



Beloved Castaway

Book II of the Fairweather Key series

By Kathleen Y'Barbo

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Verse: “And of some, have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire . . .” Jude 22-23 (KJV)

Dedication: To Robin Tompkins, the bird who now flies free

CHAPTER ONE

April 1833

Isabelle was neither slave nor free, with no past save the one she invented for herself during her daytime musings and nighttime dreams. She wanted for nothing and yet had only a disinterested paid chaperone for a companion. Exile was all she knew until this morning when a carriage arrived to steal her away.

It was time for her new life to begin, the life where the man who'd fathered her would now sell her to the highest bidder as a well-trained mistress. It was a grand tradition that started with her late mother, perhaps even generations before.

Mama Dell, who served the dual roles of parent and tormentor, seemed most pleased at this turn of events. Words like *placage* and *placee*, protector and quadroon, were bandied about as if great honor were attached to them.

Thus, Isabelle departed from a home so small that she could hold her breath while she ran the full perimeter of it. Her clothes were left hanging in the cypress wardrobe, the cotton frocks deemed unsuitable for the world she was about to enter, and she'd been given an exquisite traveling ensemble of emerald green for the journey. The rest of her wardrobe awaited her on Burgundy Street in New Orleans.

Mama Dell took extra care in dressing Isabelle's hair, all the while pondering aloud just when the man who'd sent for them would make his appearance. She speculated on much, but said little

of what she actually knew.

Through it all, Isabelle kept her peace. Even when the party stopped alongside the river to dine, she asked no questions. Through the years, she'd learned her queries would go unanswered no matter how many times or in how many ways they were presented.

But as the carriage turned down the wide breadth of the avenue that a sign proclaimed to be Rue Burgundy, a single request begged to be spoken. "I wish to know the name of my father."

She squared her shoulders and pretended no fear, even when the older woman turned her hateful glare toward her. *Now you've done it, Izzy.*

Finally, Mama Dell sighed and the glare turned to impatience. "I told you all you'll ever need to know. The rest is not mine to tell. Better you think about the benefit his protection has given you." She paused. "And of course, the honor of being chosen by a man of great importance as his placee."

Then came the reminder that was never far from Mama Dell's lips. "You're no more special than anyone else, Isabelle. Keep in mind he could have made you a slave."

So there it was, the same answer given yet another way.

Isabelle watched the passing scene with indifference. Where once she enjoyed lush green, now it seemed there was none. A thick throng of humanity crowding onto tiny walkways and spilling into muddy streets had replaced it.

"Were the situation not so distasteful," Isabelle finally said, "one might find great irony in it."

Mama Dell gave her a sideways look. "How so?"

"I am owned by the man who sired me and I am being purchased by a man who will possess me." She swiveled to face her chaperone. "The irony is that you would use words like protection as if either of these men actually sought to perform the task. In truth, neither has thought to seek my opinion in the transaction, nor have they considered my freedom in the bargain. Thus, I am merely goods to be bartered and transferred much like the barrels and crates we passed at the docks."

The older woman shook her head. "This is dangerous talk, Isabelle, and I'll not listen to it."

She dug her nails into her palms and bit back a sharp response. "And yet it is the truth," she said when her temper had been sufficiently reigned in.

"Look at those womenfolk there. What do you see?"

A trio of well-dressed ladies strolled together, brightly colored parasols shading them. One laughed aloud as the carriage passed by while the other two inclined their heads until their fancy

hats collided.

“What of them?”

“Like as not you envy them, don’t you, girl? You want what they have, don’t you?”

Did she? “Yes, I suppose I’d prefer to have their freedom.”

Mama Dell laughed then swiped at her forehead with a lace handkerchief. “You think they’re free?” Another cackle. “Hardly.”

“I don’t understand. Are they...”

“Slaves like us?” Mama Dell settled back against the seat. “Not in the way you’re thinking. Oh they have freedom enough, far as that goes, but mind you they’re slaves of a different kind. I warrant they’d prefer your situation to theirs.”

Isabelle turned to get a better look at the ladies, who were now climbing into an impressive carriage. “I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t.” Mama Dell patted Isabelle’s knee. “Those women go home to prisons of their own choosing. They’ve got mamas-in-law telling them they aren’t good enough to pass on the family name and husbands who prefer to spend their nights with women such as you instead of coming home to them.” She shook her head then adjusted her chignon. “No, thank you. I’ll keep the life I have.”

“Surely not all free women have such lives. Surely some are-”

“Happy?” Another fit of laughter ensued. “I fear you’ll be relieved of that notion sooner rather than later. Until then, know that happiness is something you can buy if you have the money to do so. And you, Isabelle, will soon have enough money to buy enough happiness for the both of us.”

Before Isabelle could respond, the carriage jolted to a halt in front of a tidy row house, one of a half-dozen lining this side of Burgundy Street. Across the way, mirror images of these soaked up the afternoon sun. The coachman handed them down and gestured toward the meager collection of trunks situated atop the carriage. “The monsieur has seen to all the lady’s needs, including a cook and ladies’ maid to assist the both of you.” he said. “I’m to linger in case he has forgotten anything she might need, however.”

“Yes, actually,” Isabelle said. “I’ve forgotten what the monsieur’s name is. Would you be so kind as to tell me?”

Fingers as strong as those of any field hand wrapped around her arm. “Your name is Isabelle. Don’t matter what other name belongs to you. Your man’s not gonna care.”

Yanking Isabelle along with her, Mama Dell dismissed the astonished driver before he could

speak. Grumbling, she hefted her considerable girth up the front porch steps and stabbed the key into the lock.

Isabelle reached for Mama Dell's arm then thought better of it. Perhaps a different approach might be best. "Yes," she said as she wrapped her arms around her waist and studied the pale blue ceiling of the structure's front porch, "but there's so much more to know."

Mama Dell shook her head and turned the key. "Better you care what man paid for this house."

"I cannot care for someone I do not know." She gave her chaperone, the only family Isabelle could claim, a level stare. "Perhaps if you were to share his name . . ."

Dark eyes closed tight as a familiar look crossed her face. Often Isabelle had been a recipient of the exasperation conveyed by the expression.

And yet without her, Mama Dell had nothing. The arrangement always struck Isabelle as odd. The very person who played jailor and surrogate parent depended on the girl she merely tolerated for her livelihood.

"Do you take me for a fool?" Mama Dell said. "I tell you who your protector is and you'll go speaking his name all over the place. I cannot risk it. It is his place alone to make such pronouncements."

She stifled a laugh. "There's no one to tell as you are my only companion. You've seen to that."

Mama Dell whirled around and grasped Isabelle by the shoulders, strong fingers pressing what would surely be bruises into her flesh. "Some day you'll know how much I've done for you. How much *he's* done. Until then you need to keep quiet, you hear?" She released her grip to hitch up her red petticoats. "Now get on inside before people start thinking we're uncouth."

"Uncouth?" Isabelle began to laugh. "You allow my father to sell my body to the highest bidder in exchange for a home in the city and enough food to fill your belly and you're concerned about what the neighbors will think?"

Soon as the words escaped, Isabelle longed to capture them. Mama Dell had never looked so angry. "I will address that," she said slowly, "when we get inside and I've had time to calm down. If you insist on an answer right now it will cause both of us much pain." She leaned closer. "And I know just how to hurt you without leaving a mark for the monsieur to find when he inspects his property tonight."

Isabelle shuddered and lowered her eyes to study the toes of her traveling slippers. "Yes, Mama Dell," she said softly. "Forgive me."

Her response was a grunt, or perhaps that came from the effort of holding back her temper. Through the years, Isabelle had learned not to cross her chaperone. Today's mistake had been a rare moment of forgetfulness.

The door swung open on well-oiled hinges, revealing a long center hallway and an elegant parlor with scarlet and gold furnishings fit for the finest mansions in New Orleans. Just beyond, a second more intimate parlor bedecked in blue velvet and needlework tapestries looked to be just as well appointed.

Isabelle waited for Mama Dell to sweep inside then followed, closing the door behind her. Someone had set out a pot of tea and two tiny cups on the carved and polished sideboard, likely the same person who'd thought to open the windows and air out the rooms.

Muttering something about laziness, Mama Dell disappeared down the long hallway, her slippers pounding a rhythm on the long expanse floral carpets. Isabelle sighed as she ran her hand over the carved rosewood back of a double settee.

This room, this home, would be paid for in ways she could not bear to consider. Mama Dell had been quite plain in telling her what would be expected of her as a placee. Her only hope was that the price she must pay for this luxury would be delayed as long as possible.

"You still brooding?" Mama Dell stood in the door, a pair of harried looking maids on either side.

Isabelle chose not to answer. Rather she walked to the pot and poured the steaming liquid into a flowered cup so translucent she could practically see through it. The scent of strong chicory coffee made her smile despite the circumstances.

The same liveried coachman who saw to their move this morning bustled in and whispered something to Mama Dell. A moment later, he slipped from the room.

"You've had a visitor." Mama Dell stormed toward her and forcibly removed the cup from her hand, sloshing hot coffee down her bodice. "A woman named Emilie. Who is she?"

Isabelle gasped and yanked the soaked fabric away from her skin. One of the servants produced a handkerchief and began to dab at the damaged dress.

"Leave her be," Mama Dell commanded. "Draw her a bath and make it cold. I cannot present the monsieur with damaged goods." She turned her glare on Isabelle the cup still in her hand. "Who knows of our move, girl?"

"None but those who packed our trunks," she responded through clenched jaw. "I was only informed today."

In truth, she'd heard whispered conversations for weeks, but their actual move had not been announced until this morning. As if she were discussing the weather or how many kittens the barn cat produced, Mama Dell informed her the time had come. While she knew nothing of the world outside the quiet world in which she'd been raised, Mama Dell had prepared her for the day when she would leave.

“A home of your own,” Mama Dell had said, “and at ten and seven years ‘tis long past the time when the arrangement should be made for you. Shameful, I say,” she’d muttered, “but then nothing about this has ever made much sense.”

Isabelle had leaned toward Mama Dell. “If I’m to leave, please tell me where and why. I ask nothing more.”

From that request came the brief tale of a squalling baby girl deposited into Mama Dell’s arms by a man she refused to name. Under cover of darkness Mama Dell and the baby were delivered from New Orleans and deposited in a cottage some distance from the city.

The owner of Cheneau Plantation professed no knowledge of the man who paid for a lifelong lease on what was once a caretaker’s cottage. With the lease came food from the plantation kitchen, a servant to see to their needs, and most important, some measure of freedom for two women who would find none elsewhere.

Isabelle sighed. A pity she hadn’t appreciated her freedom then, for it was now well and truly gone.

“I will have an explanation,” Mama Dell said.

She forced her thoughts away from the unpleasant reminder. “My name is a common one,” Isabelle offered.

Mama Dell seemed to consider the statement. “‘Tis possible,” she said slowly. “And yet I cannot imagine there would be such a coincidence.”

“Nor can I,” Isabelle said, “and yet there has been.” She looked beyond the imposing chaperone to the servant standing in the hall. “Perhaps you could show me to my room. I suddenly feel the need for my bath.”

Thankfully Mama Dell chose not to follow as Isabelle walked down the carpeted hallway a few steps behind the servant. Someone had taken the liberty to line the walls with paintings of street scenes and country vistas.

In the midst of these landscapes, one painting stood out. Isabelle paused to study it.

Wrapped in a gilt frame twice the size of the others, the stern face of a man in a military uniform and completely devoid of hair stared down at her. Were she so inclined, Isabelle could easily imagine the old codger as the devil himself.

Scooting past the frightful man, Isabelle followed the scent of lavender water into a bedchamber twice the size of the room she’d shared with Mama Dell all these years. Despite the moderate temperature outside, a fire had been laid in the fireplace. She skirted past the massive bed, its four posts draped with mosquito netting much as a bride is draped for her wedding day, and

found the metal tub filled nearly to the top with fragrant water.

A moment later, she sunk into the depths of her bath and let out a contented sigh. For as long as she inhabited this room alone, she would be content. Then, a terrible thought occurred.

What if the awful man in the painting was her protector? Dare her owner give her as placee to such a brutish-looking old fellow?

Isabelle sunk all the way under the water, disappearing into a world with no sound. If only she could remain here, her breath held and her eyes closed.

Then a hand grasped her wrist and tugged hard, sending Isabelle flying up. As she coughed and sputtered, she saw Mama Dell standing over her, the maid bustling about behind her.

“Get dressed,” she said. “You’ve got a visitor. Again.”

“A visitor?” She clutched the length of toweling to her, unused to dressing with an audience.

Mama Dell yanked the towel away and began to roughly dry Isabelle’s curls. “No matter what she tells you to call her, you’d best remember to refer to her as Mademoiselle. Do you understand?”

Isabelle nodded as best she could considering the fact her chaperone held handfuls of her hair. When her hair had been fashioned and her dress donned, Isabelle stood before the pier glass and tried not to breathe while Mama Dell finished her lacings. All the while, she continued her admonishment against offending the lady in the red parlor.

“You act as if we’re being visited by royalty, Mama Dell,” Isabelle finally said.

The older woman took two steps back to look over her handiwork. Seemingly satisfied, she nodded and turned Isabelle toward the door.

“Like as not, she’s as close to royalty as a woman of your ilk can come. To offend her would be a disaster, and it just might cause both of us to lose everything.” Mama Dell gave her a look that told her she expected any further instruction to be a hopeless cause. “Now go on out there and be sociable like I taught you.”

Isabelle skittered past the horrid man in the painting then slowed her steps as she reached the front parlor. There on the red velvet settee nearest the window was an elegant lady dressed in the latest style with a hat to match. Beneath the hat of robin’s egg blue, dark glossy curls had been swept into a coiffure that surely took two or three servants to achieve.

The fancy woman rose and turned to greet her with a smile. “Isabelle.”

“Yes,” she said cautiously.

“I am Emilie. Emilie Gayarre.” She patted the place beside her on the settee with her gloved hand. “Does that name mean anything to you?”

“No.”

“Then sit here and let’s visit, shall we?” she said in French. “I hope you don’t mind but I’ve taken the liberty to order tea and sweets for us.”

“Merci beaucoup.”

“So you speak French, then?”

Isabelle nodded. “As well as English and a smattering of Spanish. Truthfully, I prefer French.”

“As do I.”

Crossing the room on shaking legs, Isabelle studied her guest. Or perhaps she was the guest and this woman the lady of the cottage. It certainly felt so.

Everything about this woman bespoke refinement as her full lips parted to reveal brilliant white teeth and a wide “I’m sure you have questions.”

She managed a nod. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mama Dell peering around the corner. Her presence along with that of the maid sent to serve refreshments was enough to silence Isabelle.

“I will answer all your questions,” the elegantly dressed woman said, “but first I have a few of my own. Ah, there’s our tea now.” She waited until the tea had been poured and a plate of sweets set before them. When they were alone again, Emilie leaned toward Isabelle. “Can you read, Isabelle?” she whispered.

She gasped then lowered her voice so as not to be overhead by Mama Dell. “Of course not. The laws forbid it.”

“No, Isabelle. Not for a woman of your station.” She reached for a sweet and popped it in her mouth, acting as if she hadn’t just suggested they engage in an activity that would see them sent to the Cabildo until they were old women. “And I suppose your caretaker has not seen to your spiritual education,” she added.

The only education Mama Dell saw to was the one that would insure she could please the man who paid the creditors. Saying so to a woman like Emilie Gayarre was impossible.

Isabelle tried to look indifferent in case Mama Dell was still watching. “She has not.”

Emilie placed her hand over Isabelle’s. “Then with your permission, I will see to both.”

“Why?” escaped her lips before she could stop it. “Forgive me. The question was impertinent.”

“No, dear,” she said. “The question was appropriate. I’m sure you wonder why a stranger would arrive on your doorstep and make such statements.”

She lifted her gaze to meet the mademoiselle’s direct stare. “Yes.”

“And you wonder how I found you?”

The woman offered Isabelle a sweet, but she shook her head. “My chaperone is more concerned about that than I.”

“I see.” Emilie set the sweet back on the tray and leaned back against the settee’s velvet cushions. “I saw to the purchase of this house, and I have arranged for a rather lengthy period of adjustment before you enter into any, shall we say, arrangements.”

“But how? Why?” She shook her head. “Forgive me. It is not my place to ask.”

Emilie’s smile seemed vaguely familiar. “Suffice it to say that because your years in the country have not rendered you sufficiently apt to enter society, your protector is willing to wait one year before claiming you.”

Relief flooded Isabelle. “Thank you, mademoiselle. I am in your debt.”

“No.” Emilie stood and Isabelle followed suit. “You see, the two of us have something in common.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Truly it is an unusual arrangement for a woman to be involved in such matters,” she said, “but those who know me would tell you that I rarely stand on custom or concern myself with what is socially appropriate. I prefer to let the Lord do the leading and I the following.”

Isabelle could no longer contain the question. If Mama Dell overheard, Isabelle cared not. “But why? Surely the fact your father and my protector are associates does not explain the fact that you’ve taken an interest in me.”

Emilie shook her head. “You’re right, Isabelle. There is more.”

She paused to glare in the direction that Isabelle had last seen Mama Dell hiding. A moment later, footsteps hurried down the hall away from the parlor.

Seemingly satisfied they were now truly alone, the mademoiselle turned to smile at Isabelle. “The explanation is simple. We share a father.”

A gentleman wandering beyond his marriage to produce children with others, including slaves,

was sadly commonplace, but having a highborn daughter recognize lesser siblings was truly shocking.

“But you are...”

“The Lord does not see color or social standing,” she said gently, “thus I do my best to do the same. You are my sister, Isabelle Gayarre.”

Isabelle Gayarre. At last her name was complete.

Emilie waved her hand as if to dismiss any further discussion on the subject then rose. “I’m sure you’re weary from your journey so I will take my leave. I must ask one question of you before I go.”

She half-stumbled after Emilie, intent on playing hostess as she’d seen Mama Dell do on occasion. “Of course.”

Pausing, Emilie gathered Isabelle into an embrace then whispered, “Is it your choice to enter into an arrangement as *placee*?”

“It is not,” she responded.

“And if you were to be offered freedom in a place far from here - England perhaps - what would you say to such a prospect?”

Isabelle’s heart lurched. Freedom? This was a dream she’d never dared to have. “I would accept it with gratitude,” said softly.

“Very well, then. The walls have ears, dear one, so do not speak of this to anyone, especially not your chaperone, Delilah. Instead, listen carefully to what is spoken around you. Like as not you will learn valuable information that will set you free. Can you do that?”

“Yes.”

Emilie broke the embrace to hold Isabelle at arm’s length. “Wonderful.” Again, she smiled. “Then you and I will have much to do over the next twelve months, won’t we?”

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