the smell of the sea to stumble into the room.

With Papa there, Sheba would twirl about on a barstool and let the men's stories carry her to exotic ports. Oh, to sail to India, to China, to an unnamed island. But Papa wasn't here. And there was the run . . .

Bar doors again accordioned, letting in more laughter. More men. Too many men, without the security of Papa. Sheba's lips trembled. She thanked Johnny, forced a smile on her face, and shoved open the saloon doors. It was only when the sailors' guffaws dimmed that she allowed her shoulders to slump. Everything would be okay with her Papa. Wouldn't it?



"I'm here for Papa."

"Where ya been? Where's your pa?" asked the lottery dealers. None but Johnny hinted that something was amiss. Still, Sheba pasted on Papa's company smile to greet the bar and alehouse men. She couldn't be too careful when she held Papa's reputation, Papa's livelihood—that satchel—in her hands.

The satchel popped open. Tickets flew out. Money bundles plopped in. Success made her bold; she cajoled peanuts from a lottery agent and a hunk of Heavenly Hash from the *Maison Blanche* counter clerk. Quarter sights and sounds had boosted her spirits and filled her tummy.

The sun sauntered away from the river, finished with its daily work. After gathering tickets from the last alleyway box, Sheba set down her satchel, fished out and shelled peanuts, then massaged sore calves. Toting money and filled-out tickets was harder than she had ever dreamed. She licked salt off her lips and picked up the satchel. Surely Papa had returned. Though her legs ached, she kept envisioning Papa's smile when she brought home the lovely green money bundles.

She meandered through back streets and alleys, past the stench of too-ripe bananas, moonflowers, and urine. Battling the weight of the satchel, she tried to walk faster, eager to see Papa. Maman, too. She turned onto Decatur.

An old woman stood like a gnarled oak in her path. Sheba shuddered and nearly tripped.

A bony hand reached out, brought a fishy smell. "Sugar pie, got a dime?" Pale lips circled toothless gums. A filthy black shawl covered humped shoulders.

The hairs on her arms stood up. "No—no, ma'am." She swallowed hard. She had told lies today. Despite all the treats she'd eaten, they left a bitter taste in her mouth.

"Liar! May you be cursed!" The woman crooked her finger, hunched her back, turned and poked through garbage, all the while mumbling to herself.

The words trembled Sheba's lips. Beggars plagued the city, along with rats and stray dogs. Sheba paid them no mind. But this voodoo woman, with her bulging-eyed, haintlike glare, her raspy voice, grabbed her good mood and shook it hard.

Exuberance gone, she pushed past men wearing top hats, overalls, sailor suits, delivery uniforms. In two hours, men had swarmed the Quarter. Their laughter buzzed from doorways and muffled the iceman's cry, even seagull screams. Without Papa, too many men.

Energy ebbed from Sheba, who longed to sit on the dirty curb and hang her head. She'd seen too many sights. Heard too many sounds. She would hand over the money and the burdens that went with it. For months, she'd longed for summer, and her fourteenth birthday. Sheba set down the weighty satchel and swiped sweat from her face. Right now, thirteen was complicated enough. Too complicated. She scuffed home, the witchy woman's curse echoing in her ears.



*So I'm an Alexander, whatever that means. Somehow also an Allen.*

Nearby, glasses tinkled. Giggles cascaded, surely in proportion to the number of shots knocked down. Inane people having inane conversations while he sat here with this woman—his mother—who controlled his future. He clenched his jaw. He'd do whatever it took to rescue Mali. He'd listen . . . then decide.

"So they named you after a biblical character?" He dangled conversational bait, buying time to dig past her middle-class façade. The Marines had trained him to read character, motives, *lies*, with one soul-piercing look. Nam had honed that skill into an art. How many times had a dozen lives hung on his take of the slant of a peasant's eyes? The movement of a pretty girl's hand either to smooth silky *ao-dai* folds . . . or to pull a grenade pin that would blow them all to Cambodia if he didn't spot her tense knuckles, fingers tightened into claws by stress?

"Some might debate that Sheba's a Bible character, but yes."

He continued to size her up. Thick black hair had been pulled back and twisted in a way that showed off a face full of angles and contours. Yeah, she was a looker, especially with those eyes. Deep and soulful. Like . . . Mali's. Yet webbed lines and dark circles spoke of sorrow, and threatened to penetrate the bulletproof vest that shielded his emotions.

He studied his drink, avoided those eyes. He had to say something about her papa. His *grandfather*. The thought grated. He set down the glass, focused on water drops beading its surface in case he was broadcasting disgust. His grandfather mixed with the mob and hid lies behind dapper suits. How about Maman? His *grandmother*. A woman for whom headaches were an excuse for slugging booze and pills. A woman whose eyes were rumored to act as an aphrodisiac to men, just like—his mouth went dry—Mali's.

He looked across the table. Instead of seeing his mother, he saw Mali's innocent smile when he'd bought her a scarf. Taken her on countryside rides. Innocent despite the fact . . . He blinked, Mali's image gone. This woman—his mother, he reminded himself—needed TLC. He'd better dish it up if he expected her to reciprocate.

"Sir? Madam?"

Samuel's insides knotted. Vision pinpricked. He jerked his head. Took in the waiter's priggish smile and arched brows. He breathed deep. Slow. This was

no jungle ambush. Just a waiter praying against all odds that teetotalers would tip big.

"Are you ready to order your entrees?"

"Not quite." Samuel grabbed the menu and selected expensive enough appetizers to bring a smile to the man's thin lips.

"Yes, sir. They'll be right out."

Funny what money can do. *Sure hope this works . . .*

The waiter scurried away. Samuel eyeballed his mother. Silence hung heavy. She must have felt it too, as she made a hobby of twisting her ring. "I'm sorry that . . . I never looked for you. It wasn't because I didn't want to." Again the bent of her head muted her voice; Samuel had to lean forward to catch the words. "It's just that . . . you see, I've put myself in an awful position."

His eyes narrowed. He studied scraped knuckles. *Yeah. In a marriage with that husband, whose bank account's as big as his ego.*

"I wouldn't blame you for hating me," she continued.

Surprise made him raise his head. Dim lighting didn't hide her wet face. His throat tightened at the thought of another beauty who shed tears. This woman bled inside. Like Mali.

"No, no," he stammered. She'd made him veer from the direct route; if he didn't watch it, she'd burst into tears and scoot out of here. Something he couldn't afford. "I'm sure you have your reasons." *Just like I do.*

She pressed her palms together. "I wish I could explain it."

He leaned back. Forced a smile. He wished she could, too, because unanswered questions stuck in his craw. Like where he got his skin color. From the looks of it, not her. He lined up his silverware, thinking of the orphanage jobs. He'd been the only black dishwasher. The only black boy. His knife clinked against his spoon, setting his teeth on edge.

"Well, why don't you try?" He commanded his shoulders to relax. He *should* hear her story. It was *his* story, too. Eventually he'd build the bridge that would take him to Thailand. Mali. Even if it meant . . . blackmail.

The waiter smoothed in with the appetizers. Samuel took in Etienne's dark paneling and flickering candles, inhaled lemon butter, felt his hands shake as he unfolded his napkin. Money, money, everywhere. In her purse as well. *Go slow, be gentle* trumped the other thoughts.

A faraway look softened her eyes. Softened him. *Face it, Bub. You need this story as much as she needs to tell it.* He speared prosciutto-wrapped crudités and fried shrimp, set them on a plate, slid it toward her, then helped himself. He felt

## The Rhythm of Secrets

a gaping emptiness. The nuns' discipline, Uncle Sam's regimen, kept him from gobbling the food like a marine returning from recon. But it wasn't food for which he most hungered. He was starving for the truth.

"Should—do you mind if I pray?" she asked him, in that same soft yet sure voice.

*Great, Bub. Ignore God.* Why had he forgotten? A guilt trip over what God would think of his plan? He set down his fork, bowed his head, and listened to her earnest, whispery blessing.

After she said "amen," he looked her in the eyes. "Tell me more of your story. Please."