
THE HEIRESS COPY

KISANE SLANEY

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Disclaimer

This is a work of fiction, albeit inspired by real events. It is intended for entertainment purposes only, hoping to inspire the reader to dig deeper into the historical events that shape our world. While certain long-standing institutions, agencies, and public offices are mentioned, all the names, characters, businesses, places and incidents in this book are fictitious or the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events and locales is purely coincidental.

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CONTENT WARNING

Reader Discretion is advised. Proceed only if you are comfortable with potentially sensitive topics. This novel contains explicit sex scenes, references to child physical and sexual abuse and material that certain readers might consider religiously controversial.

DEDICATION

In memory of my daughter Candice, who would have been so proud that I finished writing and publishing my first novel.

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Without the support and encouragement of the following people, I would never have finished this book.

My sister Alex told me I should write a book and then read every chapter and listened to me read the rewrites. That's sister love for you!

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PART ONE

THE FAMILY

CHAPTER ONE

Tiana slammed the taxi door, flew up the front steps, through the main entrance and raced down the oak-panelled hallway to the cloakroom. Checking her face in the mirror and the precious piece of paper in her blazer pocket, she darted back into the hall and peered both ways. *All clear.* She was halfway down the corridor to her classroom when a voice echoed down the hall, bringing her to an abrupt halt.

“Tiana,” called out Sister Agnes, “what *do* you think you are doing? Is this any way for a young lady to behave, a *Marymount* young lady?”

Tiana froze, then bowing her head, she turned towards Sister Agnes. “Oh, Sister, I’m so sorry,” she said, her eyes fixed on her shoes. “I’ve just come back from the dentist.” She slowly raised her head and said, “And I was hurrying because I don’t want to miss class—Modern History.”

Sister Agnes’s brows snapped together as she gave Tiana the once-over. “Your face does look somewhat swollen, Tiana. Very well, proceed, but at a walking pace, please.”

“*Thank you, Sister,*” Tiana said as she turned with a quick sigh of relief and headed for her class.

Entering the classroom, Tiana slipped into her seat next to her best friend, Veronica. “Vron,” Tiana whispered, “you’ll never believe what I saw at the

dentist in Tatler.” She gave Veronica a lopsided grin. “I tore out the page. Show you after class.”

Tiana and Veronica became best friends when they were eleven years old. They first met at Harrods whilst getting their uniforms fitted for the London Marymount International School. Walking into the large fitting room, Tiana saw Veronica kneeling on the floor whilst an assistant crawled around her, pinning up her skirt so it sat precisely at the bottom of her knee, barely skimming the floor. Looking at Tiana, Veronica mouthed the word “Help” before rolling her eyes and going cross-eyed. Tiana burst out laughing, and that was the beginning of a life-long friendship.

“Come on then,” Veronica said the minute class was over, “cough up.”

Tiana pulled out the page ripped from Tatler and said, “Look, isn’t that the most sophisticated thing you’ve ever seen?”

Veronica gazed at the spot where Tiana was pointing. “Oh, Lordy, I don’t believe it.”

“Yep,” Tiana said in awe, “she’s smoking a cigar. A *cigar*.”

“Wow, she looks so worldly. I’ve never seen a woman smoking a cigar before. Cigarettes, of course, but *never* a cigar.”

“I know,” Tiana said. I adore the aroma of cigars, but I never expected to smoke one myself. Don’t you love it?”

“Yes, imagine whipping out a cigar and lighting up on a date just like Lady Scott-Fernsby in Tatler. Oh, shock, horror!”

“Totally, I knew you’d be all for it, Vron. So, how old would you say she is?”

“Mmm, mid-twenties.”

Tiana shook her head. “Far too long to wait. I’m thinking of eighteen to make our debut. We should start practicing. The problem is, how? Papa keeps his cigars in a special box and cuts and lights them up in a special way. We’ll have to persuade him to help us, teach us.”

“Goodness, Tiana, do you think he would?”

“Well, maybe. I think I know how to persuade him. Papa has been telling me about our business interests, and one of them is importing cigars. I’ll tell him

I want to learn more about that aspect of the business. *Then*, I'll let on about wanting to learn how to smoke them."

"Sneaky."

"Strategic. Papa told me it takes five years or more to go from tobacco seeds to handmade cigars, and actually, I am interested in learning more about the process."

Veronica laughed, "Okay, you've convinced me."

"I'll talk him into it," Tiana said with a determined nod. "Just as soon as I get home for the summer hols. After all, it's the seventies, not the fifties."

"Go you, make Germaine proud."

Tiana adored her papa. He was a cigar connoisseur, and she pictured him in his study, sitting by the fire in his leather chair, cigar in hand. The glow of the table lamp cast its light onto his book as logs shifted in the vast fireplace, sending up tiny showers of sparks.

His grand study took up the whole ground floor and was by far Tiana's favourite room in their elegant six-storey apartment in the exclusive Sixteenth Arrondissement in Paris. It was in this room that her papa sat at his vast burr walnut desk, with towering floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with leather-bound volumes as its backdrop, and oversaw his global business empire. Whenever she walked into the room, the familiar scent of cigars, rich leather and freshly polished wood filled her senses.

One afternoon, when Tiana was six years old, she escaped from her Nanny and went to visit her papa in his study. That was when their afternoon ritual started.

"Come in, come in, darling," he would say when he saw her peeping around the door. "Sit, sit," and she would scramble into the corner of the enormous leather Chesterfield sofa in front of the log fire. Then her father would enquire about her day, and, with the occasional puff on his cigar, he would listen attentively whilst she told him of her little triumphs and troubles.

Then he, in turn, told her stories about the places he visited, the people he met and the fascinating things that he saw. She learnt about her great-grandfather and how he came to receive the beautiful blue and white Ming Dynasty dragon jar vase sitting on the Chippendale side table. “It was a powerful man in China who gave your great-grandfather that beautiful vase Tiana.”

Her father introduced her to her paternal grandfather, who had died before she was born, through the story of the Jaques Anderssen boxwood and ebony chess set. “Your grandfather gave it to me for my twelfth birthday. Then he taught me how to play. When you are twelve, I’ll teach you how to play, and it will be your chess set one day. It has great sentimental value for me and is also extremely valuable, so I trust you to take good care of it when that day comes.”

In the summer, they retreated to the opposite end of the vast room and looked out at the small courtyard and trees beyond through the four elegant ceiling-to-floor windows on either side of the glass-panelled French doors.

On hot afternoons, Tiana loved sitting outside in the courtyard, filled with the intoxicating perfume wafting through the air from the two potted Frangipani trees. The gentle sound of water bubbling up and trickling over the little cherub in the fountain provided a peaceful, hypnotic backdrop to the soft murmur of their voices. By evening, the courtyard would be awash with the addition of a heady mix of aromas from the honeysuckle and jasmine that had for years been scrambling and entwining over the trellis that covered the courtyard walls.

At three o’clock each afternoon, their conversation would be interrupted by the arrival of Dominique with a tray of homemade lemonade for Tiana, her papa’s pot of his favourite black coffee, no sugar, and an afternoon treat baked by their cook, Maria. When her papa wasn’t visiting their head offices run by his CEOs in Paris, London and Greece or flying overseas, these late afternoon father-daughter visits became the highlight of Tiana’s day.

Once Tiana was at boarding school and returned home for the school holidays, the first thing she did on arrival was call out, “Papa, Papa, I’m home.” And regardless of what he was doing or whom he might be with, he would come out

of his study to greet her, arms open wide. “Tiana, my darling, welcome home,” he would say, sweeping her into a bear hug, and she would - inhale.

After Tiana’s fifteenth birthday, her father explained some of the intricacies of the family companies, dealing with their cruise line, resorts, boutiques, luxury goods and cigar import and distribution. Tentatively, they began to explore whether she would like to play a role in the business in the future or choose to go in a different direction altogether. “But there’s no rush, Tiana; we’ll continue this discussion over the next three years until you graduate from Marymount.”

Tiana loved her mother, too, but there had always been a distance between them. Whereas her papa was openly affectionate, her mother was *restrained* when it came to demonstrations of affection.

As long as Tiana could remember, her mother had an air of sadness about her. At times, it would be barely noticeable, but at other times, it seemed to overwhelm her.

Is it my fault? Is it something I’ve done? Tiana dared not ask her mother.

But the situation had changed for Tiana during the previous half-term break when she’d walked into the drawing room and found her mother crying. Quickly brushing away her tears, her mother had turned away, giving Tiana the strong message that she did not wish to discuss her emotions with her daughter.

That’s it, Tiana decided after leaving her mother. *I can’t go on like this. I can’t stand not knowing what’s making maman so sad. I’ll ask papa; he must know.*

Tiana headed straight to her father’s study, and before he even had time to greet her, she blurted out, “Papa, please tell me what makes maman so sad?”

“My darling, I’m not sure,” he said, looking startled. “I’ve asked her, but she is so evasive. I can only guess that it has something to do with being unable to have more children.”

This upset Tiana even more. “So, it *is* my fault, Papa, that maman is so sad. I knew it had something to do with me.”

“Good Lord Tiana, what on earth makes you think that?” her father said, looking shocked as he gazed at his distraught daughter.

Tiana burst into tears. “Having *me* must have caused the problem.”

“No, no, Tiana, you must not think that any of this is your fault. Your mother would be even more upset if she thought for one moment that you were thinking like this,” her father said, putting his arms around her and stroking her hair.

Tiana was still not convinced. After seeing her father, she went to the telephone and rang her former Nanny, with whom she kept in touch.

Her Nanny repeated what her father had said, assuring Tiana that whatever had happened was most certainly not her fault. “Chiquita, I had no idea this is what you were thinking. So, this is what you must do: you must speak to your Aunt Vivienne. If anyone can tell you what’s upsetting your mamá, her sister is the one. Promise me you’ll do that.”

“Si, Si, I’ll speak to Aunt Vivienne during the next holiday break.”

Tiana was just two weeks old when her adored nanny, Nanny B, took over the routine tasks of raising a child from babyhood until she went to boarding school.

Elena Belasco was Spanish and came from a large, loving family. But in 1957, there was little work for women in Spain. “You know I can’t stay, Papá,” Elena told her father. “I’ve been looking, but there simply aren’t any jobs. Sofia has written to me suggesting I go to France, where she’s sure I’ll find work as a nanny.”

“My only consolation,” her father said, “is that you’ll be living in Paris with your cousin whilst looking for a job.”

A week after her arrival, Sofia came home looking excited, “Elena, I’ve just learned from one of the other nannies that Madame Adelia Manning is interviewing for a full-time nanny for her baby daughter Tiana. It sounds like it will be a long-term position.”

Elena went for the interview and rushed home to tell Sofia, “Can you believe it? I got the job!”

When Elena first held Tiana in her arms, she gazed down at her for the longest time before lifting her up and whispering in the baby’s tiny ear, “I’ll teach you Spanish songs and Spanish prayers, Chiquita. We’ll have a wonderful time together.”

Once Tiana was old enough, she would sneak up to the maids’ quarters on the sixth floor of the apartment and sit and listen to Elena and her friends gossiping and laughing together. It was easy for Tiana to imagine she was in Spain, with the Spanish music playing on the record player, everyone talking in Spanish and the food, always the aroma of the delicious food. Tiana’s favourite was paella, a colourful mix of rice, seafood and spices. In the summer, she loved to have the cold gazpacho. When she was older and well-behaved, she was permitted to have small sips of sangria as a treat. Gradually, it became apparent that Tiana had a natural talent for languages, and by the time she was eleven, she was fluent in Spanish as well as French and English.

Tiana cried when she was about to leave for London to board at Marymount International School for the first time. “Oh, Nanny B, I’m going to miss you so much,” she said, her eyes brimming with tears. She knew that this meant Nanny B would be leaving the household, a momentous shift in her young life. “You absolutely swear that you will come and visit when I’m home on holiday?” she asked as she hugged her Nanny close.

“Sí, Sí, Chiquita, I promise.”

Whilst Nanny B took care of Tiana daily, it was Tiana’s mother, Adelia, who bore the responsibility for ensuring that Tiana always displayed the ‘breeding’

bestowed upon her at birth. She must learn to dress appropriately, when to speak and remain silent, and how to act like a young lady, especially when it comes to good manners. “It is my duty,” Adelia informed her daughter, “to ensure that you are fully prepared to take your rightful place in Paris society.”

Adelia was the quintessential Parisian woman of style. She had the tall, slender body that would be the envy of any Dior model. Her thick, dark brown, glossy hair was cut in the short pixie style made so famous by Audrey Hepburn. This was the perfect cut to draw attention to her large, brown, almond-shaped eyes, framed by straight eyebrows that tapered off like tiny wings. Adelia applied her favourite lipstick, Pink Champagne, with stunning effect, shaping her naturally arched lips into the fashionable cupid bow.

As a young member of Le Tout-Paris, the fashionable and affluent elite, Adelia always sat in the front row of the fashion shows held at the Maison’s of Chanel, Givenchy, and Dior, her three favourite fashion designers. But of the three, her favourite was Givenchy, who would one day have the honour of designing her wedding dress.

Adelia dressed Tiana exquisitely from the moment she was born. In Paris, she was regularly seen shopping at Baby Dior. When Tiana went to boarding school, they shopped in London at Harrods after each of Tiana’s fittings for her school uniform.

Alan, Tiana’s father, had insisted that their daughter attend an international school where she would mix with students from all over the world. “I want her to be open-minded and aware of what’s happening in the world. I will not have our daughter grow up to be a snob who has no concept of how people less fortunate live,” he told Adelia.

“Bien Alain, I agree, as long as she goes to Finishing School once she graduates.”

“Or Oxford or Cambridge,” Alan replied with a smile.

Whilst her father's study was his private domain, Tiana's mother held court in the drawing room on the first floor. This was the most elegant room in the house, with its bank of floor-to-ceiling windows and double French doors that opened out to a balcony fragrant with lemon and orange trees in large ceramic pots, lush ferns, a mixture of white hydrangeas, and cascading flowers in baskets falling over the wrought iron railings.

Formerly, the entire room had been painted in *blanc de roi*, royal white. However, Adelia wanted to redecorate and decided that all the intricate and ornately carved boiserie and mouldings on the walls, ceiling and tall double doors should be highlighted in gilt.

"I think adding the gold will bring the room alive, Alain."

"Dearest, you have impeccable taste," her husband assured her. "I'm sure it will look wonderful."

The result was spectacular, transforming the room to a level of opulence and sophistication it had not previously possessed. The glittering crystal chandelier and ornate carvings on the marble mantle were now complemented by shimmering gilt highlights, and the massive mirror above the marble mantle gleamed.

A pair of matching three-branch silver candelabra stood at either end of the mantelpiece. Adelia made sure the candles were lit when they entertained important guests for the evening, adding a magical flicker to the already opulent atmosphere. And it was in this room that Tiana's mother held one of her own weekly afternoon rituals.

Every Monday afternoon at three o'clock precisely, a priest, who might well be a Bishop or Cardinal, visited Adelia in her drawing room to share afternoon tea and discuss the charities she supported. When her guest arrived for the first time, Adelia would enquire, "China or Indian?" before pouring the steaming tea of choice into delicate Limoges porcelain teacups. An assortment of delicious little sandwiches, scones, clotted cream and damson jam, chocolate *éclairs* and *glacé petits fours* were offered and eaten midst the murmur of serious conversation.

Once Tiana was ten years old, her mother insisted she make a brief appearance in the drawing room after school to meet her guest and respond politely to enquiries about her health, school and so forth before excusing herself. Tiana would then dash down to the kitchen where Maria, their cook, would have her tea and hot, buttered raisin toast waiting for her on the scrubbed pine kitchen table. “Phew, I’m glad that’s over for another week,” Tiana would say to Maria with a cheeky grin.

When Tiana was older and home for the school holidays, her mother still expected her to come and make polite conversation whilst afternoon tea was brought in and laid out. She told Tiana that it was good training for the future. “It is essential that you know how to speak to people at all levels of society, Tiana, including how to address the clergy hierarchy.”

“Oui Maman,” Tiana responded, wondering how many more weekly meetings she would have to endure as part of her mother’s training.

She decided she had to figure out an escape plan. *There must be a way to get out of these boring conversations.*

Driving home from the airport to start her summer holiday, Tiana was busy rehearsing how she would start the conversation with her papa about smoking cigars when André, the family chauffeur, told her that her father had left on an emergency business trip. “He said to tell you, mademoiselle, that he is *very* sorry and will make it up to you when he returns.”

“Darn it, André, I had something very important to talk to papa about.”

“Never mind, Mademoiselle Tiana, there’s always afternoon tea with Madame,” he teased.

Tiana sighed, “Just my luck. I must come up with an escape plan, André. Maman would kill me for saying it, but they’re all so old and incredibly dull.”

“Well, Mademoiselle, Madame has a new priest visiting her today.”

“Really? As old and decrepit as all the rest, no doubt?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that exactly.”

“No?” Tiana said, puzzled by the amusement she saw in André’s eyes in the rear-view mirror.

But André would say no more.

“Well, you’ve got me curious, André,” Tiana said.

Once home and wanting to end the ordeal as soon as possible, Tiana hurried up the stairs to the drawing room, leaving André to take her bags to her bedroom.

“Good afternoon, Maman, I’m home,” she said as she walked in. All she saw was the back of the black soutane worn by the priest talking to her mother as she moved to sit in her favourite chair.

“Ah, Tiana, your home at last. Do come in,” her mother said, at which point her guest turned around.

Tiana stared in complete shock. *Holy cow!* Her thoughts whirled around in her confused brain as she stood there, immobilised, staring.

Her mother looked shocked. “Tiana,” she said, “mind your manners please, prêtre attention.” Then, turning to her guest, she said, “Father, allow me to introduce my daughter, Tiana. Tiana, I would like you to meet The Very Reverend Philippe Gagnon. Father Gagnon is filling in for Father Aubry, who is currently in hospital.”

It wasn’t the words so much as her mother’s *tone* that snapped Tiana out of her trance, only to be completely let down by her body. She could feel the blush slowly creeping up her neck and willed it to stop. But no, it kept rising until her cheeks were suffused with a reddish glow. She felt mortified.

Tiana felt her throat constricting, forcing her to clear it. “Ahem, Ahem,” - swallow. Finally, she managed to whisper, “Father.”

And then she experienced the ultimate betrayal: her hands. *Oh, please, no*, she prayed. *Don’t let him take my hand.* But her prayers went unanswered. Stepping forward gracefully, Father Gagnon took her sweaty palm in his strong, cool hand and then placed his other hand on top.

Tiana felt an electric charge go through her body, giving her sensations she had never experienced before in places she had not known existed and for which she had no words. She could barely raise her eyes above his chin. But then she saw the slight quiver at the corners of his lips and just knew that he was making every effort to restrain them from a full-blown grin.

“Tiana, how lovely to meet you. Will you be joining us for tea?” he said, his voice washing over her like warm treacle.

“Oh no!” Tiana blurted out, looking imploringly at her mother, who immediately stepped in.

“As Tiana has just arrived home from the airport, Father, no doubt she would like to go and freshen up,” she said, glaring at Tiana.

“Of course. Well, Tiana, it’s been a pleasure.”

She glanced up at him, confirming that he was the most handsome man she’d ever seen in her entire life, let alone a priest. “Father,” she said, bobbing her head and turning; she willed herself to walk, not run, from the room.

Once outside the drawing room, she rushed upstairs to her bedroom and threw herself onto her bed. Rolling over onto her back, she stared at the delicate floral design in the ceiling, replaying what had just happened at her mother’s ‘Monday Afternoon Tea’. *I could die of embarrassment. Oh, mon dieu, what a fool I made of myself. What must he think? ‘Stupid child’! Maman will be furious that I embarrassed her. Holy shit.*

On the other hand, Adelia looked horrified as she watched her daughter respond to meeting Father Gagnon.

Why wasn’t I warned that a younger priest would be coming to replace Father Aubry this week? Oh, if only Alain had been here, I could have sent Tiana to him instead. She doesn’t understand the danger. Never again.

CHAPTER TWO

Tiana couldn't stop thinking about Father Gagnon. She daydreamed about him at the oddest times, especially before she fell asleep at night. *His blond hair against the black soutane, My God! It's just not fair for a priest to be that handsome. I wonder what he looks like in ordinary clothes.*

Lost in one of her daydreams, Tiana didn't hear her mother enter her room until her mother's stern voice broke her reverie.

"Tiana, I'm speaking to you."

"Oh, excuse-moi Maman, I didn't hear you."

"Clearly. Tiana, pack your bags. I've just spoken to your papa, and we'll meet him in Greece. We'll stay with your Aunt Vivienne and the family on their yacht."

The news was completely unexpected, and for a moment, Tiana felt bitterly disappointed. For the first time ever, she had been looking forward to attending the next 'Monday Afternoon Tea'. She was longing to see Father Gagnon again.

Tiana's eyes dropped as her eyebrows drew together, and the shadow of a frown slipped across her face as her mother watched her.

Oh well, Tiana reasoned, at least now I get to see papa and talk to him about smoking cigars.

And then she remembered that she also wanted to talk to her aunt. *Perfect, I can speak to Aunt Vivienne about maman.*

Her father was there to greet them once they boarded the yacht, and Tiana couldn't wait to get him to herself.

"Papa, can we escape from the family? There's something I want to talk to you about, well, two things actually."

"Of course, darling, we'll go ashore tomorrow morning for breakfast, and you can tell me all about it."

The following morning, after ordering breakfast, Alan said, "So tell me, darling, what is it that's so important to discuss?"

"Well, Papa, I've decided I want to learn about the cigar distribution side of the business."

"Good heavens, Tiana, what brought this on?"

"Well, I love the aroma of cigars, and I've seen how much you and your friends enjoy smoking them. From what you've told me, what goes into making them sounds fascinating."

"Oh, come on, Tiana, I know you too well. There's more to it than you're telling me, although I can't imagine what."

"Well, there is something."

"I knew it."

Tiana opened her bag and pulled out the page from Tatler.

"I want to be like Lady Scott-Fernsby and smoke cigars. Look Papa. It's all the rage."

"Good God, Tiana, are you serious?" he said, a look of utter amazement on his face.

"Yes, Papa."

Alan sipped his coffee, and there was a lengthy pause.

"You understand there's more to it than simply lighting up?"

"Yes, of course, Papa."

More silence.

“And if I were to agree to this, Tiana, I would have to be sure that you genuinely loved every aspect involved in producing the final product, the perfect handmade cigar. Cigars are a passion for those involved in the industry, both the creation and the smoking of them.”

“I know how much you and your friends enjoy smoking cigars, Papa.”

“Yes, Tiana, but it’s a long journey from planting the seeds to smoking the cigar. Once the seedling becomes a mature plant, the next step is the curing barn. When the plant goes in, it’s a verdant green, and then, as the plant dries out, it turns into a rich brown.

“Tell me if I’m boring you.”

“No, no Papa, go on.”

“Then, after removing the ammonia through fermentation, the tobacco is packed into bales of cardboard or wood and left to age and mature and further round out the flavours. Some warehouses will have tobacco that’s five or six years old. All the tobacco leaves used to come from Cuba, but now they might come from Puerto Rico, Colombia, Nicaragua, or the Dominican Republic.”

“Gosh, so many steps. So how does it become a cigar?”

“Well, the leaves have to be blended. Often, cigar factory managers create new blends. It’s an absolute art, Tiana. It may take two years of experimentation, combining different leaves to develop a new and unique blend that is the perfect marriage of texture, flavour, and balance.

“Then, once the blend has been selected, the buncher will combine the leaves using a traditional method, and the roller turns the leaf into a cigar. Amazingly, one cigar roller can make up to five hundred cigars in a day. But that’s extreme. It’s more usual for rollers to produce one hundred and fifty to two hundred a day.”

“Goodness, I’d love to see them do that.”

“It’s amazing to watch,” Alan said. “But that’s not all because, for the next six months to two years, the cigars are placed in a cedar-lined ageing room. Finally, they’re banded, boxed and ready to be shipped off, and that’s where we come into the picture.”

“Wow, no wonder the whole thing takes so long.”

“Well, if you’re truly serious about wanting to be involved in this aspect of our business, then I’m prepared to consider taking you on as a trainee.”

“Oh my God, *really?*”

“Yes, but you must be prepared to learn everything about the process, and we haven’t even touched upon how to store, light up, and smoke a cigar yet.”

“Oh, I will, Papa, I will, I promise.”

“One reason I’m prepared to do this, Tiana, is because the women in the families involved in the cigar business will often smoke themselves. So, I can hardly, in good faith, ban you from smoking. Of course, you will not be smoking anything until you’re eighteen and have graduated from Marymount. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Papa.”

Secondly, I can’t imagine anything more wonderful than involving you in this part of our family business.”

“Oh, thank you, Papa.”

“It so happens that last year, a friend introduced me to a cigar created by the Arguello family. Because I loved it so much, I decided to extend my business trip to the United States to visit the factory in Ybor City in Tampa, Florida. There I met all the family. Since then, Juan Arguello and I have become good friends, and we’re discussing becoming one of their European distributors.

“I think it would be a good idea for me to take you to visit the family on one of your school holidays. There, you would learn from the Master. You already speak Spanish, thanks to Nanny B, so that’s a real bonus. What do you think of that idea, Tiana?”

“It’s a brilliant idea, Papa. I’m so excited. But what about maman, do you think she will approve?”

“You leave your mother to me.”

“Definitely,” Tiana said.

After ordering a fresh pot of coffee, Alan said, “So Tiana, what was the second thing you wanted to talk to me about? I seem to remember you said ‘two’ things.”

“Oh, yes.” Tiana hesitated, then said, “I wondered if you believe in love at first sight.”

“Goodness me, you *are* full of surprises today,” Alan laughed.

Tiana couldn’t help grinning, “Well?”

“I do.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Tiana, really. When I first saw your mother, it was love at first sight.”

“Oh my *goodness*, you never told me that before.”

“Well, you never asked me that question before.”

“So, how did it happen?”

“Well, it was in Monaco, and I had been invited to a party. The sun was about to set, and I saw your mother standing on the terrace, looking out at the ocean. She was a vision, tall and slender, with a golden suntan. She wore a long, floaty, white dress with shoestring straps, and it was synched in at the waist with a wide, long blue sash tied in a soft bow at the back. Her hair was long then, and she had it pulled up in a ponytail, and she wore large, gold hoop earrings. She took my breath away.”

“Holy cow, Papa, I can’t believe you remember so much detail. You’re such a romantic.”

“It’s a vision locked into my memory, Tiana. There and then, I said to myself, *that’s the woman I will marry*. There was a fragility about your mother, and I wanted to protect her and take care of her forever.”

“I can’t believe I’ve never heard this story before,” Tiana said, gazing at her father in awe.

“Well, it’s true, and we were married within a year. But you’re only fifteen, Tiana. Surely you haven’t lost your heart to someone already?”

“Oh no, Papa. It’s just something that Veronica and I were discussing. You know whether or not it could happen.”

The lie slipped out so fast that Tiana barely registered a twinge of guilt.

I can't speak to anyone about this, only Vron.

Adelia was waiting to speak to Alan when they returned to the yacht. “So what did our daughter have to say, chéri?”

“Oh, she just wanted to discuss possibilities for becoming part of the business. We’re in the early stages of the discussion. But she did say something unexpected. She asked me if I believed in ‘love at first sight’. Can you believe it? I, of course, answered in the affirmative and told her about the first time I saw you, my love, and fell head over heels.”

Adelia looked shocked.

“What is it, darling? Are you alright?” Alan asked.

“Yes, yes, just a little taken back, like you,” Adelia replied. “Did she mention any person of interest?”

“No. It’s just something she and Veronica discussed, as no doubt teenage girls do.”

“I see,” Adelia said.

Leaving her husband, Adelia hurried down to their cabin. She collapsed into a chair, overcome by dizziness and nausea, triggered by Alain’s account of Tiana’s ‘love at first sight’ question. *Mon dieu, this is far worse than I thought.* Suddenly, the memory of seeing Nicolas for the first time flashed into her mind, and her eyes widened in fear. *This is the first treacherous step and must never go any further.*

Back on board, Tiana left her father to look for her Aunt Vivienne. She found her on the top deck reading and said, “Aunt Vivienne, can I speak to you about something important in private?”

“Of course, my dear,” Vivienne said, looking surprised. “How about we go down to my cabin? I want to get changed anyway.”

Once in the cabin, Tiana said, “Aunt Vivienne, I’m so worried about maman. A while ago, I walked into the sitting room, and she was crying. She is so sad sometimes, and then at other times, she seems fine. As long as I can remember, she’s been like this. I don’t understand why, and I think it might be because of me.”

Vivienne looked stunned. “Oh, Tiana,” she said, “what on earth do you mean it might be something to do with you?”

“Well, papa said he thought it might be because maman couldn’t have more children. So having me must have caused the problem.”

“Well, Tiana, I know your mother wanted a large family, which may be why she gets sad. But Tiana, the fact that she can’t have more is purely a medical issue and certainly not something you should blame yourself for.”

“That’s what Papa and Nanny B said. But Nanny B thought you might know another reason for maman’s sadness.”

“No, chérie, I don’t. I think the best thing you can do is show your mother lots of love and stop blaming yourself for something that has nothing to do with you.”

Since all three adults had responded the same way, Tiana took their advice and let that guilt go. But demonstrating her love would be a challenge.

I’ll have to get creative, she decided.

Later that evening, Vivienne took Adelia aside and said, "I have to talk to you alone - now!"

"Goodness, Vivienne, what on earth's the matter?" Adelia said, following her sister, who walked briskly to the other end of the deck.

Vivienne repeated her conversation with Tiana. "But the worst part was that I had to lie through my teeth, Adelia," Vivienne said, her expression reflecting the anger Adelia heard in her voice.

"Mon dieu, I had no idea Tiana was even aware of how I felt. She did walk in on me a while back and caught me crying. It was the day of the anniversary of the loss, Vivienne. The pain and guilt never goes away."

Frowning, Vivienne said, "Well, I thought you should know that Tiana is taking it all very personally and is worried about you."

"That's terrible. I promise I'll be more discreet. I'm so sorry you were put in such a frightful position, Vivienne, especially after all the support you gave me."

"It's been so long, Adelia. I thought you would have come to terms with it by now."

"I wish it worked like that, Vivienne. I do."

Her voice softening, Vivienne said, "Well, now that you're aware of how Tiana is feeling, I know you'll find a way to reassure her."

"Bien sûr, I'll give it some thought. She mustn't know that we talked about this. I'll come up with a plan."

After her sister left to join the family, Adelia stood on deck, grasping the railings and gazing out to sea. *Am I still being punished for my sins, but now through my daughter? This is my wake-up call. I've burdened her with my pain and sorrow. I have to make it up to her. We must become closer so I can protect her.*

CHAPTER THREE

It was 1953 when sixteen-year-old Adelia first set eyes on Father Nicolas Brune. He came out to stand next to Father Allard, the parish priest of Notre-Dame de l'Assomption de Passy. Adelia was sitting in the pew between her mother and her best friend, Olivia when she saw him. She dug her elbow into Olivia's ribs, and they both turned to each other and grinned.

As soon as they left the Church, Adelia told Olivia, "I didn't expect we'd get such a young priest. Can you believe how handsome he is, Liv?"

Olivia laughed. "I won't tell Charles you said that. Come on, let's give him the once over."

They walked to the adjoining garden, where a 'welcome party' was being held for the new assistant priest. Adelia watched Father Allard skilfully guide Father Brune through the crowd of parishioners, ensuring he met the most influential families.

"He looks rather uncomfortable," Adelia said. "I don't think he likes being the centre of attention."

"Well, you don't have time to rescue him. If we don't hurry, we'll be late for the cinema, and Charles and Damien will be furious with us for making them miss the start and BB."

“Charles is obsessed with Brigitte,” Adelia said. “He can’t stop talking about her after we see her films. ‘She’s *so* sexy,’ he raves. He wants me to dress more like her.”

“What does that mean?”

“You know, those tailored polka-dot pants, the off-shoulder neckline.”

“Oh, are you going to?”

“Yes, but not because of Charles. I like that Brigitte has her own style and dresses the way she wants now. I’m sick of looking like a younger version of my mother. Have you seen those boring photos in *Elle*? I want to look awesome like Brigitte.”

“Well, I love the gingham dresses she wears,” Olivia said. “Who would think that gingham could look so *à la mode*? It’s so weird, though, seeing her up on the big screen after seeing her growing up in the neighbourhood.”

“I know. Maman and her mother, Anne-Marie, were friends from church. A couple of years ago, we were in Saint-Tropez, and we bumped into the Bardot family. They were a little ‘*avant-garde*’, maman said, but otherwise just like us.”

“Damien thinks Brigitte is incredibly sexy, too.”

“Has Damien asked you to do it yet?”

“No, what about Charles?”

“Not yet, but I expect him to pressure me once I’ve left school. You know, ‘Come on, Adelia, so and so is doing it’. They want you to have sex, but they want to marry a virgin; it’s so not fair.”

“Guess what? Damien told me that Paul and Lucile have done it.”

“No way. How does he know?”

“Paul told him. Lucile will be mortified he’s telling everyone, especially if it’s not true. Oh look, Father Brune is looking at you.”

Adelia glanced back at Father Brune, and he gave her a shy smile. Caught off-guard, Adelia blushed.

“Oh my goodness, look at you two,” Olivia said, laughing.

“Don’t be absurd,” Adelia said.

Adelia was in her final term at the Institut De La Tour and was focussed on her studies. She was an average student and had no desire to pursue higher education. The fact that there would be limited opportunities to pursue a career after she graduated was of little concern to her. She enjoyed a privileged life that meant she was free of any concerns for her material welfare. She could do whatever she wanted until she married, provided it met with her parents' approval.

She continued to see Father Brune through the regular activities and events at the parish. Then, one Saturday, they had an unexpected encounter at the local markets. It was a warm summer's afternoon, and she was busy rummaging through the books at a second-hand bookstall. She was searching for volume one of *The Second Sex* when she heard a voice behind her say, "Hello again." She turned to see Father Brune standing there with his shy smile.

"Hello, Father, what are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for books on the afterlife and counselling the sick and dying. Facing judgement after death and being sent to either heaven, hell, or purgatory is a scary concept, and I think my pastoral care skills need improving."

Adelia was taken aback by his honesty and found it touching. All the priests she had known seemed to perceive themselves as dwelling in an all-knowing, rarefied atmosphere well above the laity.

"Why are you here, Adelia?"

"Well—umm, I'm just looking around to see if there's anything interesting." She lied, knowing full well that the church had banned the book she was looking for.

"Do you enjoy reading Adelia?"

"I do; I read a lot."

"What else do you enjoy doing now that you've left school?"

"Oh, all the usual things: shopping, tennis, the cinema, parties. We have a country house we go to in les Yvelines, and in the winter, my parents take the whole family skiing. My elder sister Vivienne, brother-in-law and young nephew all come with us. It's a family tradition, things like that."

"It sounds like a very full life."

And then, just as Adelia was about to ask Father Brune about himself, he said, “Well, I’d better be on my way back to the parish. See you in Church, Adelia.”

But in the new year, there was a subtle shift in their relationship.

It started when Adelia was cycling in the Bois de Boulogne on a crisp spring morning and suddenly saw Father Brune ahead on his bike. She called out, and he stopped and waited for her to catch up.

“Adelia, how are you?” he asked.

“Great, thank you, Father.”

They chatted for a few minutes, and then Adelia said, “Would you like to get a cup of coffee, Father?”

“Good idea. Let’s get out of the cold for a while.”

Once settled, she asked, “Did you see your family during your holiday, Father?”

“I did. I saw my mother; she’s in hospital. She hasn’t been well this last year.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry; I hope she’s feeling better. Is your family far from here?”

“The family have a farm in North Champagne.”

“Do you have brothers and sisters?”

“I have, or had, nine older brothers and sisters. I was the last to arrive.”

“Wow, and did you like living on a farm?”

“No. My father worked from dawn to dusk and expected the same from my older brothers. But I knew I wanted something different, although I wasn’t sure what that might be. Of course, my father expected that I would someday join my brothers.

“But that all changed in 1940 with the war. After the north of France was lost, we found ourselves in the German Occupation Zone. My father and four of my brothers were taken prisoner and sent to the work camps in Germany.”

“Oh, how terrible. What did you do?”

“At first, we were completely devastated, but my mother said we had to keep the farm going for when they came back. My three older sisters and brother were

all teenagers in 1940, but she trained them. My brother Jules was thirteen, and he used to drive the horse and cart, taking my mother and sisters out to the fields. We were lucky we didn't lose our horse to the Germans. I was ten in 1940, and my brother Claude was eleven. We both went to school, of sorts, but we had our chores, too. We all did our best to keep it together."

"Your mother sounds amazing. My parents don't talk about the war at all."

"When the Germans first arrived, it was complete madness, Adelia. Our nearest large town was Reims, and they took over all the champagne houses. The soldiers were stealing millions of bottles of champagne, getting drunk and causing utter chaos. They had to bring in a top-brass German to bring it all under control.

"I've never heard that story before."

"The Germans took over many of the school buildings, completely disrupting the schooling system. Claude and I went to a school set up in the house of one of the wealthy farm owners. There wasn't enough paper, so we used slates and chalk! And then there was the food shortage, even for us living on the farm. We were always hungry."

"I'm lucky I was only three when the war began. What happened after the war? Did your father and brothers come back?" Adelia asked, completely absorbed in Father Brune's account of his experiences during the German occupation.

"Three of my brothers eventually returned after liberation, but not my father and eldest brother Henri. They died somewhere in Germany."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, your poor mother. How old were your other brothers?"

"Well, by 1945, Charles was twenty-five, Antoine was twenty-three, and Gabriel, a twin, was twenty-one. My mother had two sets of twins. So, after the war, my four older brothers decided to keep the farm, expand operations, and run it together. Jules was eighteen by then.

"They joined JAC, the Catholic Agricultural Youth, and attended numerous educational activities that taught them how to organise themselves in cooperatives. Then, they started to modernise the farm and use new techniques to improve the farm's production. Two of my sisters married and left to live on

their husbands' farms. My sister Jeanne, Jules' twin, worked as a hairdresser in Reims. Claude was sixteen, and I was fifteen, so we were still at school."

"So, when did you decide you wanted to be a priest?"

"Goodness, Adelia, I don't think I've ever talked so much about my family," Father Brune said softly. "But I have to get back to the parish, so I'll save that part of the story for another time."

"I'd like that," Adelia said, smiling up at him as he rose to leave.

Adelia continued to see Father Brune, but there was no opportunity for a private conversation. Then, one day, he said, "Adelia, I have a day off next week; maybe you'd like to join me for another coffee?"

"That would be lovely. I have to go to the Ninth Arrondissement to see if my father's barometer will be fixed when my parents return from America. Maybe we could meet at the café at number two, Rue des Martyrs, and you can tell me the next part of your story."

He laughed.

"Very well, number two, Rue des Martyrs it is. Shall we say ten o'clock?"

"Perfect."

Since Father Brune had invited her to join him for coffee, Adelia had been thinking about him a lot—so much so that she was finding it difficult to sleep. She thought him handsome when she first saw him at Mass, but now, as she got to know him better, her attraction had become very physical.

She could feel the energy flooding her body as she became more animated around him. She wanted to touch him but, of course, could not. The strength of the sexual energy frightened her at the same time as she longed to be closer to him.

What if he touches me? I'd faint! What if he kisses me with those beautiful lips?

She shivered with delight at the thought of it.

Father Brune was taller than Adelia, well built, and fit from taking boys for sport and riding everywhere on his bicycle. He kept his dark brown, wavy hair short at the sides and longer on the top, which resulted in the occasional strand falling onto his forehead. She found it endearing. But it was his voice that got her heart racing.

His voice, the way it softens when he talks to me. It's so - intimate.

She could hardly wait for the day when they would meet for coffee. And then she had a sudden, shocking realisation - *I've fallen for him.*

When the day finally arrived, just the thought of what to wear to meet Father Brune threw her into a turmoil of indecision. Finally, she decided that a 'soft and feminine' look would be most appropriate. She settled on a pale pink sleeveless shirt and a softly pleated mid-length skirt in a Liberty floral print in pastel colours. It was still cool in the mornings, so she wore her white mohair cardigan with pearl buttons down the front and then slipped into her taupe ballerina flats. She added her Hermès bracelet and a light dab of pink lipstick as a final touch. Now confident in her choice of clothing, she cycled to the métro and arrived at number two, Rue des Martyrs, just before ten o'clock, and Father Brune was waiting for her.

"Adelia, right on time," Father Brune said as he got up to pull out her chair.

"What coffee would you like?"

"A café crème please Father."

After placing the order, Father Brune said, "You mentioned you have to see if your father's barometer is ready."

"Yes. It stopped working, and my father was upset when my mother removed it, saying she'd put it into storage. But of course, she hadn't. She's getting it repaired as a surprise for him when they return from their trip to America. Gillery is one of the few craftsmen in Paris who can restore mercury barometers.

They need special weights and fine barometer needles; it's all extremely exact. He also gilds old frames and mirrors. It's important to know where you can get such work done."

"I'm impressed by how knowledgeable you are about barometers, Adelia."

Adelia laughed. "It's all part of my mother's training, Father. But enough about barometers; you promised to tell me how you decided to become a priest."

"Did I decide? Well, as I mentioned, my brothers joined the JAC, and I joined the JEC, the Christian Student Youth. I also used to go on holiday camps, which were supervised and run by priests through the French Catholic Youth Association.

"One day, one of the priests asked me if I'd thought of becoming a priest. I was stunned by the question and said, 'No, Father, I have not'. He said I should pray to God and ask him to show me if I had a vocation. He also said he would like to speak to my mother, which he subsequently did. She was over the moon at the idea that one of her sons might become a priest."

"She must have felt so proud that the priest showed interest in you."

"Yes, she was. Of course, if my father had been there, it would never have been an option. I felt special being approached by the priest, an experience I wasn't used to having. So I did pray, although I had no idea how I would know if I was being 'called' to God or what to expect if my prayers were answered. I was then faced with the decision to go to the lycée and eventually join my brothers on the farm or go to the seminary and become a priest. I picked the seminary.

"Of course, I had no concept of what it meant to dedicate my life to the priesthood. I was thinking of it more as an alternative to life on the farm. I've never told anybody that before, Adelia. Not exactly a 'Road to Damascus' story!"

She smiled and said, "Please go on, Father."

"So I went to the seminary at Lille."

"What was it like being in the seminary?"

There was a lengthy pause as Father Brune slumped and his shoulders hunched as he stared at the table.

Finally, his voice hushed, he said, “I think I could learn my pastoral care skills from you, Adelia. You’ve got me thinking and talking about things I’ve never allowed myself to examine deeply before, and I’ve certainly never spoken about them to anyone, even my confessor.”

“Was it so awful?”

The look of distress that washed over his face and settled in his eyes broke her heart.

She reached out and put her hand over his. The look he gave her was so full of emotion that she held her breath. They sat gazing at each other until he finally looked down at their hands.

He lifted her hand, turned it over and ran his finger around her palm, sending tiny shivers down her spine, before he gently placed her hand back down on the table.

“Adelia,” he said, in that voice she knew he reserved only for her. “Adelia, we cannot do this. I cannot do anything that might put your soul in danger. I would rather die than cause you harm.”

“It’s too late,” she whispered. “I’ve fallen in love with you, Nicolas. I have to keep seeing you.”

She held his gaze, her eyes shining with love, until he said, “My sweet Adelia, I’ve never felt this way. I can’t bear the thought of bringing you harm, but, dear God, I can’t bear the thought of not seeing you again. I don’t know what to do.”

“It *can*’t be a sin to love someone,” she said.

“But I’m a priest, Adelia. You know what that means. If anyone should find out -”

“We won’t let anyone find out. We’ll be careful. No one will know, just us.”

“All my life, Adelia, I’ve only known loneliness despite my large family. I’ve ached for connection and thought that’s what I’d find when I finally heard God call my name. I waited and waited, but I did not hear the call.”

Adelia leaned forward, her eyes glued to his face.

“I thought it would happen when I was ordained at Reims Cathedral and received the grace of the Holy Spirit. I thought my prayers would finally be answered, and my spiritual nature would be permanently changed, and I would

experience that change.” His voice became a whisper, “But I felt nothing, Adelia.”

Adelia felt tight in her chest as she listened to his desperate search for proof of his calling.

Looking down, Father Brune paused and took another sip of coffee before he continued. “I studied hard all through the seminary. I wanted to please God Adelia, so I submitted to the strict observance of the rules and the deferential obedience to superiors in a profoundly hierarchical system.”

“It sounds terrible. Did you make any friends there?”

“I did, but they were superficial friendships. We were not allowed to touch or hug each other or enter into the room of another seminarian or novice. We were warned of the dangers of sexual attraction and feelings that had to be suppressed. What does that tell you about life in the seminary? The only way sex was discussed was in terms of self-control and sin. That didn’t stop some boys from becoming enamoured with each other, of course, but I kept away from them.

“Once I got to the Catholic University of Lille, I loved the academic side of things, my studies in philosophy and theology. I was inspired by the teachings of Glorieux and Cardijn and ‘Catholic Action’ and the movement to rechristianise French society through the apostolate of the laity. I was successful in my studies and felt less of a failure. I dreamt of becoming part of the missionary role of the church, developing instruction among the working class.”

“Oh goodness, how did you end up here with us then?”

“I was given no choice. A different path was chosen for me within the church’s hierarchical structure, which felt threatened by the new movement. So the rising desire I’d felt to save souls was crushed. Of course, we were constantly told to heed God’s call and to stay faithful to our vocation. One teacher spoke of having a love affair with our Lord. Oh, how I envied him.

“I thought that after I was ordained, I would find companionship amongst other priests, but I’ve found the priests barely speak to each other. I now see that despite all my study and training, I had no idea what the life of a parish priest would be like, the pastoral demands, the lack of intimacy. I’ve met a few priests now who’ve turned to alcohol or gambling to cope. And through it all, the loneliness has been like a hard stone that sits inside me.”

“Oh, Nicolas,” she whispered.

“And now you, Adelia, have opened my eyes with your gentle questions and revealed the truth of who I am. I am a fraud.”

Adelia was devastated by his words.

“Oh Nicolas, no, no, you must not say that. Oh, I can’t bear that you would judge yourself so harshly. How could God not love you, not hear your prayers.”

Father Brune sat with his head bowed and finally said, “I’ve never seen myself with such clarity, Adelia. But that’s only one part of the revelation.” Taking her hand in his, he looked at her distraught face and said, “I love you too, Adelia. I must have done from the moment I first saw you in the church garden.”

Adelia would have thrown herself into his arms but for the table between them and the curious eyes of those sitting nearby.

“We have to talk in private,” she said. My parents left for Havre yesterday and sailed for New York in the *Liberte* today, so I have the house to myself for the next ten weeks, apart from the servants. Promise me you’ll come tonight so we can decide what we should do together. Come at eight-thirty, and I’ll let you in the front door.”

“Adelia, are you sure?”

“Yes, yes,” she said, “I’m sure.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KISANE SLANEY

Kisane Slaney became one of Sydney's top photographic models in the 1960s before retiring in the 1970s to spend the next twelve years caring full-time for her four children. When her youngest was four, Kisane took a new path, entering Murdoch University as a mature-age student. After completing her BA and whilst working in the fields of child sexual abuse and domestic violence, she went on to achieve First Class Honours, an APRA Scholarship and her PhD. In 2006, Kisane returned to academia as a Senior Lecturer in Counselling at the School of Social Work, Curtin University, Perth.

Following the self-publishing of her first novel, *The Heiress*, Kisane plans two more. The next one, *The Three Sisters*, is inspired by the extraordinary lives of three of her great-aunts. She has three very cool grandchildren, is an avid movie fan and lives with her bossy cat, Venus, in the beautiful city of Perth.

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A Final Note from Kisane:

Getting books noticed nowadays is challenging, especially for self-published authors. If you enjoyed *The Heiress*, please consider leaving a review, just a sentence or two, at your favourite ebook store. I will read them all and would be extremely grateful.