
JOSEPHINE'S FORTUNE

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Prologue

Evening shadows gathered in the nooks and alleyways of the Van der Mere home on Capitol Boulevard in Albany, New York. Leaves of yellow, brown, and orange swirled across the quiet boulevard, leaping and pirouetting in the brisk autumn wind. A squirrel, scampering along a branch of an elm tree beside the red brick townhouse, scolded the young woman poised behind the tall, narrow bank of leaded, bay windows.

Josephine Van der Mere's hand trembled as she reread the words written in the graceful scroll handwriting of Miss Clare Thornton, of New Orleans, Louisiana.

> Dear Mrs. Van der Mere,
>
> I am writing this letter to give you the good news that Samuel Pownell did not die in a storm off the Carolinas as reported. He is alive and, while not feeling too well at the moment, he is on the mend. Eb Greene, a compatriot of mine, found Mr. Pownell unconscious in the bayou five miles from my home. Mr. Pownell had been beaten, robbed, and left for dead by his attacker. The thief stole Mr. Pownell's identification papers and his letters of introduction. Using the purloined identification, the robber made his way to Hamilton, North Carolina, where he used Mr. Pownell's

identification to book passage on the *Wayfarer,* a schooner bound for the California gold fields. And as much as we have been able to piece together, the man received his comeuppance by drowning on the ill-fated voyage.

Shock gripped Josephine's heart and mind as she read the unbelievable tale.

Mr. Pownell suffered from a broken leg, damaged vocal cords, a broken arm, and several broken ribs, as well as injuries to the head that rendered him unconscious for a time. Once we discovered he'd been reported lost at sea, Mr. Pownell was most anxious to contact you and his daughter, Serenity.

Dr. Boggs, my family physician and a great man sympathetic to our cause, would not allow Mr. Pownell to communicate verbally until recently so that his throat could heal properly.

To ease Mr. Pownell's increasing anxiety, I told him I would write this letter for him. I would appreciate it if you could pass on the good news to Samuel's daughter, to his brother, to Abe, and to his solicitor, Mr. Cox. All should be cautioned against repeating the news of Mr. Pownell's condition to anyone as there is still some question as to whether or not the hunt is still on for him.

"I-I-I can't believe it!" Josephine gasped. "Sam's alive! He's alive!" She wanted to shout, dance, and celebrate, but shock rendered her speechless and paralyzed her limbs. Pinpoints of light danced before her eyes and she found it difficult to breathe. Feeling like a young girl twirling too long on the lawn, she grabbed the back of her rosewood rocker to steady herself, the letter quivering in her free hand. "I refuse to swoon! I refuse to swoon! I am not a frail dowager!"

A gentle knock on the door partially restored her balance. "Yes," she called, her voice heavy with emotion. "Who is it?"

She heard the voice of Annie, her personal maid. "It's me, Miss Josephine. Annie. Is something wrong? I thought I heard you cry out."

Josephine took several deep gulps of air but didn't bid Annie to enter the room. If the news about Sam had to be kept secret, Annie was the last person she should see right now. The girl was too perceptive. She would spot that something was wrong immediately. "I'm fine, dear. But could you do me a favor and find Abe? I need to see him right away in the library."

"Of course, if you're sure you'll be all right. You don't sound too good."

Josephine tried to hide the emotion in her voice. "I'm fine, honest."

"All right, if you're sure . . ."

After listening for the sound of Annie's footsteps on the stairs outside her bedroom door, Josephine returned her attention to the letter in her hand. The words swam on the paper as she reread the message. Tears dropped on the ink, creating artistic splotches on the inexpensive scrimshaw paper. She covered her face with her hands, and the tears flowed as the pages of the letter flittered to the floor. "Sam's alive! My Sam's alive," she whispered. Hearing the words aloud triggered something in her mind. "Oh, dear God, my Sam's alive! Thank You! Thank You! My Samuel's alive!"

Chapter One

Shadows in the Night

A flurry of wind and rain drifted across the quiet cobblestone street of the city. A tiny woman, cloaked in a brown homespun wool cape, slid to a halt at the corner of a dark alleyway. Her breath hung in the November night air as she tugged the hood of her cape closer to her face.

An unseasonably cold wind had swept down from Canada, bringing with it bone-chilling rains. The unexpected freeze would turn the leaves on the maple and elm trees to gold, red, and orange. However, the cold in Josephine's heart wasn't due to the frigid breeze sweeping about her feet but the icy fear gripping her heart. She paused to breathe a quick prayer. "You promised to keep me in perfect peace if I keep my mind stayed on Thee. I'm trying, Lord. I really am."

The candlewick of the streetlight on the corner flickered above twenty-nine-year-old Josephine Van der Mere's head. Muted shadows cast artful shapes on the brick walls and garbage-strewn cobblestones of the roadway behind her. Was her imagination playing tricks on her, or had she seen the man slip into a doorway behind her? The same man she'd spied earlier at the docks?

A shiver skittered down her spine. Senses sharpened by years of scurrying along the underbelly of the city alerted the delicate blond woman to the presence of a stranger. She first observed him linger-

ing behind one of the boathouses at the docks. Thinking him to be a deckhand stealing a smoke, she cast an analyzing glance at him. She couldn't afford to completely ignore him, not in her line of business. A woman alone in a harsh world needed every edge she could get.

Her suspicions rose as she noted his clothing, the clothing of a land traveler, not a seaman. The black Benjamin overcoat fell mid-calf on the man, revealing a pair of Wellington boots, scuffed and dulled by years of horseback riding. A well-worn black felt hat shaded his eye. Only his straight, aquiline nose could be seen above the man's dark, heavy mustache and beard.

Josephine spied the stranger a second time lingering near the neighboring slip to her barge, the *Silver Garnish.* She'd paused to scan the riverway after delivering her "cargo." A couple of fishing boats sat dry-docked for the season. An abandoned jury-rigged schooner appeared ghostly in the stormy late afternoon light. All forms of life, human or otherwise, had long since sequestered themselves elsewhere to wait out the storm. All forms, that is, except herself and the stranger who'd stepped into the lee of a stack of wooden crates when she glanced his way.

The woman wrapped her cape tightly about her body and plunged into the teeth of the storm. Up one alleyway, down the next, past an ale house, beyond the public stables, Josephine scurried, occasionally glancing over her shoulder as she ran. At the corner of Main Street and Delmar Avenue, she spotted him again, this time not more than a hundred feet behind her.

Instead of heading west toward her townhouse on Capitol Boulevard, the woman hoisted her skirts and dashed across the empty intersection to the clapboard-sided inn on the opposite corner. Quickly, she slipped through the heavy oak door to safety. Once inside, she lowered the hood of her cape and brushed the excess rain and sleet from her shoulders.

Conversation stopped at the corner table where four sailors sat devouring bowls of mutton stew and slices of homemade bread. A woman alone in the night? Eighteen fifty or not, all good and proper ladies would be in their parlors toasting their brocade-

slippered toes before their husbands' hearths. The fact that she wasn't, in their minds, left her open to their crude and suggestive ribaldry.

The other three tables in the room sat empty. In a few hours, after the ale houses closed for the night, the inn would fill with grog-soaked sailors. The word had spread through the nautical community that one could expect clean beds at a fair price, but no hard liquor at Ben's place, the Shanty Inn.

Ignoring the sailors' leers and lecherous mutterings, Josephine made her way through the eating area and into the back room. Her simple homespun clothing camouflaged for the onlookers that the woman with the silken blond hair could be anything but a peasant woman, a chambermaid employed at the inn.

Ben, the middle-aged, rotund innkeeper, glanced up from his ledger book open on the counter before him, scowled, then closed the book and followed the young woman into the back room.

As the door slammed behind her, Josephine shivered. "*Brrr!* It's cold out there tonight," she said. She turned and gave Ben an apprehensive smile.

His scowl deepened. "What are you doing here? You're not supposed to be here unless there's an emergency."

Josephine's hyacinth blue eyes widened with concern. "Ben, I think I'm being followed."

"That's not good." He took a deep breath and frowned. "Do you know who it is?"

She shook her head. "I've never seen the man before today." She slipped her heavy woolen cape from her shoulders and let it slide to the glistening oak paneled floor. Warmth from the fire in the massive stone fireplace filled the room and quickly set out to replace the damp chill in her bones. "I thought I'd stay here a few minutes until he's gone."

Ben nodded. "We've been transporting too much cargo these last few weeks. You, in particular. I do have other conductors I can use, you know."

"I know."

His eyes narrowed. "It's like you have a private vendetta, Josie. You

can't let it become personal, you know. It will affect your concentration."

She picked at the fibers of the rough textured cape in her hands. "And just how does one stay detached? Today I helped a pregnant seventeen-year-old runaway escape from her master, the father of her unwanted child. And it shouldn't become personal?"

"Is it because of Sam?" he asked. "All the runaway slaves you manage to transport to the next station will never bring Assemblyman Pownell back, you know."

Assemblyman Pownell. How formal the title seemed for the man Josephine loved. For a moment she remembered the day he proposed to her. She also recalled the reaction his teenage daughter, Serenity, had had to the announcement. She realized that Ben still believed that Sam, her fiancé and best friend, had been lost at sea.

How she missed him! Knowing him to be alive and recuperating in New Orleans made her heart ache to be with him instead of pretending he was dead. *But if this charade is the only way I can protect him from the bounty hunters,* she reasoned to herself, *I'll do it.*

Josephine also remembered the cause to which they'd dedicated their lives. She knew her zeal for the cause would be no less determined five or ten years in the future. Like it or not, her crusade was personal. She'd risk her entire fortune to save even one child from a life of slavery.

Ben narrowed his eyes to mere slits behind his tiny gold-rimmed spectacles. "You don't think that the man following you is one of those bounty hunters you tangled with in Auburn, do you?"

"I don't know." She placed one hand over her mouth in thought, then shook her head, her brow knitted with concern. "I doubt it. Albany is a long way from the trouble at Lake Cayuga. And it's been a couple of months. Besides, those two would have trailed Sam, not me."

A violent cough erupted from the innkeeper's throat. He choked, then broke into a fit of uncontrolled coughing until he gasped for breath.

Josephine ran to his side, gently touching his heaving shoulder and his arm. "Are you all right, Ben? Can I get you a glass of water or something?"

Shaking his head, the man waved his hand, then gave a ragged wheeze as he gasped for air. "I-I-I'll be all right."

"Ben! That doesn't sound good. Maybe you should get away from this cold climate," she urged, "go where it's warm and sunny year-round."

"Me? I'll be fine. It's just a little rattle, courtesy of the queen's coal mines. It's true that on nights like this . . . You know, Josie, maybe you're the one who should get away for a while. I'm worried. Maybe you should leave the conducting to us men."

Josephine's eyes snapped; the color in her cheeks heightened. "What do you mean, leave the transporting to you men? I'm as good a conductor as any you have and you know it, probably better than some."

Her hands on her hips, she whirled about in front of the massive stone fireplace heating the dingy office. Her gray linsey-woolsey skirt swooshed about her ankles, and her creamy white gauze peasant blouse contrasted with her heightened color in her porcelain complexion. "How many of your male conductors can pass himself off as a chambermaid, I ask you? Or as a child? Or a schoolgirl? Or a—"

Ben laughed. "All right, your argument is valid. But it's a dangerous occupation, m'girl. Being female won't protect you if you get caught. For that matter, being a woman might bring you more pain. And the pay is lousy." He laughed again at his wry humor.

Josephine chuckled and seated herself on a petit-point upholstered footstool in front of the roaring fire and waved her hands before the dancing flames. "Oooh, that feels so good."

The man lowered his unwieldy body into the well-worn, burgundy and navy upholstered, wing-backed chair beside her. She watched him fold his meaty hands across his protruding stomach before he spoke. "I'm serious about your going away for a few days. It would give me and the boys time to find out just what your mystery man might be up to. Believe it or not, we can handle

things here in Albany without you."

"I doubt that!" Josephine laughed and hunched her shoulders in delight. "I know. You all take good care of me and I appreciate it. If you hadn't been here for me after Sam . . ." She saddened as she stared for several seconds into the flames, remembering the tragedy that had separated her from the man she loved.

"About the trip?" the man questioned.

"Huh? Excuse me, about what trip?"

The innkeeper picked up a cherrywood pipe from a pipe rack on the stand beside his chair. As he tapped it on the edge of a crystal ashtray, a mist of ashes fell into the tray. "The one you're going on tomorrow," he continued reaching for his hand-tooled leather tobacco pouch.

Josephine sighed. Though she'd never admit it, she was grateful to have someone care enough to tell her what she should do. She rose to her feet. "All right, if you think it's best for the station."

"Best for the station nothing. It's best for you, young lady. Since Samuel's death, you've buried yourself in the cause. It's time you got out and met people, and not as a chambermaid, but as the sparkling and lovely widowed socialite, Josephine Van der Mere."

"Josephine Van der Mere . . ." The woman gave an odd little chuckle. "I hardly remember her."

"It's time you got reacquainted. She's quite the lady, you know." He shifted his considerable weight forward in the chair.

A knock sounded and the door opened. A short, wiry, bow-legged man wearing a white cotton apron over his gray wool pants and shirt entered and tipped his bald head toward Josephine. "Madam." He turned toward the innkeeper and handed him a note. "Boss, a sailor brought this to the kitchen door. Said it was for you. Sure weren't for me since I can't read a word, not a word."

"Thanks, Barney," Ben mumbled as his eyes scanned the scrap of soiled paper. "Did he say anything else?"

"Nope, just told me to give it to you. He said you'd know what to do about it. Gotta get back to my McRafferty stew before it boils down into a casserole." He chuckled at his attempt at humor.

Josephine grinned in return. He again nodded toward the young woman, then he turned to leave.

"Wait," Ben called, "do you have someone out there who can escort Mrs. Van der Mere to her home?"

The cook's face brightened. "Oh, yes sir. Abe. He just came in lookin' for her."

Josephine visibly relaxed at the mention of Abe's name. Abe, the tall, commanding Negro overseer of the Pownell's Lake Cayuga estate had vowed to Samuel Pownell, his employer and friend, that he'd watch over Josephine until the assemblyman could return for her.

Once the fire-gutted estate was sold, Abe, his wife, Dory, their eleven-year-old son Jonathan, and a servant girl named Annie moved east to Albany with Josephine. Abe took his job as Josephine's bodyguard seriously.

When Esther, Josephine's head housekeeper, retired and went home to Holland, Dory took over the running of the estate with an efficiency and grace that surprised even the longtime members of the household staff. Before long the couple became irreplaceable to the young widow of the former Dutch sea captain, Peter Van der Mere.

A relaxed smile crossed Josephine's face. Ben smiled back. "Wonderful!" he said. "Thanks, Barney. Tell Abe that Mrs. Van der Mere will be right out."

The cook nodded and left, closing the door behind him. The innkeeper handed the letter to Josephine. "This might interest you, Josie. Perhaps we can kill two birds with one stone. We have special cargo coming in to New York City on the ship *Vesuvia* at the end of the week—a fourteen-year-old girl." He scowled at the note. "You have friends in Manhattan, don't you? Our station there is closed for a time until the officials lose interest in it."

"You know I do." Josephine arose to her feet. "The Morlands' have been begging me to visit them for months now. However, they do not know about my little involvement in the operation. Should I involve their home without their knowledge?"

Ben arched an eyebrow and shifted his head wisely.

"You would, wouldn't you?" she asked.

He smiled. "You'll have to do what you think best for you, Josie."

She frowned and paced to the other side of Ben's chair. "Jon and Geneva were friends with my late husband and with Assemblyman Pownell. For some reason, they, and you, think you must mother me." She patted the bald spot on the back of his head. "I haven't had a mother since I was a child, you darling ninny."

"Mother, smother!" the innkeeper sputtered. "Are you addlebrained or what? I ain't nobody's mother."

Josephine kissed the innkeeper's forehead. "You'd make a great mother, you old garter snake, you. And take care of the cough, you hear?" Before he could reply, she threw her cape over her shoulders, blew him a kiss goodbye, and slipped out of the office door.

"Godspeed," she heard him call as the door closed behind her.

At the reappearance of the pretty little chambermaid, the sailors resumed their taunting until out of the corners of their eyes, they spotted the massive Negro wearing a navy pea jacket and canvas pants, standing in the corner by the door. The loudest of the foursome's lower jaw dropped as the black man straightened to his full height of six feet, four inches and swaggered two steps toward them. The three others followed his terrified gaze. Suddenly, all four men found their bowls of McRafferty's stew extremely fascinating.

"Bless you," Josephine whispered and smiled as she hurried to his side. "Abe, I'm so glad you came looking for me. How did you know where to find me?"

"I've been worried." The middle-aged black man held the door for her as she stepped out into the storm. "Missy, you had me going for a time. I checked the barge; no one was there, not even Capt'n Becker. The skiff was gone. Why didn't you come right home after delivering the girl?"

Josephine frowned. The last thing she wanted was another "mother" worrying over her, but like it or not, both Abe and Dory did just that. "I think I was being followed, so I thought it wise to take a detour."

The man's face darkened as he helped her into the brougham coach and signaled for the driver to take them home. "Someone followed you?" Abe climbed in and closed the door behind him. "I didn't see anyone when I came in," he confided.

She shrugged. "Well, I could be wrong, but it's hard to think three sightings coincidental."

"Not hardly. So tell me, what did the stranger look like?"

"Black. He wore all black."

"Are you saying you were followed by a Negro?" Abe asked.

"No, no. His clothes were black and his beard was heavy and black. There was something about him that I couldn't just dismiss." She jiggled her foot nervously. "Ben suggested that the stranger might be one of the bounty hunters we encountered at Sam's place last summer, but that's not likely . . . is it?"

"I doubt it. We would have noticed those guys long before now. A country bumpkin with a Southern drawl would have been detected easily."

Remembering the note she clutched in her hand, she handed it to Abe. "Ben asked me to make a run to New York City tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? That's impossible. I have a shipment in storage right now that I must deliver in the morning."

"That's all right. I thought I'd take Annie with me. We can do the switch thing since it's a young girl I'll be meeting."

"I'm not comfortable with that, especially after you told me about the mystery man. I should go with you." By the jut of his chin, Josephine knew the man had made up his mind. "And this storm. It could get much worse before it gets better."

"The snow's not sticking; it's too warm. I'll go by rail. It won't take very long at all."

"I don't know . . ." Abe looked worried. "I wish Sam were here."

"Me too." She cocked her head up toward Abe's stern face. "This isn't a matter of debate here. I am going." She added, "I appreciate everything you and precious Dory do for me, but you can't shadow my every move, you know. If anyone understands why I must do this, whatever the risk, you do."

Smiling down at her, his eyes softened. "I know. I know. Is there anything I can do?"

"Yes, if you could send a wire to the Morlands' telling of my unscheduled arrival, it would be appreciated."

"All right. I'll do that first thing in the morning. I still don't like it and I'm certain Mr. Pownell would object as well."

Josephine blushed at the mention of Sam. *If only you knew how right you are,* she thought.

The carriage swayed as the horses strained to haul the heavy boxlike coach up the slippery hill to the Van der Mere townhouse. Josephine braced herself against the side wall and the seat. When her emotions once again settled, she whispered, "Thank you, Abe. I can always count on you." The woman smiled and touched his arm with her doeskin-gloved hand.

"You know, I could come with you if I sent—"

"You won't send anyone. Annie and I know what to do. We've managed it many times over the last couple of months. First, she'll slip out of the Morlands' house before dawn so no one will know she's gone. Then we'll dress the runaway in Annie's clothing, and she and I will make our way to the train station under the eyes of the public. Anyone seeing us will think she's my maid."

Abe wagged his head. "I'll admit that your deceptions have worked many times before—but in Albany, not New York City. You're not familiar with the escape routes there."

"What escape routes? All I need are the directions to the railway station."

The carriage came to a stop. Abe opened the door, but paused before disembarking. "And if someone stops you? Or Annie?"

"Abe, you are a dear, dear friend and I love you." Josephine smiled tenderly into the man's concerned brown eyes. "Annie, God, and I will deal with the problems as they occur, my friend, just like always."