

## CHAPTER 5



SORROW WAS A natural born healer. She delivered all of the babies at Magnolia Hill and most of the babies on the neighbouring plantations—slaves and whites alike. Just like her mama and her grandmama before her, Sorrow was a powerful Obeah conjure woman.

She had inherited her renowned healing skills with herbs and such from her mama, the daughter of an African-born princess from Yoruba. After Masta Clidamont worked her mama to death, Sorrow became the official go-to person by default whenever a slave took sick or a baby needed birthing. It is mighty hard to minister to the needs of folks you hate.

When she wasn't healing, Sorrow worked behind the scenes in the Big House or in the kitchen with Mother Ethel. She didn't have to enter the dining area to serve the white folks food anymore. Masta Clidamont said her sliced-up face spoiled his appetite.

The women in Sorrow's line had a long and twisted relationship with the Etiennes. After Masta Clidamont's first wife was weakened from three miscarriages, the white doctor told Clidamont another pregnancy would kill her. Clidamont didn't care. He kept coming to her bed until his seed took.

Sorrow's mama delivered Masta Clidamont's only son Claude. She told Sorrow that Claude's mother had been a poor sweet girl of good reputation sent from France to New Orleans to find a husband. She found one alright. White folks should be careful what they ask for.

*Carolyn Holland*

Women don't last long on Magnolia Hill. That poor creature died under suspicious circumstances right after she pushed Clidamont's only son out of her wasted body— at least that's what the white folks whispered behind Clidamont's back. Sorrow's mother said she saw Clidamont pick up a pillow and smother the woman to death with her own eyes. After the dirty deed was done, she heard him say, "I'm going to name our son Claude darling, after the priest I murdered in France. Give him my regards when you get to hell, won't you?"

The last shovel of dirt hadn't been thrown over the first wife's coffin before Clidamont took him a second wife whose name escaped Sorrow at the moment. The second mistress didn't live long enough for the slaves to remember her name. One thing for sure, she fit in with the Etiennes like tea in a kettle. The slaves were glad to see her put in the ground after the fever took her.

Then Masta Clidamont's son Claude started courting Lorelei Poche from Poche Plantation between Gonzalez and La Place, and him just barely a man, still wet behind the ears. Things went badly with the newlyweds from the start. There was enough fighting and fornicating going on between them to test the patience of Job himself. Then Henri was born.

One day Mistress Lorelei was sitting up at the Big House making everybody's life miserable. The next thing Sorrow knew she was no longer around and a fresh grave had been dug up on the hill.

Masta Claude married his current wife quicker than a jackrabbit jumps out of his hole during a brush fire. His younger son, Julien, was born of this union. Sorrow delivered Julien. And wouldn't you know it? Neither one of Claude's sons were worth the shit that came out their asses. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. When the tree is rotten to the core, it can't help but bear rotten fruit.

Claude Xavier Etienne was mean as a snake and filled with the devil himself. He came by his streak of meanness honestly, because his father Clidamont Etienne was a pure unadulterated son of a bitch. The

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two sons Claude would eventually sire, Henri and Julien, were devil spawn.

Nosiree, women don't last long on Magnolia Hill.



A blast of heat from the kitchen cooking fires confirmed Sorrow's belief that she was indeed in hell on earth. When she reached for her baby, the old cook Ethel's rheumy eyes surveyed her sorry condition as a thick drop of blood plopped onto the dirt floor.

"Go on and clean yourself up, gal. Won't hurt me none to look after this little baby a bit longer. Now go on."

Ethel shooed Sorrow along while massaging the baby's little back, making cooing sounds.

Sorrow hastened to do Ethel's bidding. Somehow she managed to express her thanks through lips that had long ago forgotten how to smile. Once she was cleaned up, Sorrow took her baby from Ethel. She immediately put her baby to the tit. The babe suckled hungrily.

"Did the mistress have that baby yet?" Ethel asked while stirring the stew that would be served for the evening dinner. Sorrow bit into one of Ethel's hot buttery biscuits before answering.

"The baby dead," she said without emotion. "And soon, if it ain't happened already, Mistress Felicity gon' be dead too."

"Lord have mercy," Ethel said, dropping her fulsome arthritic figure down heavily on a nearby stool.

Sorrow held her newborn on one hip while she steeped some herbs to make a tea she would drink to heal her insides from the recent birth.

"Masta Claude and his daddy must have ice water flowing through their veins," Sorrow declared. "Masta Claude stood at the foot of the birthing bed like he was betting on a racehorse. When the baby came out dead, Masta Claude screamed at me to git out the birthing chamber, even though Mistress was bleeding like a pig stuck with a pitchfork. He

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wouldn't even let me pack her to stop the bleeding. She bled out before I turned my back to open the door." Sorrow handed Ethel a cup of the tea. It wouldn't do the old woman any harm.

"Thank you, baby," Ethel said, blowing on the tea to cool it off before taking a sip of the steaming brew. "You know how white folks is, child," she opined with the wisdom that comes from a lifetime in captivity. "Now that Masta Claude got himself an heir and a spare *and* Mistress Felicity's money, he don't have no more use for her. I 'spect he'll just go out and get himself another victim."

Sorrow nodded in agreement. Felicity Valcour Aime came from money. She was the only child of Armond Valcour Aime who was the owner of St. Joseph Plantation in St. James Parish. She brought a huge dowry into the marriage.

Sorrow jumped up when she heard the sound of horses' hooves. She went to peer out of the window. "Ethel. You ain't gon' believe this. Masta Clidamont and his nasty ass son Claude just saddled up. I bet they on their way to town to carouse at that black whorehouse."

Ethel's expression was pinched. "Hmph, I guess they gon' leave the mistress and that dead baby till morning without a second thought. It's a shame before God."

Her huge breasts shook with merriment. "If we leave it up to them, they'll do us a big ole favour and kill off every white woman this side of St. John the Baptist Parish. Then we'll only have to deal with the white menfolk!" The women laughed companionably. Sorrow stared out the window long after the dust settled from the Etiennes' horses.

"Now both of them been through two wives," Sorrow said, then added in a more sombre tone of voice, "I only wish the angel of death had plucked the two of them up along with the mistress."

Sorrow never met a white person she didn't hate, and she never hated one more than she hated Clidamont Etienne. It didn't much matter that he was her daddy.

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**(Ten years later...)**

Old Mother Ethel was long gone, dead and buried and feeding the worms in the old slave cemetery that bordered the woods behind the plantation. Sorrow was now the plantation cook, midwife, and healer. She and her daughter, whom she named “Flossie,” could have continued to live in the kitchen, as they had while Mother Ethel was alive. Sorrow didn’t want to be that close to the white folks in the Big House. She preferred to live on Slave Row. Besides, folks ran in and out of the kitchen all day and night. Sorrow needed privacy to practise the rituals passed down from her mother.

Flossie was dark, like her daddy. She had to be of good use if Sorrow wanted to keep her only child out of the fields. Folks didn’t last long in the fields. The fact of the matter is—folks didn’t last long period on Magnolia Hill. Sorrow passed on her vast store of knowledge about healing, herbs and delivering babies to her daughter Flossie so that she would be more valuable to the whites. She also passed on her knowledge about the Ancestors and the Orisha gods and goddesses to her daughter.

It had been more than 10 years since they killed Sorrow’s man. Still, the hatred that festered like an open sore was blazing as white-hot as the fires of hell. She was consumed by it. Sorrow found a small sense of satisfaction every single day she sprinkled some of her poisonous herbs in the Etienne’s food before serving it. Slow and easy—that’s how you do it. She wanted to see them suffer.