



# Beloved Counterfeit

Book III of the Fairweather Key series

By Kathleen Y'Barbo

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*Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life. Proverbs 31:10-12*

*Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. Isaiah 1:18*

## ONE

*July 1819  
O'Connor Plantation, Jamaica*

“You were supposed to be watching.”

“I have been. Not a ship’s approached.” Claire O’Connor turned at the sound of her sister’s voice and held up the most special shell in her of her basket of prizes. “I found some sand dollars. Come and look. This one’s the biggest yet.”

“No, I don’t want to see them.” Opal hurdled over the small dune and bounded toward her. “You weren’t watching either. He’s back.”

Looking toward the horizon, she spied nothing but low-hanging clouds and a sun hot enough to shrivel all that it touched. With no slaver in sight, the only reason for the announcement was obvious. “Papa?”

“Yes, Papa. Who else?”

“He couldn’t be.” Claire set her basket down carefully, making sure not to spill the shells she’d spent the morning collecting. “If Mama had expected Papa to return, she’d certainly have sent away her gentleman friend.”

That’s what Mama made her and Opal call them, but none of the fellows who climbed the stairs of the big house while Papa was away ever looked like gentlemen to Claire. And they certainly weren’t friendly.

Well most of them weren’t anyway.

“Now come on over here and help me look,” Claire said. “I don’t think I’ve seen this many sand dollars on the beach since the big storm blew over last fall.”

No explanation of their destination was required as nine-year-old Opal raced across the sand to catch Claire’s wrist and give it a jerk. “I think Papa killed this one.”

“Don’t be silly,” Claire said, even as her heart thudded against her ribs.

Though Claire was almost a full year older, her sister’s legs were already longer so keeping up took some effort. By the time she reached their secret hiding place beneath the front steps, Opal had already lifted the loose board and shinnied inside.

The hurricane that was their father’s voice rose and fell like heat waves and blew past toward the dry expanse of land that tumbled downhill toward the beach. By contrast, her mother’s bird-like responses chirped across the storm with all the effect of a whisper in a gale. Words like “slave” and “bankrupt” and oaths against the monarchy and Parliament bounced past, all just a part of what they’d heard from Papa since the news that the slavers would be arrested should they dare bring their cargo into Caribbean waters.

Thus far nothing had been said about what went on while Papa was at sea. Perhaps things weren’t as bad as Opal claimed.

Claire pressed her finger over her lips to hush her sister then crept toward the parlor window. She might have risen up to look inside had something not whizzed past her head and landed in the yard, sending Claire racing back to the steps. A glance over her shoulder told her the object was the sparkling necklace Mama had put on for the first time this morning.

“Hurry up,” Opal called in an urgent whisper. “You can’t let him see you.”

“I’m not afraid of him,” she blustered even as her trembling fingers refused to take instruction. Claire let out a long breath. “He can’t get you here. He can’t get either of us.”

Finally the board slipped back into place and Opal hauled her back with a yank of her arm. They cowered against the rocky foundation in a spot the pair had claimed as their own so long ago neither remembered who found it first.

“Sides, he’s mad at King George again, not Mama,” Claire added. A reminder to herself and her sister that no matter who took the blame, it was something other than them that generally started the ruckus.

“Tommy says the slaves are gonna kill us in our sleep,” she whispered. “He said he hears things when he’s on the ship with his papa.” Opal paused. “Evil things.”

“I told you to stay away from that boy,” she hissed.

“He’s nice, Claire, and I’ll not hear another word about him.”

“You will so.” Claire held her tongue a moment longer than she knew she could. “Cause if I find out you’ve been talking to him, I’ll tell Mama.” Another pause to appreciate Opal’s gasp. “No,” she said slowly, “I’ll tell *Papa*.”

Opal put on her stubborn look and let loose of Claire’s arm. She’d hit on a sore subject, sure enough, but she’d not be the one to make things right again. As the older sister, it fell to Claire to keep Opal from things that would hurt her.

And keeping company with a boy whose papa supplied half the Caribbean with slaves could lead to nothing but trouble. The fact he’d he was some years older and had already begun to sprout whiskers didn’t seem to matter to Opal, but to Claire it meant soon he’d be just like Papa and the others who called themselves grown men.

Claire rubbed the spot on her leg that still plagued her when she stepped on it wrong. Every bruise she got was another reminder of what grown men were capable of.

“Tommy said his papa would take us far away from here.”

For just a moment, the idea tempted. Far Away. It was a place where her dreams took her, though she never expected her feet would ever land on the spot.

“I don’t like him, Opal,” Claire whispered. “Bad things happen on his Papa’s ship, so we can never sail upon it. And he calls me Ruby Red, though he knows I hate that.”

Heavy footsteps thundered overhead, signaling the brawl had moved from a respectable inside spat to a potentially public one. Claire’s heart sunk. Those were always the worst, though it was either Opal or she and not Mama who would likely bear the scars of the day’s battle.

“Don’t leave me, Claire,” Opal whispered as she scooted closer.

“Never, ever,” Claire said.

“Vow it,” her sister said so softly she almost missed the words.

Claire held up her pinky and Opal did the same. Linking trembling fingers took some work, but they managed. "I vow it," they whispered in unison even as their father's shouts nearly covered up the statements.

A determination welled up in Claire as Papa's footsteps faded. Despite the fact their combined age didn't add up to twenty, she'd leave this place soon enough and take Opal with her. And as the big sister, she'd surely see that nothing happened to Opal ever again.

Right then and there she promised it – swore it before the Lord that the Methodists down in Port Royal called on every Sunday– even as the footsteps turned and headed back their direction.

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*November 1828  
Galveston, Texas*

Nine years later, and Claire could still remember the day Papa hauled her and Opal from under the stairs. Likely she always would, for the scars reminded her every time she lifted her dress. Most times, however, the gentlemen didn't notice. She, in turn, tried not to notice they weren't gentlemen at all.

It was an agreement between them, this mutual ignorance of plain fact. A bargain struck in coin and flesh that promised should they pass on the street neither would acknowledge the other.

Yet here in this rented room with the window shut against the sea breeze and the curtains closed to the prying eyes of anyone who might be strolling by, names were whispered and secrets shared. Sometimes she played the old piano jammed against the far wall, but most times it remained silent once the lamps were turned low.

Much as she hated what transpired here, Claire nonetheless entertained banker and businessman, politician and policeman, and others whose names and employment she never knew. During the day, the same rented room hosted children whose mamas insisted they learn to sing a fine tune or play the piano.

To these children, she was Miss Claire. To their mothers, she was Miss O'Connor. More than one of their fathers, however, called her endearments that would scorch the ears of any who listened.

All of it she endured rather than experienced. It was how she managed. Perhaps it always had been.

Claire sighed even as she waited for the door to close and the heavy footsteps to fade into silence. When the clock struck the hour, another would arrive, so she hurried to set herself and the room to rights.

It bore hard on her that she'd found no other way to supplement the pittance she made teaching, but time would be kind to them, of this she was sure. She just had to get through the next hour. Then the next day, and week, and eventually time would pass and so would their situation.

And in the meantime Opal and all the respectable wives and daughters of Galveston would know Claire O'Connor as a woman who taught piano lessons in a rented room above the Cotton Exchange and kept to herself in the little row house three blocks from the ocean.

Sitting at the piano to play helped her pass the time and gave anyone within hearing distance the idea she had another lesson. She played louder, faster, and with more abandon than she'd played in ages.

Tonight she felt different. As if something were about to happen. Something big. Something that would change things.

And then came the familiar knock, and she knew nothing had changed at all.

Later, she shut her door against the fellows who might show without warning and donned her winter coat. Though November's chill touched Galveston with a gentle brush, it nonetheless painted the streets with ice on this rare occasion.

Of late, Opal had taken to spending her evenings away so Claire smiled when she saw the lamps burned bright in the front parlor. At eighteen, her sister could hardly be called a girl anymore, but to Claire she would always be more child than woman. Too young indeed, for the potential suitors who gathered on the porch or called to her from the street.

The price of finding refuge on a slaver all those years ago had been the knowledge that Tommy had known what became of them. Two girls left on the Galveston docks might have found nothing but a bad end, but Tommy's papa saw to placing them in a home with an elderly relative of his who was in need of cooking and cleaning.

Claire had hoped both would forget them, but Tommy never did. To her great chagrin and Opal's delight, the slaver's son had arrived unannounced some months ago. Thankfully his visit had been brief and not repeated, for the years had not been kind to the man.

Oh his looks were unaffected, for he was quite a handsome fellow. There was something else about Tommy Hawkins, something that she couldn't quite put her finger on that bothered Claire. Maybe it was the way he watched her, or it might have been the easy and familiar way he treated them.

Whatever it was, the man's presence set her on edge.

"I'm late," she said as she pressed open the door. "I hope you've not waited dinner on me."

She stepped inside and found the parlor empty. A fire burned low in the hearth though the lamps still glowed bright. "Opal?" Claire called, even as she shed her coat. "Are you here?"

The kitchen echoed as she passed through, nothing the cold pots on the stove. Claire doubled back to the eastern-facing bedroom where she found Opal's bed still neatly made.

Moonlight slid across the wide boards and bade Claire enter. She did, and found the note. Opal was gone. Run off with the slaver's son.

Thoughts scattered then found their focus as Claire stalked through the house to the kitchen then back to the bedchamber. There she threw what little mattered to her in a bag along with the note.

She would catch up to Opal and put a stop to this foolishness. Surely her sister didn't intend break the vow they'd made all those years ago under the steps.

"That's it," Claire whispered. "That Hawkins fellow's got her brain addled. We'll just see how sweet his words are when I find them."

Closing the door to the little cottage, Claire walked out into the evening's chill without even bothering to extinguish the lamp or bank the fire. Surely Opal hadn't gone far. Indeed, they'd both be back in time for a warm meal and a long chat about the bonds of family and the importance of keeping a vow once made.

But Opal didn't come back, nor did Claire. When she reached the docks she found a familiar vessel about to weigh anchor. There on the deck was her sister.

"You've come," she called. "I hoped but didn't dare ask."

Claire glanced behind her at the bustling port city where she'd come to call home. How many years ago had she stood on this same platform and stared back at a Hawkins vessel in the hopes she'd found a new life?

It seemed like yesterday, and yet she and Opal had lived a lifetime since then.

"That you, Ruby Red?"

Claire suppressed a groan. He hadn't called her that since their childhood days.

Tommy tossed a rope to a crewman and came to stand by Opal. "Isn't that something? I didn't expect I'd get two lovely ladies for the price of one."

Ladies. Price.

She sighed. An unfortunate choice of words, though Claire knew he likely did not make the same reference as she.

"You know what your problem is?" Tommy released Opal to lean over the rail. "You're far too serious."

“Am I now?” This from a man who hadn’t said two words to her in six months.

“Yes,” he said as he offered a courtly bow. “What if I promised to help you bury the serious Claire O’Connor at sea? Next time your feet touch dry land, you’ll be Ruby Red, sailor of the seven seas.”

His laughter was contagious, though she’d not let him know. “I never liked it when you called me Ruby Red,” she called back.

Tommy pretended to think. “How do you feel about plain old Ruby? Not that you are either,” he said.

“Look here, Tommy.” She came to the rail and gave Tommy a playful nudge. “She’s my sister, but I’m your wife, so you’d better be careful.”

“Your wife?” Claire swallowed hard. “Since when?”

“I married her weeks ago,” Tommy said, “but she was afraid to tell you.”

Opal looked apologetic. “I know you wanted big things for me, Claire, but I love him. We’d planned a fancy ceremony. You would have liked doing that for me, I know.” She linked arms with Tommy, who now stood beside her. “We didn’t count on a being blessed with a little one so quickly.”

By degrees, the picture became clear.

“Come aboard,” Opal called. “I’ll play and you can keep watch. When the baby comes, you can be her Auntie Claire.”

“He,” Tommy corrected.

“Or perhaps one of each.” Her giggle sounded almost like the Opal of her youth. “Claire, please. We’ll have this adventure together.”

*Together.* In a moment she made her decision; for a lifetime she would regret it.

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