

## ❧ SIX ❧

Clarissa changed several times before deciding on a lavender muslin dress with small, embroidered, yellow and white daisies along the rounded neckline and fitted, elbow-length sleeves. She loosened the tight bun she wore her hair in and pulled a few short wisps of curls out near her temples to frame her face.

As she gazed at her image in the vestibule mirror, she was surprised at how self-conscious she had become of her appearance lately. Before Gabriel came into her life her only concern was that she looked presentable without standing out in a crowd. Suddenly she wanted to be noticed. She enjoyed the way Gabriel looked at her as if she were the most beautiful woman in the room. Until recently, she had prided herself on her reserved manner and never resorting to silly flirtations like her friends to get a man's attention. Now she found herself wanting to flirt, giggle at his jokes and blush profusely when he complimented her.

What surprised her most was how she felt when they kissed. Her body seemed to come alive with sensations she never knew she could feel. She'd been kissed by only two other men before Gabriel, Adam and an acquaintance while she was away at school, and those chaste kisses never made her feel the warmth and excitement Gabriel's did. She smiled at the flush that came over her cheeks when she remembered those kisses. Turning away from the mirror, she gasped as she faced the door. As if she had conjured him up with her thoughts, there stood Gabriel on the other side of the screen door.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were there." A blush spread across her face.

Gabriel smiled as he wondered how just the sight of Clarissa could take his breath away. She'd probably have the same effect on him if she were dressed in a burlap sack.

"It's all right. I was just admiring the view."

For an instant Clarissa was taken aback. It was the same thing James Clayton said the day he assaulted her in the shop. Coming from him it had been obscene and insulting, but coming from Gabriel it was a wonderful compliment.

Gabriel noticed an odd expression on her face. "Ready whenever you are."

Clarissa realized she had been standing there just staring at him. She turned and headed for the kitchen.

"I'll get the food," she called back over her shoulder.

Gabriel watched her through the door. Her hips swayed seductively under her skirt. He began wondering if they would move that way when making love. He shook himself when he realized where his thoughts were heading and turned away from the door. He knew Belle was still at the church and wouldn't be home for a few hours. That was too much temptation for even him.

He was beginning to wonder if this outing was such a good idea. Being alone with Clarissa in a secluded spot might be more than either of them could handle. Clarissa came out, greeting him with the most beautiful smile he'd ever seen.

"I hope I made enough."

Gabriel took the basket from her and smiled. It weighed far too heavy to contain just a few sandwiches.

"I'm sure you made more than enough," he reassured her.

As they traveled through the French Quarter to the outskirts of town, they talked about their experiences at the Colored universities they attended, Gabriel's love for architecture and laughed about their first meeting in Texas. So absorbed in their conversation, Clarissa didn't notice the direction they were traveling. The landscape began to look familiar. She rarely ventured to the countryside unless a client requested a fitting at their home, but she knew they were nearing the bayou. Suddenly she remembered and smiled. It was a long time ago, but she could never forget where she and her mother lived before moving into the city.

Memories of spending afternoons running through the wild flowers and bringing armfuls of them home to her mother to brighten their dingy, one-room house came back to her. Despite their ramshackle home and lack of money, she remembered her childhood being very pleasant while they lived there.

Gabriel came to a stop near a huge oak tree. Some of the branches were so laden with flowers that they lightly caressed the ground. The air was pungent with their sweet, heady scent. Clarissa closed her eyes, breathing in the intoxicating fragrance. When she reopened them, Gabriel was standing beside the buggy, smiling up at her.

He had been mesmerized by the change that came over her.

"You looked so content. I didn't want to disturb you," he said, reaching up to help her down off the high seat.

She took his hand, "I was just thinking how much I missed the untamed beauty of the bayou. I lived not too far from here."

Clarissa laughed at the surprised expression that came over Gabriel's face.

"Don't look so shocked." she began spreading a blanket under the tree. "My mother wasn't always taken care of. She was scrubbing floors when she met my father."

There were so many fascinating things about this woman that he had yet to learn. She took the basket from him and began laying the contents out onto the blanket. Gabriel sat beside her gazing at all the food. There were thick slices of ham on hunks of fresh baked bread, fried chicken, potato salad, slices of apple and sweet potato pie and even a sealed jug of lemonade. This was much more than the few sandwiches she had offered to make.

"If you don't mind my asking, what happened to your father?"

"I don't mind at all. As soon as he found out my mother was pregnant, he refused to have anything to do with her." She shook her head sadly.

"His family didn't want a 'nigger' in their midst calling him Daddy."

"He knew my mother was a virgin when he raped her, he claimed it could have been anybody's baby and that everyone knew how loose Colored women were."

He couldn't tell from her expression but Gabriel knew it must have hurt Clarissa to know that her father refused to acknowledge her.

"Did your mother tell you all of this?" he asked.

"No, my mother never mentioned my father to me. By the time I was old enough to ask questions she was gone, so I had to get what information I could from Aunt Belle. She only told me what I just told you."

"It doesn't bother you that you never knew your father?"

"I resented it at first but then I realized that I was better off without him. He was from a prominent White family. He could have never been a true father to me. He and my mother came from two different worlds."

"Now, if you don't mind we can finish this conversation later, I'm starving," she said, smiling and handing him a chicken leg.

Gabriel was impressed by Clarissa's calm acceptance of her situation. Instead of becoming bitter and angry, she seemed to be a stronger person because of it.

After the filling meal, Gabriel lounged back against the tree beside Clarissa, wanting to hear more about her childhood.

"Judging by your carefree mood since we've been here, your memories of this place must be pleasant," he said.

She smiled contentedly. "I remember spending hours out here running through the wild flowers barefoot, feeling the cool grass between my toes. My mother would get so frustrated with me because I'd come home with mud and grass stains all over my clothes. After a while she stopped making me wear shoes because they never stayed on my feet long and dressed me in boy's breeches because I would ruin every dress she made for me."

Gabriel laughed at the image her description brought to mind. A much younger version of the beautiful woman who sat beside him with her curly but tangled hair surrounding her small, dirt smudged face. Her dress torn and muddied and her shoes, strings tied together, thrown over her shoulder while she carried a handful of wildflowers to take home to her mother.

"You must have been a handful."

Clarissa smiled mischievously. "I wasn't a bad child, just troublesome."

"I'm sure," he laughed.

"What was your home like?"

"My mother tried her best to make the house we lived in as comfortable as possible. Her dream was to live in a nice home with a white picket fence and large garden to plant her vegetables in. She had to settle for an old hunting cabin that had seen better days and a gray fence that only went halfway around the house because we didn't have enough wood and paint to finish it." She laughed at the memory of their awkward looking dwelling.

"She did get the vegetable garden and spent hours there caring for it. I always wondered if it was because, when times were hard, it was our only source of food or her way of escaping the harsh life she was living."

Gabriel saw unshed tears sparkling brightly in her eyes. He felt all the joy and heartache her young life must have been.

"Why did she never marry?"

Clarissa sighed sadly. "I think what my father did to her destroyed her self-esteem and she didn't think any decent colored man would find her worthy of marriage."

"What about you, why hasn't someone swept you off your feet?"

"I haven't found a man who's worthy of me." She said with a smile.

"What about Adam Clarke? There's talk you turned down his proposal." He chuckled at her surprised expression.

"I didn't think you were one to listen to rumors."

"Usually I'm not, but after the scene I witnessed the other night at the Social, I tend to believe this one."

She blushed remembering the scene. "I'd rather not think about that right now."

"I'm curious, why did you turn down his proposal?"

He was a little more than curious.

She sighed. "I don't have the same feelings for Adam that he has for me. I love him, but not enough to marry him. He's more like a brother to me than a husband."

She shook her head sadly. "He doesn't seem to understand that. He thinks that, if we married, I would learn to love him more."

"You don't agree?"

"No. I've thought about it, but we would both be unhappy," She smiled. "I think I'm doomed to become an old spinster."

He chuckled. "You just need the right man to come along and sweep you off your feet."

"Really, do you have anyone particular in mind?"

He grinned mischievously, "Maybe."

Reaching over and gently caressing her cheek, "I don't blame Clarke for being so persistent."

She felt flush at his touch. His hands were amazingly soft for someone who made a living with them.

"Why?" she asked breathlessly.

He gazed directly into her eyes, "Because you are a very beautiful and intelligent woman and any man would be lucky to call you his wife."

Clarissa saw the sincerity in his dark eyes, making her feel a joy that she'd never experienced before.

"Thank you."

They gazed at each other as his fingers traced the outline of her ear. Her quick intake of breath gave away the affect his touch caused. Her eyes fluttered closed as she gave in to his sweet caress.

He placed light kisses upon her closed lids, the tip of her small, delicate nose and finally her soft, full lips. It was an achingly sweet and slow kiss, as if he had all the time in the world to enjoy it.

Clarissa's hands traveled the length of Gabriel's arms to the hair lying against the back of his collar. She buried her fingertips in its depth, loving the soft feel of it as she caressed the nape of his neck. She sighed and leaned fully into the kiss, allowing his lips to play over hers, sculpting and molding them to fit his own. His hands traveled up into her hair and began removing the pins, never once straying from the kiss they shared.

She was so caught up in the new feelings overwhelming her that she failed to notice what he was doing. She couldn't get enough of the taste and feel of his lips upon hers. She felt as if she was starving and he was a plate of delights set before her to take her fill. She fed willingly, almost ravenously. Suddenly his lips were gone and she moaned in protest.

Gabriel chuckled, "I want to look at you." His voice was deep and husky with passion.

She finally realized that her hair was flowing freely around her face and shoulders. When had that happened? Suddenly she didn't care as she felt Gabriel's strong fingers comb lightly through the thick locks.

With her doe eyes swirling with passion, her face flushed, her hair wildly framing her beautiful oval face and her kiss-swollen lips, He thought she looked beautifully wanton. His gaze traveled lower to the gentle slope of her breast where they strained against the bodice of her dress with her heavy breathing. Even through her clothes he could tell her nipples stood proudly erect as if awaiting his attention. He closed his eyes as a deep shudder quaked through his body. His arousal was so strong, he felt as if he'd explode just from looking at her.

"Woman, if you knew how you were making me feel right now, you would be running in the other direction," he said through clenched teeth.

"If it's anything like I'm feeling, I'm not going anywhere," she said boldly. Her whole body was afire.

He opened his eyes to find her gazing heatedly at him. "Do you want to stop?"

She hesitated for only a second before shaking her head 'no' and boldly wrapping her arms around his neck.

"I want you to kiss me like you did last night."

He groaned and gave her what she asked. He sent her senses soaring to wild, new heights as his tongue delved between her lips in a passionate dance of give and take.

Her hands traveled the length of his back, feeling the hard, sinewy muscles underneath his shirt pull and stretch with his movements. She felt herself being lowered onto her back and gave no resistance. She knew she should be protesting what was happening, but she couldn't say no to the passion and heat he was making her feel.

Clarissa wasn't ignorant to what they were doing. She knew that if Gabriel took their caresses to a more intimate level, she wouldn't stop him. She didn't feel the least bit of shame at the heat burning through her body or the liquid fire flowing like a river to the center of her womanhood. It felt right to be with him. She instinctively knew she could never feel this passion with Adam or any other man.

Gabriel's mind screamed for him to stop, but when Clarissa's soft body yielded so willingly to him, desire overruled any sane thought. His hands began an exploration of their own, gently molding and shaping her soft curves beneath his palms. When she moaned deeply into his mouth, he answered her with a passion filled moan of his own.

Her mind melted as every nerve ending in her body caught fire under his caresses. She writhed in abandonment beneath him, feeling the press of his manhood within the crevice between her thighs. She gasped as she felt its hard length caressing her through her dress. She moaned his name as the pleasure she felt gathered and blossomed in the core of her womanhood and raced through her like liquid fire.

When he gazed down at her, her head was thrown back, her lips were slightly parted, her eyes closed and her long, sooty lashes caressed her passion-flushed cheeks. He knew at that moment that they couldn't continue with this dangerous love-play.

"Clarissa," he whispered hoarsely.

"Hmm..." She looked dazedly up at him.

"I think we better leave."

His body throbbed as it was denied the release it craved. But as much as he wanted to be with Clarissa, she didn't deserve to lose her virginity in a field with a man who couldn't make her any promises about the future.

Clarissa looked at him in disbelief. "Now? You want to leave now?"

He smiled in understanding. "If we don't leave now what little self control I have left will be gone."

He eased himself off of her then assisted her up into a sitting position.

"You're too tempting to lie here with any longer."

He stood and leaned against the tree just out of her eyesight trying to will his body to calm down, while she tried to slow her heart beat down to a normal pace.

Thinking distraction would help her situation, she began readjusting her disheveled appearance and putting their supplies away. Once she finished, she looked up to find Gabriel watching her. Standing, she walked over to him, laying her hands upon his chest. Despite her once-again-neat appearance, Gabriel saw that her emerald eyes were still dark with desire. She gazed up at him with so much trust that he began feeling as if he had taken advantage of her innocence. Guilt soon overrode passion.

"I am very aware of what could have happened here and I don't feel the least bit of guilt over it. I hope you don't either." It was as if she read his mind.

He smiled. "No."

She stood on tiptoe, brushing a gentle kiss across his lips. He wanted to take her in his arms to deepen the kiss but he knew where that would lead.

"We better get going before we start something we may not be able to stop," he told her half-heartedly. The other half hoped she would tell him they could stay.

Disappointed but knowing he was right, Clarissa nodded in agreement and went to put the picnic basket in the buggy.

Neither spoke until they were just a few miles away from home when Clarissa broke the silence.

"Gabriel, can I admit something to you?"

I knew it, Gabriel thought, she was too good to be true. She was about to admit to some horrible secret that would ruin the perfection he imagined her to be.

"Go ahead," he agreed hesitantly.

He focused his eyes on the road ahead when she turned towards him so she didn't see the guarded expression on his face.

"Adam's comments the other night proved that I will forever be judged for my mother's decision to become a kept woman so I've resigned myself to never being able to find a man who would willingly accept me for who I am. But I also don't want to live my life never knowing the joy and passion that can come from a physical relationship with a man."

She hesitated for a moment and put her hand on the reins so that Gabriel would stop the buggy. When he did he took a deep breath to prepare himself for what might come next and slowly turned towards her.

Clarissa wondered about the strange expression on his face but she knew she had to finish what she was saying. She may not get a chance like this again.

"Gabriel, from the moment we met I've felt a connection with you that I've never felt with anyone. I've also felt more alive with passion in the few days we've spent together than I could possibly imagine. I'm a realist, I know I may never find someone who can make me feel the way you do and I don't want to take the chance of letting you walk out of my life without finding out if I'm right."

"I'm not asking you to marry me. I truly believe marriage is not in my future. What I'm asking you is to make love to me."

Confusion and shock fought to control Gabriel's thinking.

"Do you know what you're asking?" He doubted that he'd heard her correctly.

"Yes I do." There was no doubt in her mind that this was what she wanted.

He was speechless for a moment. "You can't be serious? What if the right man comes along a month or even a week from now? You'll regret just casually giving up something so important to someone who can't promise you a future," he tried to reason with her.

She smiled, "This isn't something I'm taking lightly, Gabriel. Right now my future is the shop and taking care of Aunt Belle as she gets older just as she cared for my mother and me."

She shrugged her shoulders indifferently. "If and when I decide to marry it will be with someone who will accept me for what I am, not for what everyone else says I should be. Until that day comes, I don't intend to wait for some handsome prince on a white horse to carry me off to his castle," she said only half-serious.

Gabriel sat gazing at Clarissa in awe. Until he'd met her, he had never known a woman who could challenge his ideals the way she could.

"I don't know what to say," he told her honestly.

"I understand." She looked away in disappointment. Surprisingly she felt no shame making such a proposition, but she could only guess what Gabriel must think of her.

He placed a finger under her chin, turning her face to him. She was surprised to see understanding in his eyes.

"I don't think I'm worthy of such a gift, but I will definitely consider it if you're really sure you want to do this."

Clarissa nodded her head in agreement. Gabriel gazed into her eyes for a moment longer then proceeded to give her a kiss that sent her senses soaring and confirmed her instincts that Gabriel was the perfect man to introduce her to the passion men and women have shared since the beginning of time.