Chapter One

Behind the Wall

Charleston, South Carolina, October 1867

My name is Martha Adams, and what I'm about to tell you happened one year after my husband Arthur and I returned to Charleston from our farm in the South Carolina Upcountry. The war had ended, but with no one left to work the land and half the neighboring farms and fields standing empty, we chose to make a new start in the city.

The October morning was cooler than usual for Charleston, with a salt breeze coming off the harbor that made me grateful for my shawl. I stood in what would soon be our proper parlor, watching Moses Johnson and his nephew Samuel pull down the water-damaged plaster from the south wall. We'd been back in Arthur's great-aunt's house on Church Street for over a year, and we'd put the rest of the house to rights that first week. The

parlor wall had to wait until we could afford the work.

“Careful with that crowbar, Moses,” I cautioned the older of the two. “These old walls weren’t built to last, just to look pretty.”

Moses nodded and eased the crowbar under the plaster. He’d been recommended by the Freedmen’s Bureau as a skilled carpenter, and I could see why. His nephew Samuel, barely sixteen, worked with equal care.

The war had taught me to sleep light and keep the doors bolted, but it had also taught me the value of good help, wherever it came from. These two had been working for us near a month, and I’d found them honest and skilled, more than I could say for some of the white workmen who’d tried to overcharge us early on.

Charleston itself was finding its way after the war. The burned district from the great fire of 1861 gaped like missing teeth along Meeting Street, and cannonball scars pocked the seawall at the Battery. Union soldiers patrolled the streets, freedmen crowded into makeshift camps near the old workhouse, and once-grand families sold their silver spoons for cornmeal, left penniless by the collapse of Confederate currency. Yet somehow, the old Charleston ways persisted; families secretly hid gold coins, and the St. Cecilia Society held its balls, though with mended gowns and watered-

down punch. The social register mattered, though there were fewer names on it.



The plaster came away in chunks, showing the old brick beneath. Charleston brick, soft and porous, the kind that drank in moisture from our humid air and crumbled if you so much as looked at it. Arthur said it was a wonder any of these old houses stayed standing through the war and storms. His great-aunt, Mrs. Louise Dumont, had bought this home back in the 1820s, after her merchant husband died young, or so she'd always told us.

In the late 1840s, we received word that Louise had fallen ill and was alone. As her only living kin, Arthur felt a solemn duty to travel south from our home in Maryland. We cared for her until her passing in 1851. By the time we found tenants for the house and bought our farm in the Upcountry, we'd been in Charleston near three years.



"Miss Martha," Samuel called out, tight with surprise. "There's something strange here."

I moved closer, my boots crunching on fallen plaster. Where the plaster had come away there was a square space between the bricks, about a foot high and as deep.

“Lord have mercy,” Moses muttered, peering into the darkness through the bricks that shielded the contents. “That ain’t no accident. Somebody built that special.”

“Can you open it a bit wider? Careful now...”

They worked in silence, removing a few more bricks until the opening was large enough to see inside. Moses held up his lamp, and we all leaned in to see what was on the inside.

Tucked away was a dark leather ledger; it looked to be water-stained but still bound and in one piece. Beside it, a portrait miniature in a tarnished silver frame and a small silk purse, the fabric stiff with old wax. And beneath it all, a single folded paper wrapped in what remained of rotted oilcloth.

“Reach in and bring it all out,” I said, my mouth suddenly dry. “All of it.”

Moses reached in carefully, handing each item to Samuel, who laid them one by one on the table we’d covered with a drop cloth for protection. When he passed him the small purse, it gave a telltale clink, the unmistakable sound of coin against coin.

Without thinking, Samuel loosened the clasp of the purse and peered inside. He gave a low whistle. “These ain’t American coins, Miss Martha. Look at the writing.”

I took one of the few gold pieces out and held it in my palm. It was heavy, the surface worn smooth with age. The inscription was in French, and though my French had grown rusty from disuse, my long-ago schooling of it was finally proving useful. I turned the coin over and made out a name: Napoleon. Below it, a date: 1815.

French gold from Napoleon's time? Hidden in our walls? Arthur's great-aunt had always been peculiar about money, but this was something else entirely.

Moses glanced at the leather ledger, frowning at the script written on its cover. "This don't look like English either, Miss Martha. Might be French too," he said, handing it to me.

I opened it delicately, trying not to damage the water-stained pages. There were numbers, dates, and what looked like initials. It was some kind of account book, but not like any I'd seen before.

Samuel had opened the portrait miniature, and we all stared at the woman captured there. She was young to middle-aged, with dark hair arranged in the elaborate style of the 1830s. Her eyes, even in that small image, seemed to look right through us. She was beautiful in a striking way, with high cheekbones and a mouth that seemed to hold secrets.

“There’s writing on the back,” Samuel said, turning the frame. “Says, ‘*Lisette Dubois, 1840*.’ Must be her name.”

I stared at that face, my mind working. 1840. Arthur’s great-aunt had been living in this house in 1840. Who was this Lisette, and why was her portrait hidden inside the wall of our house?

“Moses, Samuel,” I said, making my decision. “You both take your dinner now. Take your time, go on down to the market, and get some hot food. Here.” I pressed coins into Moses’s hand, more than enough for a good meal. “Don’t hurry back.”

They traded glances, and Moses cleared his throat. “Miss Martha, you sure you don’t need us to...”

“I’m sure,” I said firmly. “This is old family business, nothing that concerns you. But I’d be obliged if you didn’t mention this to anyone. Can I trust you on that?”

Moses straightened. “Yes, ma’am, we ain’t seen nothing but plaster and brick.”



After they left, I locked the front door and returned to the room. The house felt different now, quiet and heavy, as though the very walls were holding their breath. There were questions here I couldn’t yet answer.