



**THE
LIGHT
ALWAYS
BREAKS**

**ANGELA
JACKSON-BROWN**



HARPER MUSE

The Light Always Breaks

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jackson-Brown, Angela, 1968- author.

Title: The light always breaks / Angela Jackson-Brown.

Description: [Nashville] : Harper Muse, [2022] | Summary: “In her distinctive Southern literary style, award-winning author Angela Jackson-Brown delivers a moving story of a star-crossed romance and the way love has the power to change everything” -- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021061626 (print) | LCCN 2021061627 (ebook) | ISBN 9780785240594 (paperback) | ISBN 9780785240600 (epub) | ISBN 9780785240617

Classification: LCC PS3610.A35526 L54 2022 (print) | LCC PS3610.A35526 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021061626>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021061627>

Printed in the United States of America

22 23 24 25 26 LSC 5 4 3 2 1

*To the ancestors. I feel your spirits always,
especially when I put pen to paper.*



HARPER
MUSE

“Light breaks where no sun shines.”

DYLAN THOMAS

“However long the night, the dawn will break.”

AUTHOR UNKNOWN



HARPER
MUSE

ONE

Eva

Eva Cardon knelt down to pray the rosary with the beads that used to belong to her maternal grandmother, Bettine Cardon, wishing as she did every morning and evening that she could hear Grandmother Bettine's voice again, calling to her, saying in French, "*Ma belle petite-fille chérie. Le temps des prières.*" *My beautiful, darling granddaughter. Time for prayers.* Grandmother Bettine would also say, in perfect French, which she insisted on Eva speaking as well, "The light will always break, Eva. You just have to give it time, and then any sadness left over from the previous day will fade away."

Thankfully, Eva was not feeling any sadness. She was happy to meet this morning head-on because the evening was going to be spectacular. She just knew it. As always, Eva positioned herself in front of the bay window in her bedroom to say her prayers. The sun was just beginning to peek out from between the barren tree limbs, casting eerie shadows throughout her room. It was December, and winter was just starting to make its mark on her beloved city of Washington, D.C., a city she had only lived in since the age of fourteen, but it was the place that had made the greatest impact on her because of the Negro community that consisted of politicians, religious leaders,

activists, entertainers, you name it. Just like Harlem, Washington, D.C., was a place Negroes could live and shine, and Eva was learning some of her best lessons while living in D.C.

From the time Eva was a child, early mornings had been her favorite time of the day. She and her grandmother Bettine used to go for long walks through the French Quarter in New Orleans before her grandmother passed away. People would call her Bettine's little twin because Eva looked like a younger version of the Creole woman, from their long, black curly hair to their piercing green eyes and complexions so fair they both could have passed for white, but Grandmother Bettine would correct anyone who mistook them for anything other than Black Creole. "I am Colored," she would say, raising her chin haughtily at anyone who dared to question her ethnicity. "My maman was as black as onyx, and I rue the day I did not inherit her beautiful black complexion." Then she would turn to Eva and exclaim, "Always be proud of who God made you to be. Understood?" It wasn't until Eva was older that she truly understood her grandmother's fervor.

Now, years later, Eva meditated on her grandmother's words. She loved the mornings because she could get quiet with her thoughts and reflect on what challenges she might be facing throughout the day without worrying about being interrupted by her older sister, Frédérique, or her brother-in-law, Pearson, whose house she resided in. Early morning was also a time that was just for her to immerse herself in the rituals that had sustained her through the death of so many people she had loved, like her father, grandmother, and mother. She would alternate between praying in French, which was what her grandmother Bettine taught her to do, and Latin, which she was taught to do in parochial school. She would always say the sign of the cross in Latin, "*In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.*" But she would pray the rest of her prayers in French.

Eva's sister was no longer a practicing Catholic, but Eva was, in

her own way. She didn't regularly attend Mass or confession, but she always, without fail, prayed her rosary in the morning and before she went to bed at night. Although Eva was in a rush to get her morning started, because she had so much to do before the evening, it was as if her grandmother Bettine, a pious, loving woman, was whispering, "*Ralenti, mon cher.*" *Slow down, my dear.* "*En toutes choses nous rendons grâce.*" *In all things we give thanks.*

With those words still in her ears, Eva stopped her rushing around and knelt and prayed the prayers that had been taught to her by her grandmother and the nuns at the parochial schools she had attended in New Orleans and later Harlem, but once she was done praying the rosary, she did not immediately get up. She whispered in a passionate voice, "Please allow tonight to be a success." She was just about to say amen once more, but then she added, "And please do not allow any hurt, harm, or danger to come to those who are out celebrating the New Year, whether at my restaurant or somewhere else. Amen." After that, Eva proceeded with her day, which was the culmination of years of dreaming on her part.

Eva Cardon's restaurant, Chez Geneviève, was going to be closed to the public for a private party she was throwing to celebrate the New Year. She'd opened the restaurant three years ago, and finally, she was at the point where she felt she could do things in a big way. She wanted 1947 to go out with full pomp and circumstance at Chez Geneviève, reminiscent of the New Year's Eve parties her mother used to throw at their brownstone in Harlem just off 147th Street, albeit to a much smaller degree. The guest list for Eva's party read like a Who's Who, thanks in large part to her friends Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and his wife, Hazel Scott. Adam and Hazel had made sure that every famous person they knew and/or had known her equally famous mother, jazz singer Geneviève Cardon, would be present that night.

There were Sammy Davis Jr. and Frank Sinatra sharing martinis with the likes of Jackie Robinson and Dinah Washington. And there

were leaders in the Negro community like Howard University professor Alain Locke sharing small talk with local activist Mary Church Terrell.

Eva was awestruck and incredibly humbled by the crowd of high-profile, successful people in both the entertainment industry and politics who had RSVP'd for her huge soiree, but Adam and Hazel had reassured her that this moment wasn't just about her restaurant.

"Eva, my dear," Adam had said on the phone the day before when she had called him to see if he had any last-minute guests to add to the already burgeoning list. "This party of yours is bigger than any of us. The work you have done in the civil rights movement locally has been nothing short of astounding for someone your age. This moment is about showing the white establishment that we are here, and we are not going anywhere." Eva blushed at the compliments Adam was giving her. She didn't feel as if she had done much. Yes, she donated money to various causes, and she offered up her restaurant for planning meetings for voter registration and other causes that appealed to her, but really, she didn't see how her activities had amounted to the praise Adam was offering.

However, once the party started and she looked over the somewhat diverse crowd of attendees, Eva had to concur with Adam's observation that this moment truly was bigger than her. There weren't a lot of white guests who showed up for the party, only those who were brave enough to go to an establishment that was run by not only a woman, but a Negro woman at that. D.C. was a segregated town—as segregated as any Jim Crow South town. This was why this night was so important to her—to so many Negro leaders who had been working to end many of the segregation laws in effect in the city. This was her not-so-subtle way of saying to the individuals who preached segregation that she did not honor those written or unwritten laws. Plus, what police force would dare to storm a party filled with elite white and Negro celebrities like Sinatra and Jackie

Robinson? The optics alone would not go over well, and that had been Adam's goal all along when he first mentioned to her that she should have an integrated party.

"Let's see them tear gas Ethel Waters," Adam had said wryly, "or put handcuffs on Count Basie." Eva knew she was taking a huge risk by throwing this party—a risk that could lead to horrible retributions—but Eva was willing to take that risk. It was in her blood.

She had learned about civil rights at the feet of her mother, and she was not interested in taking the safe or easy way out in life. However, there were many in the Negro community who did not like the idea of her having such a high-profile party with white patrons present. Some of the local business owners had urged her not to move forward with her diverse New Year's Eve celebration. There were more than three hundred Negro-owned businesses on and around U Street in D.C., and most of those businesspeople showed up for a meeting to discuss, among other things, Eva's planned New Year's Eve party.

"How many times do we need to see white mobs coming into our communities with their hatred and violence?" said Hal Conroy, the owner of the upscale Negro restaurant The Phoenix. "Some of y'all weren't around here in 1919, but I was. I remember those four days of rioting like it was yesterday. We don't need to see that level of hatred aimed at us again."

Hal was referring to a riot that involved a Negro man being accused of raping a white woman. The civil unrest did not stop until finally President Wilson sent in federal troops.

Eva watched as various ones in the main sanctuary of her brother-in-law's church, Second Street Baptist, nodded in agreement. She noticed that Pearson was one of them. Eva's sister, Frédérique, had not attended, but Eva knew she would have been on Hal's side. Pearson and Frédérique were constantly urging her to tamp down her activities when it came to activism work in the community, but

Eva was headstrong, so once she made up her mind to host this New Year's Eve celebration, there wasn't much anyone could tell her.

"Eva, we appreciate all that you've done to help support our local young people by giving them jobs and backing various efforts to improve the civil rights of us all in this community, but when you keep challenging these white folks with your integrated parties and such, you put us all at risk," Hal said. "It's one thing for a random white person to come eat at your restaurant out from under the scrutiny of the media, but this event—this highbrow, highly visible event you're wanting to put on—is a direct thumb of your nose at the establishment. Plain and simple."

At that point, Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune had stood. She was a well-respected educator, humanitarian, and civil rights activist. Mrs. McLeod Bethune had worked closely with Franklin D. Roosevelt and had been responsible for the creation of the Federal Council on Colored Affairs, also known as the Black Cabinet. When she spoke, people listened, both Negro and white, so Eva waited, knowing that the conversation was soon going to come to a close because Mrs. McLeod Bethune had not only offered her support to Eva but also encouraged her to do this and even more.

"I understand your fear," she said to the crowd of business owners and community leaders, "but we're entering into an era where fear is not an acceptable reaction to injustice. Eva is doing more than just 'throwing a party.' She is challenging the unacceptable Jim Crow laws that have no place in modern society, but especially not in our nation's capital. Don't try to stand in the way of progress, because progress has a way of rolling right along with us or without us. Don't be on the wrong side of history. Support this young woman. Don't be a hindrance to her or what she is trying to do."

A few people had clapped as Mrs. McLeod Bethune took her seat, but Eva noticed that many remained stoic and unmoving. Eva knew that it was her time to talk. Her mother had not raised her or

Frédérique to be fearful. Having integrated parties was something Geneviève used to do all the time. So Eva stood and surveyed the crowd, speaking with heartfelt conviction. “I hear your concerns, but the party will go on as planned. I am not trying to ruffle your feathers, and God knows, I am not trying to put anyone in harm’s way. I just can’t stand idly by while injustice continues to grow in our community. My mother taught me and my sister to never bow or scrape. No matter what, that philosophy has always served us well. I hope to see as many of you who feel comfortable at the New Year’s Eve celebration.”

As quietly as she had stood, she took her seat as her brother-in-law brought the meeting to a close with a prayer and encouragement for everyone to continue to support one another. Once the meeting was done, Eva turned her attention back toward making her party the best ever.

Coming up with the guest list had been an overwhelming task, even with the help of Adam and Hazel. Eva had spent months working on it. It was a fine dance to bring together the groups of people she chose to invite. Some folks she knew would not come due to her gender and race, and others would opt out because of divorces and friendship breakups, some of which were happening right up until the day before the party. She understood that just having Frank Sinatra present alone would cause her all sorts of headaches. His wife wasn’t going to attend the party with him due to her being pregnant, and Frank, ever the playboy, had requested specific women like Ava Gardner and Marilyn Maxwell be present. Eva had purposely “lost” their invitations.

For most people, having such distinguished guests in their midst would have been daunting, but having spent her early years in Harlem, Eva had become quite familiar with a number of important and famous Negroes, as well as quite a few of the influential white celebrities who enjoyed “slumming it” in Harlem. Of all the

“in” places one could go to there, like the Cotton Club or the Savoy, most preferred the intimacy of a house party because it lacked the scrutiny and publicity that were often attached to going out to some of the landmark clubs in Harlem.

Eva’s mother, Geneviève, or “Viève” as most people called her, threw some of the best get-togethers. Geneviève was a retired blues and jazz singer. She had rivaled some of the greats like Bessie, Ella, and Sarah, but when she met Eva’s father, a white, married landowner in New Orleans, she let go of her dreams of fame to be his kept woman. After he died, she loaded up her family and moved to Harlem, where she said, “Negro folks could breathe out loud and not be afraid.”

Everyone loved coming over to Viève’s house and dancing the Lindy Hop on her parquet floors, drinking Dom Pérignon, and sipping on gin and tonics while rubbing elbows with the rich and talented. Businessmen, politicians, artists, and performers all loved to hobnob together at Viève’s soirees. Eva and Frédérique grew up seeing this type of interaction firsthand.

That is why when Langston Hughes, Representative Adam Clayton Powell Jr., and Thurgood Marshall, to name a few, found out that Viève’s little girl had a restaurant in D.C., they were all determined to come out and support it. She had opened the doors three years before when she was only twenty-one, eight years after the sudden death of her mother. Her mother and father had left both Eva and Frédérique a very nice settlement, and Eva invested almost all of her money into Chez Geneviève.

Looking around the room now, she knew she had made good on her investment. Eva had used nearly every dime her parents had left her to buy this building and hire a young Negro interior designer, Calvin Aaron Toussaint, to decorate the place. Calvin had studied in Paris, which was evident by the parquet floors, French chandeliers,

textured white walls, gold pendant and sconce lighting, and bone-colored leather banquettes and black-lacquered chairs.

The artwork was a combination of new and old paintings that had once belonged to Eva's mother, many of which were gifts from Eva's father to their mother. However, Eva's favorite paintings were watercolors done by Lois Mailou Jones. Eva had commissioned her to create some original paintings for the restaurant the previous year, and everyone loved them because of their vibrant colors and abstract shapes. And then the room was filled with every white flower the florists at Lee's Flower Shop could locate.

"Ce soir a été un triomphe, mère," Eva said underneath her breath, trying valiantly to keep the tears from flowing. *Tonight is a triumph, Mother.*

Some of her guests came from as far as Paris and others no farther than across town, but no matter where they came from, they all wanted to be there to witness Eva's success in the nation's capital because as much as some of the neighboring business owners had complained, most of them had shown up. Some because they were nosy and wanted to see what she had planned, and others simply because they wanted to show their support, like Hal, one of her biggest critics. He had kissed her on the cheek and whispered, "I hope you make a liar out of me. I hope this night is all you dreamed of and more, little miss, but more than that, I hope you don't have to pay for your obstinance."

Eva had agreed, and she hoped the same thing. Her thoughts were interrupted by none other than Mr. Paul Robeson, a well-known Negro actor and singer. Paul was not the kind of man to be ignored, so she turned to him with a radiant smile. She hoped it reached her eyes.

"Miss Eva Cardon, you set a fine table," Paul said as he kissed Eva on the cheek while holding a plate piled high with escargot de Bourgogne, Ris de Veau, and candied pork belly. "And I must say, you

are the loveliest thing in this room. I can barely keep my eyes on my plate for staring at you.”

Eva forced herself to continue smiling. Her face was pained by all of the schmoozing she had done throughout the evening. Eva was tall, standing at a statuesque five nine, but she still had to look up to see Paul, who she guessed was several inches over six feet. Paul Robeson was quite the looker in film, but up close he was almost breathtaking. Way too handsome for any man, and it was clear he knew what sort of effect he had on the ladies. Fortunately, Eva was immune to his advances. She knew his wife, Essie, and had no intention of disrespecting her by responding to Paul’s flirtations in spite of the many rumors she had heard that their marriage was in trouble. If the truth be known, what marriage in the world of Hollywood and politics wasn’t in trouble? Were it not for her sister and brother-in-law’s undying love for each other, she wondered if she would ever believe love was possible.

“Thank you, Mr. Robeson. I’m happy you are enjoying yourself. If you will excuse me,” she said, attempting to move around him, but he set his plate on a table and took both of her hands in his.

“Call me Paul. You’re acting like this is our first-time meeting,” he said. Like so many of the people present, Eva knew Paul Robeson through her mother. “You know you don’t have to be so formal with me, Eva. I would enjoy myself more if you would sit and talk to me. I’m beginning to feel like I’m not your favorite guest,” he said, flashing her his trademark smile. Clearly Paul Robeson was not dwelling on the fact that at the age of forty-seven, he was old enough to be her father. Eva didn’t want to insult him by bringing up that fact, so instead, she chose tact.

“All of my guests are my favorite, Paul. You know that,” she said and eased herself out of his grasp. “I’ll check back on you later.”

Eva had hundreds of guests to appease that night, many with egos just as huge as Mr. Paul Robeson’s, so she continued to walk

through the throngs of people, thanking each of them for coming out to her New Year's Eve party but not stopping to talk to any one person over a few seconds. She was thankful that all she had to do was be the hostess, unlike when she first opened Chez Geneviève. Back then, she was everything from the greeter to the dishwasher if that was what it took, but she soon realized she couldn't both run the restaurant and operate in the role of head chef too. Plus, her cooking skills were not nearly as strong as her business acumen. Even at such a young age, and with no formal college education, Eva instinctively understood what it took to run a business, and she knew she needed help.

With that in mind, she went back to her childhood home of New Orleans and convinced Chef LeRon du Passe, the head chef at Joseph Broussard's French Quarter establishment, Broussard's Restaurant, to come back with her and help her operate Chez Geneviève. Chef du Passe had been a close friend of her father and mother, and after much persuasion he had agreed to come for a year or two at the most and train her staff in the ways of cooking authentic Cajun and French cuisine.

It was now three years later, and Chef du Passe continued to say, "I shall return to New Orleans next year."

Eva would just smile and dutifully kiss him on his cheeks. She knew that it would take an act of Congress to get Chef du Passe to leave Chez Geneviève. It was as much his baby now as it was hers. Plus, Eva had the good sense to give him free rein over the kitchen and the freedom to go back home to New Orleans and visit his family and friends whenever he wanted. Chef du Passe had gone back to visit home only once. The restaurant kept him busy, and he wasn't ready to turn over the kitchen to any of his protégés, not even for a week.

On the night of the New Year's Eve party, however, it was not the food or the music that caught the attention of every woman and man in the room. It was Eva who had them totally and completely entranced. Eva carried herself like a cross between a Hollywood

starlet and a D.C. socialite. She was by far one of the youngest people in the room, but she was able to hold her own among the rich and powerful who graced her establishment that night. And there were many women there to rival her beauty, like Lena Horne and Josephine Baker, who had flown in from Paris to witness Viève's little girl's triumphant night, but none of them came close to stealing her shine.

"*Chérie, tu es magnifique!*" Josephine exclaimed in an accent that was far more French than American. *Darling, you are magnificent.* "I never thought there would ever be a woman alive to match Viève's beauty and grace, but child, you have. Your mother would be so proud of you tonight," Josephine said, kissing Eva on both cheeks while Josephine's new husband, Jo Bouillon, stood off to the side smiling at both women.

"Thank you," Eva replied, in awe of the older woman who still lit up a room with her very presence. Eva wore a black-and-gold chiffon beaded dress that was reminiscent of the style of clothing Josephine herself had made famous. Eva watched as Josephine glided across the room to a seating area where Langston Hughes was holding court. Eva tried to drink in the sheer magnitude of all that was happening around her, but as always, there was one thing after another that she had to deal with to make sure the night went over flawlessly for everyone in attendance.

One of the waiters rushed up to Eva as the final strains of Duke Ellington's "Mood Indigo" played in the background.

"Miss Eva, we are running low on champagne," the eager young man gushed.

Eva had just recently hired and trained him and several other waiters for the evening, and it was apparent that he was unused to the fast-paced, high-energy atmosphere of Chez Geneviève on a night like this. To be honest, this night was unlike any night Eva had ever experienced, but she knew how to finesse her way through most any situation.

Eva patted his shoulder and smiled. He was only a couple of years younger than she, but she felt decades older. “Don’t worry, Lincoln. There is plenty of wine and champagne in the cellar below. I’m sorry no one bothered to tell you. Go get Antoine to help you bring up a few more cases. We should be fine.”

Lincoln smiled and attempted an awkward bow and then hurried away in search of the head waiter.

“You are quite the efficient hostess,” a deep voice said behind her.

Eva turned and saw a very handsome and debonair-looking white man standing a breath’s distance from her, looking at her with a familiarity that almost made her snap something rude at him, but she reminded herself that he was a guest, and she couldn’t allow him to get to her any more than any other man in the room.

The unknown man was well over six feet, and he cut quite the figure as he leaned lightly on a walking cane. Eva wasn’t sure if the cane was for getting around or for adding to his overall persona. A thick lock of dark curly hair hung down over his left eye in an almost rakish fashion, and he was sipping on a glass of dark liquor, all the while admiring her with his eyes. He reminded Eva of the actor John Payne or perhaps Tyrone Power. He was wearing the standard tuxedo, but nothing was standard about the way he looked in it. Eva could not help but admire how well the suit seemed to mold to his body. Clearly it had been tailor-made for him. Realizing she had been staring at the stranger for quite some time, Eva cleared her throat with embarrassment.

“I-I . . . Do I know you?” she asked, finally settling on something to say.

The man took a sip from his glass and laughed. “No, but I would sure like for us to get to know each other.”

Eva blushed. “This is a private party, sir, so if I don’t know you, then that means you weren’t invited.”

He smiled broadly. “Then let me introduce myself so maybe I can

get on your A-list. My name is Courtland Hardiman Kingsley IV.” He extended a hand, but she ignored it.

“If the name is supposed to mean something to me, it doesn’t,” she replied.

“Well, I’m no Paul Robeson, but I’m no slouch either,” he said and reared back his head and laughed with an abandonment that caused others in the room to look over at them. Just as Eva had decided she was going to find her security so he could throw out this impertinent man who was having so much fun at her expense, Representative Adam Clayton Powell Jr. walked over to them.

“Hey, hey, I see you’ve met the country boy senator from Georgia, Miss Eva,” Adam said, slapping Courtland on the back. “I hope you don’t mind me inviting the good senator here to your party. It’s not often the House and the Senate get to rub elbows together. Those senators are a snooty bunch,” he said with a laugh, then quickly got serious. “Senator Kingsley and I needed to talk some politics, and I thought here would be as good a place as any.”

Eva’s face turned a dark red as Courtland bowed low and then laughed again as he and Adam walked away together. Eva noticed that he had a slight limp, but it did not detract from his overall aesthetic. She cursed herself for not recognizing Courtland. She had prided herself on knowing most, if not all, of the Washington elites by face if not by name.

Debating over whether or not she should go over and apologize to Courtland for her faux pas, she was once again interrupted by a staff member. One of the waiters had gotten sick and needed to be seen about, so for a time, she forgot about Courtland and their encounter as she got busy putting out fires. It was a quarter until midnight before Eva ran into Courtland again. He was standing by the double doors that led to the balcony overlooking U Street. He halted her with his voice.

“Well, have I made it onto your A-list yet?” he asked.

For the first time that evening, Eva smiled at him. “I’m sorry for before. You startled me, and I behaved rudely.”

“All is forgiven. Actually, I am more to blame than you, Miss Cardon. I should have told you from the start that Representative Powell had invited me.”

Eva wondered how such an unlikely union of New York’s Representative Powell and this “country boy senator” could have occurred.

“You’d be surprised how much Representative Powell and I have in common,” he said, almost as if he heard her thoughts.

Eva lifted her brow. “Excuse me?”

“You were wondering how Adam and I became friends.”

“Yes. I suppose so,” Eva admitted with a slight smile.

“Not all of us Southern senators are bad. We aren’t all Georgia crackers below the Mason-Dixon Line,” he said, then laughed again as Eva felt herself blush once more.

“You do laugh a lot, Senator Kingsley,” she said in a gruff tone.

Courtland took her hand in his. “Why not laugh, Miss Cardon? There is so much to be sad about in this world. Why not laugh when we get those rare moments like we have been given tonight?”

Eva pulled her hand away. “Well, I am glad that I amuse you so much.”

Courtland smiled, leaning casually on his cane. “Don’t be offended. I love to laugh, and unfortunately, I haven’t done a lot of laughing in recent years. The brief interludes that we shared tonight have brought much pleasure to my sad, boring little life.”

Eva let out a quick laugh of her own. “Please, Senator Kingsley. I would hardly say your life is sad or boring. From what I can tell, you keep the media hopping with all of your wild escapades.”

Courtland tilted his head and looked at her mockingly. “And I thought you didn’t know me.”

Eva looked away embarrassedly. Although she had been busy

throughout the night, she had made time to question her sister about Courtland. Frédérique, who was always up on D.C. gossip, immediately had choice words to say about Courtland.

“Oh, that one,” Frédérique had said in her rich Southern voice.

Somehow the Southern drawl had escaped Eva, who had a more clipped New York sound to her voice. Maybe because she had lived fewer years in the South than Frédérique. Either way, Eva loved the sound of her sister’s voice because it reminded her of their mother. Where Eva favored their grandmother, Frédérique was Geneviève through and through—from her light brown complexion to her thick, coarse black hair.

Frédérique continued, speaking softly so as not to be overheard gossiping, “If the papers are to be believed, Senator Kingsley is as wild as they come. They call him and that John F. Kennedy the Rowdy Boys of Washington. Kingsley is the bad boy in the Senate and Kennedy in the House.”

Eva had pressed her for more details, but Frédérique had dismissed him as yet another senator from the South whose only concern was to make sure he and his white constituents stayed in power.

“Have you been struck mute, Miss Cardon?” Courtland teased just as someone yelled, “Ten seconds to midnight!”

“I sh-should check that everyone has champagne,” she stuttered, but the countdown to 1948 had already begun.

“Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . Happy New Year!” everyone screamed as Duke Ellington and his orchestra began playing “Auld Lang Syne.”

Courtland kissed her lightly on her cheek.

“Happy New Year, beautiful lady,” he whispered, and then he kissed her again, but this time on the lips. For a few seconds, Eva kissed him back, but then she realized what she was doing and pushed him away, slapping him resoundingly across his face.

“Don’t do that,” she hissed, looking around to see if anyone had

seen them, but everyone seemed engrossed in the act of celebrating the arrival of 1948.

Courtland rubbed his jaw slightly and had the good graces to look apologetic. Eva frowned but was pleased to see that he wasn't a total cad.

"I'm sorry. That was . . . uncalled for and highly inappropriate. I think I have had enough dark liquor for one night. Please, accept my apologies," he said and walked away from her, disappearing into the throngs of people who were back on the dance floor, swaying to Duke Ellington's "Take the 'A' Train."

Instead of going out into the crowd and mingling with her guests, Eva stood rooted in her spot, unsure of what she really felt about that kiss. One thing was for sure, however: this was not how she expected to ring in the New Year. Not at all.



HARPER
MUSE

TWO

Eva

The kiss that Eva shared with Courtland on New Year's Eve stayed on her mind long after it ended. Once she got home close to 5:00 a.m. on New Year's Day and was able to go to bed, her dreams were filled with images of Courtland and that kiss. Slapping him was the right thing to do, she acknowledged to herself, but that acknowledgment didn't stop the daydreaming, over and over. Eva couldn't understand what she was feeling, and she felt too embarrassed to bring it up to Frédérique. She and Frédérique talked about a lot of things, but this subject was not one they had discussed beyond the usual, "Do not do anything to embarrass yourself or this family." So Eva tried her best to pack away her emotions as best she could, but out of the blue, the sensuousness of that brief interlude with Courtland would invade her thoughts, much to her dismay.

Eva closed the restaurant for two days after the event, with plans to reopen for business that Saturday. She and Chef du Passe got together on the Friday before she reopened to discuss the menu for the next day and the upcoming week, something that usually excited her, but all Eva could seem to focus on was that kiss. Several times, Chef du Passe touched her arm, causing her to jump.

“Est-ce que ça va?” he asked. *Are you okay?*

“Oui, merci,” she responded. *Yes. Thank you.* After the second or third time he had to ask her that question, or some form of it, she forced herself to stay in the moment. But as she drove home after her meeting with the chef, her mind returned to the night of the party. Eva tried to stay miffed at Courtland for kissing her like that without even knowing her, but she just couldn't. That kiss awakened something inside of her that she didn't know existed. Just like Eve from the Bible, Eva felt as if for the first time her eyes were opened to things she had never thought about, like attraction to the opposite sex. Oh, she'd had schoolgirl crushes, but nothing happened with them other than a shared giggle with some of the girls at school. But this . . . this felt different. What she was feeling felt very much adult-like.

Times like this, she desperately wished her mother was still alive. When Frédérique spoke of attraction to men, it was always in the context of marriage. As far as Eva knew, Frédérique hadn't shared much more than a peck on the cheek with Pearson before they got married, and she absolutely knew her sister was a virgin on her wedding night. Eva knew a conversation with Frédérique about her current feelings would lead to a lecture that included Scripture and prayers. Lots of prayers.

“Pull yourself together,” she chided herself as she pulled her car, a 1946 Super DeLuxe Tudor sedan, in front of the brownstone she shared with her sister and brother-in-law. When she entered the house, she heard the familiar sounds of Frédérique and Pearson cooking dinner together.

“I'm home,” she said as she put her coat in the hall closet.

“Good,” Frédérique said from the kitchen. *“Go wash up and sit down at the table. Dinner will be ready in about five minutes. So happy you made it home.”*

“Do you need any help?” Eva called back.

“No,” Frédérique replied. “Pearson and I have everything under control. You just go and make yourself comfortable.”

Eva made her way into the hall bathroom where she quickly washed her hands. She was tired, but she also didn’t mind helping out in any way she could. She was grateful that her sister and brother-in-law had taken on the task of raising her after her mother passed away. The last thing she ever wanted to be was a burden, even though she knew both Frédérique and Pearson would insist that she wasn’t.

Before turning the corner into the dining room, Eva noticed the newspaper was still sitting on the table in the hallway. She picked it up and went into the formal dining room where Frédérique insisted they take all of their meals. The room was filled with antiques Frédérique had handpicked, as well as artwork that had once belonged to their maternal grandmother. Because they never got the chance to eat a meal with their father growing up, Frédérique was a stickler about family dinners, and she always wanted them to be special, from the food itself to the plates and glasses they used. Frédérique did not believe in saving the “good china” for when they had guests. She always said, “The most special people I can ever have at this table are you and Pearson, so why wouldn’t I use my best dishes, linens, and glassware?” Since it was so important to Frédérique to put on an elaborate show at every meal they shared, Eva never balked, although she did tease her sister occasionally about the formality of it all.

As Eva sat down at the table, in spite of herself, she couldn’t help but peruse the paper a little closer than usual, just in case there was a mention of the “country boy senator from Georgia.” And, as fate would have it, there was an article in *The Washington Post* about Courtland. It pertained to some of the laws concerning the inequities of higher education in the United States. Although Courtland never mentioned Negro people specifically, he was quoted as saying that he felt the present higher education system was not fair to all

American citizens, and he would support any bill that would ensure that everyone got a chance to experience quality education.

A part of Eva wished he would have just come right out and been specific with his words, but she also recognized that with the present racial climate of the country, particularly in states like Georgia where Courtland was from, there was no way he wouldn't be careful about how he introduced new ways of looking at the social ills of the day. Eva was thinking about that and other things concerning Courtland as her sister and brother-in-law placed the food on the table. Once they were settled, Eva brought up what she had just read in the paper about Courtland.

"Senator Kingsley is suggesting some very revolutionary ideas, don't you think?" Eva asked as she passed the roasted duck to Pearson after putting a sliver on her plate. So much of Eva's day was spent tasting food, and by the time she arrived home, the most she would want was a nibble or two, mainly to satisfy Frédérique.

Frédérique eyed her sister with suspicion. "That Georgia senator? What makes you bring him up?"

"Nothing," Eva said quickly. "I was just reading the newspaper earlier and saw something about him wanting to support access to education for everyone."

Frédérique snorted as she put green beans on her plate. "For everyone? Right. We all know everyone doesn't include Negroes."

"Why do we all know that?" Eva pressed. "Perhaps he means exactly what he says."

Pearson chuckled in a loud voice as he put a large helping of roasted duck on his plate. "He's from the South, Eva. That alone tells us he isn't thinking about our people. And anyway, let's just say for the sake of argument he did mean Negroes. How revolutionary is it to suggest the things Negro folks should already be getting in the first place? Warranted, yes; revolutionary, not so much."

Frédérique nodded in agreement as she put a dab of mashed

potatoes beside her green beans. “Pearson’s right. It’s like Negroes are supposed to stand up and cheer every time a white person throws us a few crumbs. As long as we’re still getting strung up in trees in the South and other rural parts of this nation, I don’t feel any sense of gratitude for the little bit of good they do for us.”

Pearson reached over and patted his wife’s hand. Eva knew that Pearson knew the two of them could easily become like oil and water when conversations about race came up. After their father died, Frédérique basically put up a wall between her Black self and her white self. Although, to hear Frédérique tell it, there was no white self; in that regard, she was just like their maternal grandmother, Bettine. If the subject ever came up, Frédérique was quick to say, “I am Negro to the bone.” Any and every chance Frédérique could take to deny the white part of her DNA or belittle the white race, she took it. Unlike Eva, who was quite fair skinned, Frédérique, who was much darker, was often teased and ridiculed about her skin color when they were children.

People would refer to Eva as the “pretty one” and Frédérique as the “smart, sensible one.” Eva knew it hurt her sister even though she never complained, and she definitely never showed the slightest hint of jealousy over Eva’s appearance. But Frédérique did go out of her way to embrace all things Black. A part of Eva wondered if Frédérique had first started dating Pearson because he was so dark skinned. Eva knew her sister loved Pearson with all of her heart, but she also believed Frédérique would not have given him a second look had he been lighter complected.

“I’m not saying we should put white people on a pedestal, Freddie, but I do think we can legitimately respect those few who actually do try to right some of the wrongs that have been done against us,” Eva said.

She wasn’t sure why she was trying so hard to make her sister like Courtland. If the truth be known, she wasn’t even sure if she

liked him. Yes, he was very handsome, but other than that, she knew nothing about the man. Well, she knew he was a good kisser, in spite of her slap to his face. She didn't want to imagine what Pearson and Frédérique would say if they knew he had spoken fresh to her and kissed her without her permission. Well, suffice it to say, for all of Pearson's God-love as a Baptist minister, had he seen or even heard about the kiss, he would have been the first to be on the hunt for the country boy senator from Georgia.

Frédérique poured herself a cup of coffee, her drink of choice for every meal. "You go right ahead and respect those folks if you like. I don't have it in me at this time," she said.

Pearson smiled at both women. "My dears, let us pray," he said, reaching for both of their hands. That was Pearson. Whenever it looked like things were about to go left between the two sisters, he always found a way to bring their little family together, which usually involved him saying some type of prayer.

Frédérique was seven years older than Eva, just recently turned thirty-one, but at times the two of them could lock horns like they were children all over again. Pearson chose to deal with their arguments with love and godliness. Eva was thankful Pearson had come into their lives when he did, just weeks after their mother died in her sleep from a heart attack. Pearson, who was ten years older than Frédérique, not only became a husband to Frédérique but also a stand-in father for the then thirteen-year-old Eva. Now, as he sat at the head of the table, looking lovingly from Frédérique to Eva, Eva silently thanked God for this phenomenal man, because without him, she didn't know what their lives would have been like. She listened as Pearson prayed over their meal and for the sisters' peace of mind.

"Lord, bless this family. Bless these two passionate women, who have such strong convictions but who, at the end of the day, love each other. And God, thank you for bringing them both into my life. I can't remember what the world was like before I was blessed

with a wonderfully strong wife and a wonderfully strong little sister-daughter. May the food we are about to eat be nourishing to our bodies and minds. Amen.”

He kissed Frédérique’s hand, and Eva immediately knew the argument was over, although Pearson’s next question was just as polarizing, but for a totally different reason.

“Adam called me today, and he mentioned there’s going to be a meeting at the restaurant in a few days,” Pearson said, carefully loading up his fork with duck and mashed potatoes. “Do you think it’s wise to get involved in all of these civil rights activities, one after another?”

“The dust has hardly settled from that party you threw,” Frédérique said.

Eva held back a sigh. She was hoping to postpone telling Pearson and Frédérique about the meeting. Adam and Mary McLeod Bethune had asked her if she would be willing to host it, and of course she said yes, but telling her sister and brother-in-law was not something she was anxious to do, so she had put it off. Eva didn’t want another argument, but Pearson and Frédérique’s approach to protesting was far more passive than hers. Pearson and Frédérique preached patience and waiting on God to move the hearts of racists. Eva didn’t believe patience was an effective way to address the social ills of the day, particularly those related to Negro rights.

“Pearson, I know you and sissy worry about me,” Eva said. “That’s why I didn’t say anything, but—”

Frédérique interrupted. “You don’t know how much we worry, Eva. You just don’t. You are reckless at times, and you are purposely making yourself a target for every racist with an agenda. That party was bad enough, as beautiful as it was, but now you want to join forces with Adam and all of these other folks with a radical agenda? God knows I admire them and their tenacity, but I would be

remiss if I didn't say I am scared for your life. Can't you just donate to their causes and stay out of the fray?"

"What would Mother do if she were still here and they asked for her help?" Eva asked softly.

Throughout their childhood, their mother had used her celebrity for groups like the NAACP and the New York City League of Women Voters. No matter what any of them asked, their mother was always eager to support, and she made sure her daughters knew what she was doing and involved them when possible. Eva remembered being a little girl and walking through Harlem with their mother as she talked to people about the importance of voting.

"Yes, Eva, our mother was a trailblazer in a lot of ways, but if I'm to be honest with you, my reasons for wanting you to slow down are purely selfish," Frédérique said softly, looking away as tears rolled down her face. "The thought of losing another person in my life is more than my heart can bear. I'm afraid of what might happen to you if you don't back away from all of this public protesting. We have a comfortable life. You have a wonderful business. Why can't that be enough?"

Eva got up from her chair and walked over to her sister, taking Frédérique's hands in hers. Immediately, Eva knew where a lot of her sister's emotions were stemming from. The week before Christmas, Frédérique had a miscarriage. It was her third. Eva knew her sister tried to be stoic about the miscarriages, always insisting that when God was ready for her and Pearson to have children, he would make it so, but Eva knew the losses were wearing on her. She never wanted to do anything to make things worse for either Frédérique or Pearson, but she had to follow her heart.

"Sissy, I don't ever want to hurt you or make you afraid. I just feel as if this work with Adam and Mrs. McLeod Bethune and the others is part of the purpose God has for me. I might not ever have a husband

or family beyond you and Pearson, but this work—fighting for the rights of our people—this feels like my calling.”

Pearson cleared his throat and looked at Eva with a smile. “If that is what your convictions tell you, then we will just pray for God’s grace over your life. We would never try to stand in the way of what you believe is your purpose, but promise us this: that you will be careful and always let us know what you’re doing so we can cover you in prayer.”

Frédérique smiled through her tears. “My prayers for you are constant. Just be mindful of what you do. Test every spirit. Sometimes we think we are hearing from God; instead, it is our own desire leading us.”

Eva bent and hugged Frédéricque, kissing her on the top of her head. “I promise to be mindful at all times. And thank you for understanding—or at least trying to understand.”

Later that night, Eva was lying in her bed reading Rudolph Fisher’s detective story, *The Conjure-Man Dies*, when she heard a knock at the door.

“Come in,” she said, knowing it was Frédéricque.

She laid the book down and waited as Frédéricque entered the room, already dressed in her nightgown and robe. She came over to the bed and sat beside her sister, taking Eva’s hands in hers.

“You know I’m proud of you, right?” Frédéricque asked.

“Of course,” Eva said with a smile. “You have been my biggest supporter from the day I took my first breath, according to Mother. And I know you worry about me all of the time, and I don’t want to contribute more to what you are already feeling, but I just feel like this work with Adam and the others, even more so than the restaurant, is something I have to do.”

“I’m trying to understand,” Frédéricque said, “and when I heard you say you believed what you were doing was according to God’s plan, I told myself I needed to trust you more and definitely trust

God. Just continue to listen. That's all I ask. And in spite of what some might think, it is okay to ask God questions. I do it all the time. I'm never accusatory, I just . . . every now and then, say something like, 'Hey, God. Did I hear you right?'"

Eva laughed. "That sounds exactly like you. I will. I promise."

Frédérique kissed Eva's cheek and stood, but then she sat again. "I might be overstepping, but I have been your eyes and ears since before you could walk, and I notice you seem a bit taken by this senator from Georgia. Am I misreading you?"

Eva turned away, feeling her cheeks immediately grow warm. "I just thought his stance on education was good. That's all."

Frédérique smiled. "I know you consider me a prudish Goody Two-shoes, but I know when a woman is feeling something for a man. I saw the light in your eyes the night of the party when you asked me about him, and I saw that same light a little while ago when you brought him up at the table. Your sister sees everything when it comes to you."

"It's nothing," Eva insisted, feeling embarrassed. "I was just asking questions."

Frédérique placed her hand on Eva's shoulder. "I know Pearson and I have sheltered you from boys . . . men. We encouraged you to be a woman business owner, but we never taught you very much about the birds and the bees. The senator from Georgia is a very handsome man, I will give him that, but remind yourself that it could never be anything more than a dalliance, and you deserve more than that. At the end of the day, he is a white man, and you are a Negro woman. Nothing has changed when it comes to relationships between the races. Remember that."

"I understand," Eva said, "but I don't think it is worth mentioning since he was only at the party because of Adam. There is no reason for me to believe I will ever see him again."

"Okay," Frédérique said. "I hope that is true."

Eva watched her sister walk out of the room, then tried to return her attention to her book, but thoughts of Courtland reentered her mind. She knew her sister was right. This white senator from Georgia was the last person she should be thinking about. All she had to do was remind herself of the grief her mother endured and her grandmother before that. Neither woman ever lived to have a love they could have in public like Pearson and Frédérique.

Get him out of your thoughts, she chided herself silently as she gave up trying to read and tried to focus on sleep. *And anyway, just like you told Frédérique, you will probably never see him again.*

It took a while for sleep to find her, but mercifully her dreams were Courtland-free. And by the next day, the crowd was so heavy at the restaurant, she didn't have time to daydream about Courtland or anyone else for that matter. Her staff was so overwhelmed by the lunch crowd that she ended up acting as the hostess, making sure people were seated quickly and that tables were bussed as soon as a group of diners were done. She got so busy that she almost didn't hear the deep, rich baritone voice behind her.

"Good afternoon, Miss Cardon," he said. She turned in time to see Courtland standing with a bouquet of pink and white roses as he leaned on his walking cane, looking extremely dashing.

"Hello, Senator Kingsley," she said, making sure her voice did not show the excitement she was feeling. And anyway, the last time the two of them had seen each other, she had resoundingly slapped him across his face. It would not have made sense for her to suddenly start gushing over seeing him again.

"I wanted to bring you these flowers as an apology for my brutish behavior the other night," he said with an embarrassed look. "I drank more than I should have. That's no excuse, but it is an explanation, and I'm sorry."

Eva took the flowers, feeling a bit embarrassed herself from the attention she was receiving from Courtland as well as many of her

patrons whose eyes were fixated on the two of them. Eva stopped one of the waiters and gave the flower arrangement to him.

“Thank you for the flowers,” she said to Courtland. “And thank you for your apology.”

“You are very gracious. I was hoping I might have lunch here today, but judging from the crowd, that doesn’t seem likely,” Courtland said, smiling, “which is a great thing. The more customers the better, right?”

She smiled back at him. “Most definitely. The restaurant business can be finicky at times, but I have been blessed. We tend to always have a good crowd.” She paused but then decided that since he was so kind to come and apologize and bring her flowers, she would extend kindness to him. “If you don’t mind waiting another minute or two, I can seat you at my table,” she finally said, maintaining the formality in her voice.

He bowed low. “Thank you, Miss Cardon. I hope you will join me at your table.”

“I’m afraid I have much to do,” she said.

She would have loved nothing more than to join Courtland for lunch, but if she was truly trying to decrease her attraction to him rather than increase it, she knew she had to keep her distance.

“Come this way,” she said, waving away her maître d’ as she walked Courtland over to the corner table where she would sometimes sit and observe the goings-on in the restaurant, making sure everyone was happy and content. Other times, she would give that table to important customers who came in to eat.

“I am excited to get the chance to sample more of the restaurant’s delicacies,” he said, the twinkle back in his eyes, making her unsure if he was referring to the food or her. She blushed and looked away.

“Well, I’m sure our very extensive menu will more than satisfy your taste,” she said in a husky voice.

“Any suggestions on what I should order?” Courtland asked.

Eva quickly adopted her hostess voice. “Today the chef has prepared red beans and rice. I think you would like that. The blackened catfish is also tasty. I’ll send a waiter over to take your order. And please, order whatever you like. It’s on the house,” she said and then immediately regretted it. What if he took her kindness the wrong way? Many times, she would give important first-time guests a meal on the house to ensure their loyalty and rapid return, a lesson taught to her by Chef du Passe.

“There is nothing rich people like better than to receive something for free,” Chef du Passe had said to her. And he was right. The two of them used to laugh at how the eyes of the rich and famous would light up when she offered them something free, whether it be a free meal or a free bottle of her best champagne.

“You don’t have to do that,” Courtland said. “I don’t mind being a paying guest.”

“I do this with all of my preferred customers,” she said and almost bit her tongue when she saw the huge grin on Courtland’s face.

“I hope you don’t have too many preferred customers,” he teased.

Feeling her cheeks grow warm, Eva chose to ignore his comment. “Have a nice lunch,” she mumbled, then turned and walked with a swiftness to her office.

Once again, she had allowed him to get her all riled up. Determined not to sit and daydream about Courtland, Eva busied herself with the mountain of paperwork on her desk. She employed just a little more than eighty-five people, so keeping up with the payroll and other issues that came up related to having a large staff had her working well into the wee hours most every night. Eva kept promising herself she would hire an assistant, but she never did. She enjoyed having her hands in all parts of her business, and since she was single and not really looking to date, she had the time to focus on her business with a single-mindedness. In fact, she had become so immersed in her work that when someone knocked at the door, she jumped.

“Come in,” she said as she stood from her soft leather-back chair, which had been a gift from Frédérique and Pearson when she opened the restaurant.

It was Courtland. He entered the office, leaving the door ajar. “I wanted to thank you for a delicious lunch. Your chef is amazing. How did you happen to find someone of his capabilities here in D.C.? I mean, his cooking tastes so authentic. It was like being in a French Quarter restaurant.”

Eva smiled. She always loved telling the story of how she hired Chef du Passe. She walked from around her desk and offered Courtland a seat on the burgundy couch she’d recently purchased. She sat beside him but made certain there was plenty of space between them. She then told him how she lured Chef du Passe from his position at Broussard’s.

“You are quite the businessperson, Miss Cardon. Very few women your age would have had the know-how or the drive to venture into something as daunting as opening a brand-new restaurant in a city they weren’t even from. Whatever gave you such an idea?” Courtland asked.

“My mother,” she said simply. “Mother was the quintessential hostess, so I guess her people skills rubbed off on me. And the other business owners here in and around U Street are very helpful with information. I have relied on quite a few of them whenever I had questions.”

“Well, you have definitely made a restaurant your mother would have been proud of,” he said. “You are very impressive, Miss Eva Cardon.”

Eva gave a shy smile. “I’ve been very blessed with a wonderful staff. The restaurant practically runs itself,” she said.

Courtland shook his head. “I don’t believe that. You are clearly the mastermind behind this great operation, Miss Cardon.”

“Thank you, but like I said, I am very lucky,” she said, feeling

uncomfortable with all of the compliments. Humility was something her mother stressed to both her and Frédérique as they were growing up, and Frédérique had continued hammering home the idea that being humble was a trait that would take her further in life than arrogance.

“You are being far too modest. Being business-minded is something to be proud of, and you have every right to be proud. I’m trying to imagine my sisters or my mother running a business,” he said, laughing. “They would have had to declare bankruptcy before the end of the first day of business, I’m afraid.”

“That’s not nice to say,” Eva said. “I’m sure they aren’t as bad as all that.”

“Oh no, Miss Cardon. Trust me when I say I love my mother and sisters, but they can be quite the handful,” he insisted. “They are firm believers in the spending of money, not the making of it. When I came home on medical release from the war, the first thing my younger sister, who was twelve at the time, asked me was if I had remembered to stop by Paris to pick up the fineries they had written me about in their letters. Can you believe that? Here I was returning the wounded warrior, and all they could think about was all of those silks and satins I had left behind.”

Eva looked at him with concern. “You were hurt during the war? Are you okay?”

Courtland smiled. “I’m fine. It was just a little shrapnel to the leg. No big deal,” he said. “My men and I had landed on—hey, are you sure you want to hear these old war stories?”

“Absolutely,” Eva said. If the truth be known, he could have been talking about anything. She just wanted to hear his voice. It was mesmerizing. No wonder he was reported to be such a ladies’ man. What lady wouldn’t be caught up by the sound of his voice, not to mention his good looks? She had read somewhere that he was thirty-five, but he could pass for much younger, even with the walking cane.

“Like I was saying, not long after we landed on Guadalcanal, several of us got separated from the rest of the platoon,” he said in a quiet tone. Instantly, he seemed transported to a different place.

“You don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to,” Eva said in a soft voice. She didn’t want him to relive anything that was going to cause him pain.

Courtland shook his head. “It’s okay. I don’t mind. I get asked to talk about this time of my life fairly regularly. I just haven’t really sat down and talked about it one-on-one with anyone in a while. You make talking easy.”

“Thank you,” Eva replied, blushing. “If you are sure you want to share, then please, continue.”

Courtland started talking again. “My men were the best the Army had to offer. We were the first Army unit on Guadalcanal. We came onshore to support the Marines. We joined the 182nd and 132nd Infantry Regiments, forming a new division called the Americal.” He paused again. “If at any point you want me to stop, just say so. These war stories can be . . . heavy.”

“I’m fine, Courtland. Tell me your story,” she prodded. She could sense that he wanted to talk . . . needed to talk.

“Well, several of my men came down with dysentery and were not having an easy go of it; they kept falling behind. Once I realized they were struggling, I sent a couple of other men to rally them up, but then I lost contact with them. I decided I had to go back and locate my men, so I took about a half dozen guys. We found them all deep in enemy territory. They were sick and surrounded—not a good combination.”

“My God. You all could have been killed,” Eva said, shuddering at the thought.

“You’re right about that,” he said. “It was so hard to make your way out there. The terrain was dense, and before we knew it, we were outgunned and definitely outmanned. Somehow I managed to

get my men out of there, but in the process, I got hit a few times in the leg with shrapnel.”

“That’s scary to hear, and I’m sure even more scary to live through. You’re a hero, Senator Kingsley,” she said. One more reason for her to like him, as if she needed more. But at least this reason was less superficial. Courtland wasn’t just someone nice to look at. He was a good man—or at least, that was the impression she was getting about him so far.

Courtland gave a wry laugh. “That’s not what my father told me. I won’t regale you with the colorful language he used, but suffice it to say, he made his point clear to me and half the population of Parsons, Georgia, that I was a fool to the nth degree.”

“I imagine you just scared him,” Eva said.

“You are quite the diplomat. We need you in Congress. Maybe we could get more done.”

This time Eva laughed. “No. I am far happier feeding a member of Congress than I ever would be working with all of you.”

“Then that is our loss, Miss Cardon,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said. “Call me Eva.”

He smiled. “And please, call me Courtland. That’s enough with the war stories. Tell me about you and your future plans for this magnificent restaurant of yours.”

Eva smiled. “I don’t know where to begin. When I started Chez Geneviève I had no idea what I was doing. Oh, I did my homework on how to run a restaurant, and so many people have mentored me—like Hal Conroy, the owner of The Phoenix—but this has been a huge undertaking.”

“I see a glint in your eye,” Courtland said. “You love this, don’t you?”

She nodded. “I do. So much so that I’m planning on opening another restaurant.”

He looked at her with surprise. “You want to take on opening a second restaurant? Another Chez Geneviève?”

She shook her head, leaning forward, excited to talk about her plans. “No, I plan on opening a less fussy restaurant—more like a diner. I want to be able to have restaurants that serve a myriad of people. My people have so few choices when it comes to dining that I want to give them options—fine dining and/or a restaurant that the local blue-collar workers can take their families to and not have to worry about it being cost prohibitive or too stuffy. I’m still working on the business plan, but when I’m done, I am going to go to the bank and see if I can make this happen.”

“I have no doubt you will,” Courtland said. Courtland stood, and Eva rose also. “I wish I could stay and talk to you more. Learning about you has truly been an enlightening experience. I don’t think I have ever met someone like you, Eva Cardon. You are one in a million.”

She blushed again. Receiving compliments of this nature from someone other than her family and friends was a bit unsettling. “It was nice of you to come by today, Courtland . . . Do you have big plans for the weekend? I know you senators love to work hard and—” She stopped, fearful that her teasing had gone too far.

Courtland laughed. “Play harder? Sadly, you are not far off the mark. But this weekend is all about family. I’m taking the train to Parsons, Georgia, later today to attend my father’s birthday celebration tomorrow. I probably should have left yesterday, but to be honest, I wanted to avoid as much of the brouhaha leading up to the party as possible.”

“But you’re one of the Rowdy Boys,” Eva said with a smile. “I would think you would be looking forward to this big bash.” She was surprised at how comfortable she had gotten with Courtland in such a short period of time. The only other man she had joked with was Pearson, and he didn’t count considering he was more like a father to her.

Courtland nodded as if he approved of her teasing. “Look at you

with your jokes. In spite of popular belief, I am not as much of a party person as the media would like to think. If the truth be known, I had hoped the party would have been held on Friday night or tonight, just to get it over and done with, but Mother insists that my father's birthday be celebrated on his actual birthday each year, so Sunday it is. My mother and sisters always put on a spectacle. Pops acts as if he hates it, but the old coot would throw a fit if they didn't go all out for his big day."

"That sounds fun. Have a good time," Eva said.

"It will be interesting. Hopefully I will see you again soon, Eva," he said, then walked toward the door. Eva could tell he was working hard not to limp. She wanted to tell him that the limp didn't matter, but she didn't want to embarrass him more.

"That would be nice," she said solemnly, but Courtland grinned.

"Oh, then you can count on it. I will be back," he said, then left.

Eva continued to stand, looking at the door he went out of for a moment, but then she forced herself to return to the work on her desk. As attracted as she was to Courtland, she had work to do, and never in her life had she allowed herself to be distracted by the job at hand. That was true when she was a child in school, and it was definitely true now that she was a business owner.

"No time to be lovestruck," Eva said and dived back into the paperwork, but every now and then her mind would drift and she would once again be thinking about Courtland.

"Dear God, please take this man from my mind," she finally whispered.

Eva thought about her grandmother and mother and wondered if their relationships had started like this . . . innocent banter that led them to make decisions that were still having ripple effects on both her and Frédérique.

"Grandma Bettine . . . Mother . . . if you are listening, please, watch over me. Please." *S'il te plaît.*