



Beloved Captive

Book II of the Fairweather Key series

By Kathleen Y'Barbo

Excerpt proved courtesy of www.kathleenybarbo.com

Dedication: To my grandfathers, George Martin Simpson and Richard Leslie Aycock, Jr., whose stories and unconditional love gave me words and wings.

Author's note: While I have attempted as much as possible to stay true to history, some events, locations and persons are the product of conjecture and imagination. It is my hope that the reader remains happily unaware of which is which.

“And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” John 8:32 (KJV)

“ . . . he delivered me, because he delighted in me.” Psalm 18:10 (KJV)

“Where small hope exists, there does the Lord abide.” Cook

ONE

New Orleans
May 2, 1836

It was a terrible thing to wish.

With every roll of the carriage wheels, Emilie Gayarre fought the urge to pray that her arrival would come too late. The request she'd traveled so far to make stood a greater chance of being granted were she begging the funds from her father's estate rather than making the request to him personally.

And yet, if she made to return to Fairweather Key without funds to build a school for the children, Judge Campbell would see to it that the children were sent off to neighboring keys where the price for their education had already been paid. “If only the old grouch would pry open the coffers and do what's right.”

“My friend is not an unreasonable man, you know.” Reverend Hezekiah Carter, her elderly traveling companion, reached over to pat her sleeve. “Perhaps you will change your mind and visit upon the morrow rather than rush to his side.”

She’d been thinking of Judge Campbell when she spoke her musings aloud, but the words certainly had bearing on her situation with her father. Emilie stayed her fidgeting fingers and swung her gaze toward her father’s oldest and dearest friend.

How easy it would be to agree, to avail herself of a warm bath and a good night’s sleep before attempting the visit she dreaded. But the letter had been marked urgent, the words sure in their insistence that the daughters of Jean Gayarre see to their father’s last wish: an audience with him at the family home should he survive and a reading of the will should he perish before their arrival.

“No, Reverend Carter,” she said, even as she hated it. “Time appears to be of the essence. I’ll not disappoint my father by delaying his last request.”

Though I’ve sorely disappointed him in other matters.

The old preacher merely nodded.

As the carriage rocked over uneven streets, the earthy smells of the city pushed away the stench of the docks. To their right, a fruit vendor juggled samples of his freshest produce while across the way a woman sold pastries right from the folds of her apron.

“Are you fearing your father tonight, lass?”

Emilie swung her attention to Hezekiah Carter. “Fearing?” She gave the question but a moment’s thought. “I don’t suppose I ever feared my father, though I surely disliked him on occasion.”

Leaning heavily on the silver-topped cane, the reverend shook his head. “A clever response, Emilie, but not a direct one.” His piercing gaze challenged her. “Shall I rephrase the question, or will you rephrase your answer?”

She sighed. This man knew the Gayarres far too well. Any hope of deflecting the true meaning of his query disappeared under his persistent stare. “Indeed,” she began, “I do wonder what awaits me, though I’d not call my feelings fear.” Emilie paused. “I believe I am yet in awe of the man as much as I am reluctant to return to his home.”

Reverend Carter reached across the space between them to grasp her hands in his. “Then it is well you chose not to face this alone.”

“I chose?” A grin threatened. “Would that I’d known there was a choice.”

He affected a surprised expression. “Dare I believe a woman of your quality would travel unaccompanied? One must be concerned with the dangers of ruffians who ply the shipping trade

nowadays.”

His grin joined hers at the reference. Some two years past the reverend’s own son was one of those ruffians. Now Josiah Carter’s sole enterprise was to love his wife and his God, dote on his newly born son, and make his living saving others from the ravages of the Florida seas as a wrecker. Emilie smiled at the reminder of the man’s transformation from infidel to husband. Her smile broadened when she thought of his wife, her half-sister Isabelle.

“A penny for your thoughts, my dear,” the old preacher said.

“I was thinking about Isabelle and Josiah,” she said. “And what an interesting life one lives when following God is one’s priority.”

“Indeed you speak the truth,” he said.

Too soon, the carriage rolled to a halt and the coachman called out. A moment later, the iron gates gave entrance to the courtyard where the news of their arrival had brought a collection of servants running.

Her smile faded. It was in this home that she first learned of Isabelle. An errant slip of the tongue by a gossiping housemaid had sent Emilie on a quest to find the young quadroon woman who shared her father. Here the plans were made for freeing this slave who was her half-sister. Here, too, I will likely have to atone for the success of those plans.

She tugged at her gloves to disguise the shaking of her hands. When the carriage door opened, she straightened her back and closed her eyes to offer an entreaty to the Lord that she might not be thrown in the Cabildo as befitting her crimes.

“Welcome home, Mademoiselle.”

Emilie opened her eyes to see Nate, husband of Cook. “Thank you, Nate,” she said with a genuine smile. “It’s wonderful to see you again.”

He tipped his hat then lifted her down onto the cobblestones. “It’s right nice to have you back here again.”

One step into the courtyard and Emilie’s concern returned. The home seemed less of a home and more of a haven for the dying. Lamps that never went unlit were dark, and curtains in rooms that once invited guests to enter now stood closed.

“My father?” she asked of Nate.

“Up there waiting for you last I heard,” he said as he gestured toward the second floor.

Reverend Carter glanced up at the darkened windows then shook his head. “On the morrow, perhaps?”

“No.” Emilie squared her shoulders, and her head held high, she walked toward the door. “I shall not wait until then,” she whispered. Trembling fingers formed a fist then, with care, rose to come near to knocking on a door that swung open on silent hinges.

Cook took two steps backward and clutched at the scarf at her neck. “Miss Emilie, Lawdy mercy and bless my soul my prayers done been answered. You’ve come home!”

The housemaid’s cry brought a half-dozen familiar faces running. Each exclaimed as if a lost treasure had been suddenly found.

Emilie nudged past and walked into her father’s home as if she were certain he would receive her. In truth, she had no idea whether Jean Gayarre would welcome her or whether he’d merely sent for his daughters to exact some measure of revenge. Or did he seek only Isabelle’s counsel and did not wish to see me at all save to banish me?

The question had lain dormant as Emilie boarded the vessel in Fairweather Key, and until she saw the gates swing open and heard her footsteps echo in the long hallway that led to her father’s room, she felt no need to disturb it.

Too soon, however, the lamplight chased her to her father’s door and now here she stood.

Just once could she remember breaching the sanctum that was Jean Gayarre’s chambers. As a small child she’d had the great misfortune to lose a button off her favorite doll’s dress beneath the heavy cypress door.

A moment’s worth of demanding ended when a hapless servant girl, no more than a child herself, had agreed to go in and fetch it. Even now the sound of the girl’s soft knock echoed in Emilie’s mind followed by the creak of the door. Emilie remembered peering inside at the heavily curtained bed positioned before windows that were swagged and festooned with matching tassels and loops.

The girl crept toward the button on hands and knees, and Emilie shadowed her despite warnings to the contrary. What great fun it seemed to a child of no more than six or seven.

And then a sound from the bed. Her father, his voice thick and nearly unrecognizable called an unfamiliar name and then repeated it. “Sophie, ma chere, c’est vous?”

Much as now, fear held Emilie’s lips shut tight and her feet glued to the floor.

“No, sir,” the girl said. “I’m D-d-daisy, sir. I k-k-keep the girl when my mama’s b-b-busy.”

A rustle of bed coverings and a man rose. Bold as you please, he stumbled toward them without bothering to don a dressing gown or cover the stench of his breath.

“Sophie,” he repeated, ignoring Emilie completely to sweep the poor servant girl into his arms and deposit her behind the bed curtains. Only when the servant girl’s bloodcurdling scream chased her from the room did she flee.

After that, Emilie had never gone near the door again.

“Would you like me to go in with you?”

Emilie started at the sound of Reverend Carter’s voice. “No,” she said. “Thank you,” was added as an afterthought.

His nod was hasty, as was his retreat, despite the impediment of the cane. “I shall have Cook prepare a light supper for you,” he called. “Perhaps some of her biscuits and red eye gravy.”

In truth, the thought of food did not hold any appeal. Neither did opening the door, and yet she must.

One hand on the knob and the other pressing against her furiously beating heart, Emilie somehow managed to find herself inside. She blinked hard to get her bearings. The same heavy velvet curtains were now drawn against the afternoon sun, casting a pall across the mountain of quilts piled on the grand bed. In the midst of it all, the skeletal form of Jean Gayarre lay propped on more pillows that could surely be comfortable.

“Miss Emilie, that you?” This from the girl who’d fetched clean water for her bath more times than Emilie could count. And yet she knew not the girl’s name.

“It is,” she said, tossing aside the reminder of her formerly self-centered life. Before she left, she would know this girl’s name, but now was not the time to ask. Not with Papa watching.

And watch he did, his eyes a clear and bright even as his face wore no expression. A week’s worth of travel had not been in vain, for Jean Gayarre had not yet gone to his reward. His mouth opened and closed, putting Emilie in mind of a fish in want of water.

Was he working to find the breath that would order her from the room or welcome her home? A sound escaped from the old man’s mouth, something akin to a baby’s soft whimper. She held her finger to her lips, halting. “Don’t try to speak, Papa.”

“*Ma belle fille,*” emerged from cracked lips in a breathless gasp.

She grasped his hand and held it, painfully aware of the lack of strength in his icy grip even as her heart softened at his tender greeting. “*Oui, Papa, c’est moi. C’est Emilie.*”

The old man looked past her. “But where is...”

“Isabelle?” she offered. “She was unable to make the journey.”

To say more seemed unwise, so Emilie kept her silence and turned her attention to the bedchamber’s condition. The windows were shut tight against the danger of draft and a great fire had been laid in the massive fireplace, wrapping the room in an oppressive heat.

With her free hand, Emilie shrugged out of her wrap and passed it off to the nearest housemaid. “Thank you,” she said to the young woman’s retreating back before returning her attention to her father.

“Never . . . thank . . . a servant,” he said. “Makes them . . .”

The rest of his admonition was lost in a fit of coughing that left Papa struggling for each breath. Finally, the old man’s eyes closed and he rested. For a moment, she thought he might have breathed his last. Then he stirred and a look came over his face that could only be described as disappointment.

“I summoned two and yet only one of my daughters has arrived.” He paused and seemed to collect either his breath or his thoughts. “Isabelle is abed with child, Father, and unable to travel,” Emilie said.

“And you. You’re Sophie’s girl,” he whispered.

Sophie. Emilie’s gaze darted from the bed curtains as her heart lurched. Did her father remember that long ago day? What significance did this name hold over a man who would repeat it after all these years?

“No, Papa,” she said as she forced her attention back on the old man’s nearly lifeless form. “My mother was Elizabeth, your wife.” She added what she hoped would be a smile in order to placate him. “I’m told I resemble her.”

“Ha!” The force of his statement startled Emilie, as did the flash of anger on his face and his sudden move to raise up on one elbow. The motion sent pillows flying and caused a tray of what looked to be sweets to fall to the floor. As the servants surged forward to clean the mess, her father banished them all from the room.

The moment the door closed behind the last of the startled household help, Jean Gayarre fell backward onto the remaining pillows. Emilie hastened to arrange them then stopped when Papa motioned for her to move away.

Before she could step out of his grasp, Emilie felt her father’s hand encircled her wrist to hold her captive. Despite his pallor and the exhaustion written in dark circles beneath his eyes, Jean Gayarre still held some measure of his former strength.

“Indeed you resemble your mother.” Brown eyes slid shut, and his grip loosened. “*Tres jolie*, my Sophie was,” the old man muttered as he pointed to the bedside table then allowed his hand to

fall to the coverlet as if the effort caused him the last of his strength.

“But, Papa, my mother was...” The breath died in her throat as she spied the lone portrait at his bedside. The woman smiling back at her from the bonds of the silver frame could have passed as Emilie’s twin.

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