

PROLOGUE

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He rode alone; no one noticed him. His clothes and demeanor rendered him unremarkable. His wide-brimmed hat pulled low covered thick wavy black hair and screened his face as he passed. Though he wasn't old, nearing a mere score and eight, years of suffering and privation had ravaged him immeasurably. But even the aging and the full shaggy beard could not obscure the proud set of his broad shoulders and the distinctive features of his aristocratic lineage.

Had the passersby discerned the scalding fury behind the cold blue eyes, they might have remembered him. But they couldn't, and they didn't. He passed through towns and villages without anyone realizing he'd been there.

He journeyed silently through dreary days and unbearable sleepless nights. But he rode with a single goal and nothing left to fear—that made him dangerous.

Squinting against the agony of the throbbing thunder in his head, he vowed to make them pay. He would make them know how it feels to be helpless and afraid; how it feels to wake up not knowing yourself; how it feels to have nightmares so terrifying that sleep becomes an elusive luxury; how it feels to have to fight your way back from the gates of hell itself.

They wouldn't know him, of course. He'd been gone nearly a decade, and the scars of those long years had taken their toll on his appearance. But he knew who he was, he knew what they'd done to him, and he was determined to make them pay. He hoped, as they slept tucked into their beds, that they had frightening dreams. He hoped they were afraid. They should be afraid, because he finally remembered who he was. He was Fletcher Stedman, and he was going home.

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Nearly two thousand miles away, Kyndee Brock's wailing could be heard throughout the house as she threw down her starched linen napkin and fled hurriedly from the elegant dining room. "I won't and you can't force me!"

"I can, and you will!" her brawny father called after her. "You mark my words; this wedding will take place!"

Kyndee sought the solace of her room and slammed the heavy wooden door. She threw herself onto the canopied bed and sobbed miserably into her pillow.

"Fletcher, where are you? I need you." But she knew he wouldn't be coming to save her. Fletcher was gone—had been gone almost ten years without word. Sometimes, when she was alone, she imagined he was still there with her, the way he used to be whenever she needed him.

Fletcher Stedman had been her best friend. They'd grown up together and had been inseparable, like two puppies trying to sit in the same spot. Their wealthy fathers' Virginia plantations shared a border; she and Fletcher had planned to be married one day and build a beautiful house right on the property line. To seal their plan, they recited the marriage vows to one another on a beautiful sunny day while nesting in the shade of their favorite tree. Their union was sanctioned by love if not by law.

She heard the other girls had thought him handsome and dashing, and he was; but to her, he was simply Fletcher, and she still loved him more than any man—alive or dead. She remembered the way the wind used to ruffle his luxuriant coal-black hair and give him a rakish look. He'd always cast her that sideways glance with his dark blue, indigo-tinged eyes from under dusky lashes, then tilt his head just enough to tease her into surrendering to whatever daring and reckless scheme he had cooking in his brilliant head.

Her door opened and heavy padded feet shuffled across the floor. "You're crying over him again aren't you, child?" asked Maggie, the family servant and Kyndee's longtime friend. "Ain't no use, girl. It's been too long now; he ain't never comin' back."

"Oh, Maggie, there are days when I still can't believe it, when I feel he's here with me."

"He is, honey," Maggie offered compassionately. "He'll be in your heart forever, but your daddy's right; you got to go on with your life."

Kyndee ignored the last statement; even now she didn't want to think of a life with anyone but Fletcher. Wiping her eyes with the back of her hand,

she sat up and hugged her knees. "Maggie, remember the fracas I caused for Fletcher when I fell into the river?" She sighed as her mind wandered back to the time Fletcher didn't want to take the long way around the river; he goaded her into crossing by a tall tree that had fallen across the river in a storm.

He had crossed first, of course, to show her it could be done. It had been easy for him. Nearly seventeen at the time, he'd been superbly built with broad shoulders that were neatly wrapped in hard corded muscles. The impressive strength tapered to narrow hips, supported by long lean legs. When she saw him last, he was six feet of exuberance and growing taller with every passing moment.

That day his sturdy frame wavered back and forth across the fallen log, arms outstretched for balance and, for a moment, looked as if he would fall. Her heart had jumped. But when she screamed and cried out to him, he'd simply smiled and laughed—his wonderful, warm hearty laugh. She had furiously crossed her arms with a vitriolic pout but it was difficult to be angry with him. His dazzling devilish smile was wide and inviting, his teeth straight and white.

Jumping safely from the tree, he'd then seized a long narrow stick from the thick brush and, threatening an invisible enemy, feigned a vicious fight with his wooden sword. He moved with a swift and easy grace as he grunted and parried, groaned and lunged until victory was his. Panting and jubilant, hands on his hips in an imperious stance, he'd called to her from the other side.

"Come, fair damsel, I have slain the fiery dragon, and thy way is clear." He made a wide sweeping movement with his arm and bowed deeply. "Don't look down, my lady," he told her in his rich, deep resonant voice. His inviting arms were outstretched to her. "Look straight ahead; look at me."

It had always been easy for Kyndee to do that. She could have gazed at him all day—at his pitchy hair gleaming in the sunlight, at the sensual warmth of his smile, the profuse length of the dark eyelashes, the fine straight nose, the chiseled line of his cheek and jaw. His total demeanor was one of well-bred confidence.

Not willing to be outdone, she'd snatched up her full skirt and took her first tentative step. The first half of the journey was fine. But then he made her laugh, told her what he wanted to do to her when she reached him. He described in vivid delectable detail his reward for her victory. How she had giggled at his wicked suggestions, feeling a hot blush creep up her neck but when her hand flew to her mouth her balance fled. She lost her footing and plunged to the frigid water.

Kyndee remembered hearing him scream her name, felt him dragging her from the river. He'd cradled her tightly in his muscular arms, trying to give her warmth from the icy water. He'd rocked her gently; murmured how sorry he was and urgently begged her to please, please open her eyes.

The rest had been a haze. She'd awakened the next morning with a heavy splint on her arm, a nauseating dizziness in her head, and a strict order to stay flat in bed for a week.

"He was a rascal, that one; no denying it," Maggie agreed, sitting on the edge of the bed, the palm of her hand smoothing Kyndee's hair with maternal tenderness.

"Everyone called him a rascal and a scamp but they didn't understand him the way I did." Kyndee could picture him presenting her with his latest brainstorm. Fletcher had possessed a mature and ingenious mind that was far beyond his years. His clever inventions were fondly remembered, mostly for their failures, but he never ceased to amaze her with his ideas and his tenacity.

His father had adored him, but Fletcher often frustrated him beyond bearing; he called his son's tinkering rattlebrained and constantly demanded he settle down to learning the proper affairs that a plantation owner's son should know. Fletcher had also infuriated his tutors, mainly because he usually knew more than they did and promptly told them so; more than once he was soundly beaten for his impertinence. However none of it had ever seemed to have an adverse effect on him.

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Seabrook, Samuel Stedman's plantation, was one of the wealthiest in the State and, as its sole heir, Fletcher had been the crown prince. Even though he'd been raised with countless servants milling about to do his bidding, he was neither arrogant nor mean and could not abide those traits in others. But that was a side of himself which he showed only to those he loved. To the rest of the world he was proud and honorable Fletcher Stedman, a worthy opponent and formidable enemy to all who dared to cheat him. Because confrontation was not something he backed away from, he had his share of scuffles, returning home sporting numerous abrasions and bruises. But his sturdy build and forbidding expression when crossed usually forestalled any violence before it began. He had known the power wielded by his name and position and had used it to its fullest advantage both in righting his grievances and appeasing his lusty insatiable appetite for life. His wit was still legendary as was his wicked daring grin that could have charmed the song from the birds if he so desired it. He was simply Fletcher, which is what she had loved most about him. There was no tree he couldn't climb, no horse he couldn't ride, no aim as true, no problem he couldn't solve in one way or another.

Without fearing God's wrath for her impudence, Kyndee had always thought Fletcher one of His most magnificent creations—not only in his perfectly sculptured physical features but in his recklessly bold yet tender nature as well. Truly Samuel Stedman had sired a unique and brilliant promise of a man in the form of his son.

Maggie's hand on her shoulder brought Kyndee back to reality. "I best go back downstairs. I just wanted to see a smile back on my sweet child's face." After Maggie left, Kyndee locked her door and curled herself in the middle of her bed.

Fletcher could always make her smile and laugh. He could make her cry, too, and he did that sometimes—just because, he'd told her as he'd sensuously trailed his fingertips along her cheek, he wanted to prove to her that he could always make her smile.

Kyndee gripped the pillow closer to her breast. "Fletcher, how could whatever goddess took you for her own have left me here alone to pine for you? Surely I had not been so wicked that I deserved such a fate." She turned over her soft pillow, having dampened one side with the tears that cascaded from her now red-rimmed emerald green eyes.

The day she'd been told of his disappearance had been the most gruesome of her life. It was as if a portion of her very soul had been stripped from her. His loss left a gaping bleeding hole in her grieving heart that never healed. It had sealed, yes, but not healed. She walled it in, day by day, as the hopes of his returning alive grew dimmer and dimmer, until there was nothing left but a wall—harsh and hard and impenetrable.

As the seasons had passed, she'd grown sullen and quiet; although gentlemen paid suit, none came to ask for her hand. Somehow that had pleased her and life had dragged on.

Until now.

He came. And for some reason he wanted her. He was Fletcher's cousin: the one who had been taken in by Fletcher's parents when his own parents had been tragically killed; the one who never disobeyed the rules; the one who won over every adult with his overbearing politeness; the one who was so envious of Fletcher he could have choked on his jealousy; the one who was with Fletcher the day he disappeared; the one who now occupied Fletcher's place, his home, and his rights to the Seabrook Plantation.

He was Buck Bannistre, and she was wary of him. Kyndee wasn't exactly sure why she felt that way, but there was satisfied look about him that plagued her.

Maybe it was because he had returned while Fletcher hadn't. Maybe it was because his sorrow over Fletcher's disappearance had seemed a little too great; maybe because his move into Fletcher's position had seemed a little too soon. Maybe it was because his formal adoption as Samuel Stedman's legal son and heir made Fletcher's loss a brutal reality. Maybe it was all those things or maybe it was none of them, she didn't know.

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One thing she knew for sure: not even the devil himself could force her into marrying Buck Bannistre. Kyndee covered her eyes with her palms and wept bitterly, knowing and fearing how persuasive the devil could be.

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