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Red and Lowering Sky

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PART I



Days of Shadow

*For we are but of yesterday,
and know nothing,
because our days upon earth are a shadow.*

Bildad the Shuhite to Job, 8:9

*Monday's child is fair of face,
Tuesday's child is full of grace,
Wednesday's child is full of woe,
Thursday's child has far to go,
Friday's child is loving and giving,
Saturday's child works hard for its living.
But the child that's born on the Sabbath day,
Is bonny and blithe, and good and gay.*

"A Week of Birthdays," Mother Goose

Infernal Creatures



Miss Livingstone, the Misses Carrolltons have come to call.” Trista turned to the door, where the Livingstones’ butler, Rokeby, stood, left eyebrow arched high with elegant English disdain. He was wearing a leather apron and had dirty hands; he had obviously been polishing the silver.

But before Trista could respond, Charmaine and Colette Carrollton brushed by him, Charmaine pouting and Colette rolling her eyes. “Oh, Rokeby, that was just no fun at all,” Charmaine grumbled.

“Your pardon, miss, I’m sure,” Rokeby said with a mocking bow and glided away.

“He knows which of us is which,” Charmaine said, throwing herself down on the small bed. “He’s just too uppity to say it.”

It was very easy to tell the Carrollton twins apart, though they were identical—perfectly identical—twins. Both were short and curvaceous, with glossy black hair and dark eyes and the same gamine heart-shaped face. But even when they were standing perfectly still and quiet, even in photographs when they were suitably grave for the solemn event, it was clear that Colette was the more mature and sober one, and Charmaine was flighty, mischievous, and flirtatious. Trista had never been able to figure out if it was because Colette’s expression had grace and dignity or if it was because Charmaine’s eyes sparkled as if she were about to have a fit of the giggles. Or both.

“Well, I expect it’s your own fault this time,” Trista said, turning back to arranging her dried eucalyptus. “It’s really beneath him to answer the door since we’re not formally receiving calls yet. What did you do, make poor Susie run him to ground?”

“Of course she did,” Colette answered, settling herself on the edge of the single straight-backed Windsor chair. “And it’s because of her silliness that he won’t announce me properly.”

“I honestly think that Mother was right when she said that the women in this town only come to adore Rokeby, not to call on us,” Trista said dryly.

The twins exchanged a quick look of satisfaction and relief. Trista had not made the slightest mention of her mother in the year after her death. Phoebe Racine Dodge Livingstone had died on March 30, 1887. It had seemed that the one-year anniversary of her death had been a milestone for Trista, for she had begun to speak of her mother in this sort of offhand manner just last month, though only rarely.

Charmaine then said, “Oh, Colette, stop your complaining. You’d think you were an elderly matron. You’re only eighteen minutes older than me—”

“Than I,” Colette said.

“—than I and in any case, it would seem that old Rokeby would be glad to be called away from scrubbing the flagstones or scouring pots or whatever he was doing,” Charmaine finished triumphantly. In her mind she had scored a point.

“Excuse me,” Trista said, stepping back to view her arrangement with a critical eye, “but do I understand that all this contention is because Rokeby has made a mistake in butler etiquette? Impossible.”

“I’m the eldest daughter,” Colette maintained with unusual vehemence. “He’s supposed to announce me as ‘Miss Carrollton’ and her as ‘Miss Charmaine Carrollton.’ Everyone knows that.”

“At the risk of repeating myself, I must remind you that we’re not receiving callers, that Rokeby was busy in the kitchen polishing the silver, and that Susie is perfectly capable of opening the front door

to let people in who know very well that we are not receiving callers.” Somehow the eucalyptus just wasn’t flowing right; it looked haphazard. “Does this look all bunchy to you?”

“Yes,” Colette said.

“No,” Charmaine said. “Oh, how I love Rokeby. He’s so—so—aristocratic. He must, he simply must have royal blood. Oh—do you think maybe that he’s actually French? A count or something? A duke? And that he had to flee the guillotine, in disguise as a butler during the Bloody Revolution?”

“Since the French Revolution began in 1789, and this is 1888, that would make him over one hundred years old,” Colette observed.

“And he would be much more offended for you to think he was French than if you think he’s a hundred and twenty years old,” Trista said, frowning and snatching the whole bunch of eucalyptus out of the brass pot to start all over again.

“Oh, you two think you’re so smart,” Charmaine grumbled.

“It’s very difficult not to think so during conversations with you, Charmaine,” Colette said with clear affection.

“What? Oh, never mind, I just know you said something clever. Trista”—Charmaine looked around with sudden surprise—“isn’t this Merritt’s room? Whyever are you cleaning Merritt’s room? And by the way, you look like a scullery maid. Your apron is dirty.”

“She doesn’t look like a scullery maid, Charmaine,” Colette said. “A governess, maybe.”

Trista was small, barely over five feet tall, with a wispy waist and delicate frame. She had lovely red-gold hair, a welcome inheritance from her father’s side of the family, with mysterious hazel eyes that sometimes looked smoky brown and sometimes a clear pine green. Her face was heart-shaped, with a small but well-shaped mouth, thin nose, and straight thin brows. She was not extraordinarily pretty, nor was she plain. At first glance she looked the type of girl to be shy, like a small bird, for she was so tiny and seemed fragile. But her direct, assessing gaze and her poise, unusual for a girl of nineteen, were what made her notable in the company of her more flamboyant friends such as the Carrollton twins.

Trista turned to answer, “Yes, Charmaine, I know I look drab in drab colors, but we are in half-mourning, you know, and I flatly refuse to wear that putrid lavender that ancient matrons wear for years. And yes, this is Merritt’s room. I’ve put him back in the schoolroom, for McKean has said that he’ll stay here at The Cedars for a while when he returns, instead of in his flat in town.”

“McKean’s coming home?” Charmaine exclaimed. “When?”

“The SS *Golden Phoenix* docked in Baltimore yesterday,” Trista said with a sigh, knowing that she’d get no more sensible conversation out of Charmaine—if it could be called that—for the rest of the afternoon, only gushings and vaporings over her elder brother. Even sensible Colette’s eyes sparkled. “They decided to ride in. McKean’s telegraph said they couldn’t stand another train or carriage or ship or boat. So I think they should be home late this evening.”

“McKean! McKean’s coming home! Why didn’t you say so, Trista?” Charmaine cried, bounding up and turning to smooth the down comforter she’d mussed while lolling on the bed. “And just look at that window, it’s positively filthy!”

She hurried to the door, leaned out and shrieked, “Mrs. Cross! Mrs. Cross! Oh, here, Elspeth, bring some hot water, vinegar, and clean rags right now. This room is shameful, girl, for shame!” The Carrolltons were practically family, and as such, the servants knew not to pay much attention to Charmaine. Elspeth, the stocky, cheerful upstairs maid, glanced cautiously at Trista.

“Never mind, Elspeth, it’s just a tiny smudge on the window,” Trista said. “I can clean it with my apron.”

“Yes, miss.” She bobbed and disappeared in a great hurry.

“Why didn’t you tell me McKean’s coming home?” Charmaine said, hurrying to check her face and hair in the small shaving mirror on the chest.

“Because I thought you knew since your own brother is with him, and I’m certain Endecott telegraphed your parents when they arrived, just as McKean did,” Trista said patiently, scrubbing the tiny smear on the window with a corner of her apron.

“Oh, bother Endecott, he’s such a—such a—big-brotherly old thing,” Charmaine said. “I thought they weren’t coming back until next month.”

Trista’s elder brother, McKean, and the eldest Carrollton son, Endecott, had been best friends all their lives, they and Vaughn Pascal. The Livingstone, the Carrollton, and the Pascal families were all close friends, since their fathers had been partners in a thriving law practice for almost twenty-five years. Their children had all grown up together, and they were neighbors.

Evangeline Carrollton and Bettina Pascal and Phoebe Livingstone had been best friends their entire married lives. When Phoebe had died in March 1887, it had devastated the Pascal and Carrollton families almost as much as it had the Livingstones. Almost, but of course not quite. Though Phoebe had been dead for over a year, Stockton Livingstone was still living much in seclusion, still in private mourning, not yet rejoining his life. That was why the Livingstones were still not giving or receiving calls, that most important bulwark of Washington, D.C., society. That was why Trista Livingstone, at nineteen years of age, was still wearing half-mourning, why she felt constant helplessness in the face of her father’s pain, why she felt such terrible uncertainty in her role as surrogate mother to her four younger brothers and sisters, and why she was so very glad that McKean was coming home. He was the only person in the world who could help her. He might even be able to help her father heal.

McKean was like that—capable, confident, sure of himself and of his place in the world. He was also reckless, brash, restless, and something of a rake, but that only added to his rough charm. And that was why Charmaine Carrollton was hopelessly in love with him, or so she often insisted, but in fact McKean was a favorite with ladies, all ladies, young awkward twelve-year-olds, ancient society doyennes, maidservants young and old, all of Trista’s and her younger sister Lorna’s friends, stiff and pretentious senators’ wives—it didn’t matter. McKean was dashing and women adored him.

Trista came out of her reverie—the smear had long since disappeared and the window was squeaking in protest—and went back to

the Federal worktable in the corner to wrestle with the eucalyptus. She had missed her friends' last few words and now dutifully attended again.

"—from Cherbourg, you ninny," Colette was saying. "In France."

"But I thought that everyone went to London on the Grand Tour, so I just assumed they'd take ship from there," Charmaine said stubbornly.

"They didn't go to London, they didn't go anywhere in England," Colette said. "They were on the European continent, Charmaine. Paris, Vienna, St. Petersburg. Because they only had six months. So they sailed to St. Petersburg first, and then came back to Vienna, then Paris, then Cherbourg. Which is on the sea. To get the return ship home."

"Well, I don't understand why they didn't go to London—it is the Season you know, and there it is, so close," Charmaine argued.

"So close? Charmaine, it's all the way across the English Channel and all the way up the River Thames!"

"It is? Oh yes, yes, I forgot London's not actually in Europe. Oh, and don't you two exchange those looks. We're just alike, Colette, and I'm as smart as you, I'm just not so unbearably pretentious about it." Charmaine theatrically fell onto the bed and then threw herself back, her arms over her head. "Oh, just think, McKean's actually going to be sleeping—"

"Charmaine! Really!" Colette was appalled.

"You are the silliest creature," Trista said. "It's just my brother, with his hair uncombed and his dusty boots and silly jokes. Get up right now, Charmaine, I've plumped that down comforter way too many times already."

Charmaine rose, the picture of injured dignity. "You have no idea of the deep affection, the esteem, that I hold for McKean, Trista, and I'm sure that he feels the same for me. He's just young and young gentlemen must be allowed to sow their wild oats, as they say, but when he wants to settle down with a mature, discerning, caring woman he'll see how well suited we are."

“Discern this, sister dear,” Colette said with a rare giggle. “You’ve busted your bustle. Again.”

“Oh no, no!” Charmaine wailed. “And this is one of those new Langtry bustles with springs! It’s supposed to retain that elegantly correct Parisian shape.”

Colette and Trista could barely hear her wail, they were laughing so hard. Charmaine was turning to try to see the damage, but the effect was something of a puppy chasing its tail. When she turned, the collapsed bustle, of course, whisked around and disappeared.

“Oh, oh, Charmaine—wise, mature woman of the world—if McKean only knew—” Colette choked.

“Knew what?” he said from the doorway, grinning.

“McKean!” Trista ran and jumped, for she was so tiny and McKean was over six feet tall. He picked her up, whirled her around once, kissed her cheek with a loud smack, and set her down. With his arm still around her waist he said, “C and C, you’re here! What are you doing in my bedroom? And Charmaine, that’s an interesting new fashion. Let me guess—the new soup tureen bustle? Didn’t see many like that in Paris.”

“Oh! You—you’re so—you’re such a—a—grubby, silly little boy!” Charmaine blustered and then backed out of the room in an odd crablike sideways shuffle.

“That’s not what you said—” Colette began with wide-eyed innocence.

“Do shut up, Colette,” Charmaine said. “If you will step aside, you great clomping boor, and let me by.”

“Sure, Char,” he said, bowing in a courtly manner as she practically ran into Trista’s room. It was a major endeavor to undress and then reshape a big inside-out bustle.

“She collapsed it,” Trista explained, rather unnecessarily.

“Tough break,” McKean said sympathetically. “Colette, you look as lovely and graceful and uncollapsed as ever.”

“Thank you,” Colette said calmly. “It’s good to see you, McKean. It was a long ride, I see.”

“Yeah, I really am grubby, huh? I thought I’d come up and clean up a little before making my entrance; didn’t know there’d be a parcel of females in my room. Beautiful, lovely, welcome females, of course.”

He threw some rather worn saddlebags on the spotless, much-plumped bed and ran his hands over his head. His hair, thick and unfashionably short, with a tendency to be spiky, was dusty. He was dressed the way he always dressed for long hard rides—denim jeans, soft leather riding boots, a plain white linen shirt, no waistcoat. McKean was not actually a handsome man; he was more rugged-looking. Even though he was just now twenty-four, his face was weathered, with deep smile creases and sun-squint lines at the corners of his eyes. He always had a deep tan, more akin to a laborer’s or sailor’s than to a fine gentleman’s, and his hair was usually bleached out to a whitish blond. He was tall and athletic, with a little bit of a rough edge about him—though his dark blue eyes were warm and his lips were full and well-formed, both were somewhat jarring in that tough face.

“That stuff smells good. I always forget what it is but I like it,” he told Trista, stretching high. He could touch the sloping ceiling with his fingertips.

“Eucalyptus. Oh, McKean, I’m so glad you’re home, I don’t care if you are grubby,” Trista said. “Have you seen anyone else yet?”

“No, like I said, I just—”

“Good heavens,” Colette said, jumping up from her chair. “What is it?”

It was a spectacular ruckus, obviously coming from downstairs, obviously from the kitchen: women’s terrified screams, the clang of crashing copper pans, crockery breaking.

McKean ran downstairs, followed by Trista and Colette, who unceremoniously picked up their skirts so they could follow McKean’s long strides. Charmaine appeared, properly bustled again, demanding breathlessly, “What is it? A fire? Murderers? Robbers? What is it, McKean?”

He didn't answer as the four of them ran down the stairs, bowling around the great carved banister, through the long back hall to the kitchen. The four of them burst in together.

Mrs. Cross the housekeeper was shrieking and whirling around in a desperate manner, while Mrs. Trimble the cook was down on her hands and knees, crawling around, shouting, "It's all right, it's all right, Mrs. Cross, it's not on you, not now—"

Also down on the floor, flat on his belly, was twelve-year-old Merritt Fielden Livingstone, bane of all servants' existence, and a sore trial to his older sister, Trista, who tried all day every day to keep him out of mischief and keep him healthy. Right now he was halfway under the great oak worktable, saying something, but it was muffled and just sounded like "Oomph—mit hrrr—whoomph—"

Susie the parlormaid came running in, eyes wild, and shrieked, "Oh, Lord save us, Master Merritt, is it snakes again?"

"Snakes!" Colette and Charmaine screeched together, and Charmaine got a death grip on McKean, who tried unsuccessfully to disentangle himself and reassure Mrs. Cross at the same time.

"Calm down, calm down, Mrs. Cross, there's nothing on you. Diggers, what is it? And how many?"

Merritt popped up, grinning with delight. "McKean! Hi! I didn't know you were home yet!"

Mrs. Cross did stop whirling like a mad dervish and pressed both hands to her ample bosom. "Oh, I'll have an apoplexy! That boy will be the death of me—"

"Is it snakes? Merritt, it's not snakes, is it?" Colette pleaded, now perched, rather precariously, on a three-legged stool, with her skirts hiked all the way up to her knees.

"Naw, it's just skinks," Merritt said with disdain. "I just wanted to show them to Mrs. Trimble."

"Skinks! What is a skink! Tell me what a skink is!" Charmaine screamed hysterically, clinging like death to McKean.

"It's just Rosalie and her babies, and you're scaring them. Oomp—rumph—" Merritt said, squirming underneath the table again.

“*We’re scaring them!*” Mrs. Cross said, picking up a long-handled wooden spoon with murder in her eyes, and taking a step toward Merritt’s still-visible lower half.

“Wait—” McKean and Trista said together.

Unfortunately, Rosalie, the biggest, fattest, slimiest-looking lizard that Trista had ever seen, at this point saw fit to attack Mrs. Cross, running out from underneath the table, her mouth opened wide, right to the housekeeper’s shiny half boots. Mrs. Cross screamed again, dropped the wooden spoon, whirled, and ran to cower against the far wall. McKean finally pushed Charmaine away, grabbed a bowl, and upended it over the lizard. Mrs. Trimble made a grab for a smaller lizard that was trying to sneak by behind McKean’s back and managed to capture it.

“Oh, oh, how can you bear it, Mrs. Trimble?” Charmaine said, now clinging to Trista. “I would faint, I just know I would, I may anyway!”

“Please don’t, we’re all too busy,” Colette snapped.

“Oh yes, you’re really busy, teetering up on that stool,” Charmaine said, straightening indignantly. “And McKean can see your bloomers!”

“Do be quiet, Charmaine, McKean doesn’t care about Colette’s bloomers,” Trista said, leading her to a high stool stowed in the corner. “Here, sit up there and be quiet.”

Trista, McKean, and Mrs. Trimble flattened themselves on the floor at the other three sides of the big table, surrounding the lizards, as it were. “How many more, Diggers?” McKean asked.

“Oo—eenk,” Merritt answered.

“Twenty-three? Did he say twenty-three?” Charmaine wailed.

“Master Merritt, I am going to whale you, I mean literally whale the tar out of you,” Mrs. Cross said.

The ancient oak door at the back of the kitchen creaked slowly open, revealing a strong bolt of afternoon sunlight and a little blonde girl with wide blue eyes. “Hullo, everyone. Is it the skinks? Uncle Jumbo’s in the garden.”

“No, no, Dolly, you’ll let them out!” Merritt said, wiggling out from under the table.

“Please! Please let them out!” Charmaine said. “Open the door, Dolly! Wider! Shoo, shoo!”

“I’ve got one, Diggers,” McKean said conversationally. “Slippery little sods, aren’t they?”

Trista suddenly sat up straight. “Dolly. Dolly, what did you say?”

“I said Uncle Jumbo’s in the garden.” Dolly was clearly pleased. Such cool amusement in the eyes of a five-year-old girl was unsettling.

“What—what’s an Uncle Jumbo?” Charmaine asked.

Now, skinks or not, loads of lizards or not, Mrs. Cross rounded the table to loom over McKean’s prone body, waving the wooden spoon. “Mr. McKean, you had better not have brought back any elephants or anteaters or other infernal creatures from those nether lands!”

McKean looked up with righteous indignation. “I didn’t, Cross! Honest!”

“No, he didn’t,” Trista said, sighing as she rose and tried to dust herself off. “Uncle Jumbo’s not a creature, he’s a person. Where is he, Dolly?”

“In the dollhouse. With Penn,” she answered, delight growing in her eyes.

“Well, I suppose—” Trista began, but Rokeby appeared at the door leading into the hallway, in full splendor now—black coat, waistcoat, perfect tie, white gloves.

“Miss Livingstone,” he said, bowing slightly, “the first lady is calling.”

“Thank you, Rokeby. Where have you put her?” Trista asked.

“I have not put her anywhere, since she is neither a chess piece nor an errant house cat,” Rokeby replied, staring very hard at Colette, who blushed and let down her skirts. “She is waiting for you in the morning room, and I took the liberty of telling her you would be with her directly. Directly, miss.”

“Yes, Rokeby,” Trista said meekly and scooted out.

Rokeby looked around the room, eyebrow at full tilt. Everyone was still frozen.

Dolly said conversationally, “The president’s out in the garden, Rokeby. With Penn.”

“Very well,” he said calmly, “I shall go suggest that Mr. Livingstone join them. And then I’ll hurry and return and offer my services, as they are so clearly needed here.” He marched out.

“Rokeby always makes me feel like a—like a naughty little boy,” McKean said.

“Now why would that be, I wonder,” Mrs. Cross snapped.

McKean rolled his eyes—he was facing away from her—as he was struggling to get to his feet, for he had a tiny wiggly lizard in each hand and couldn’t use his hands without squishing them. Colette collected herself before Charmaine could, jumping down and hurrying to help him up, surreptitiously making a face at her sister over his head.

“Wait—” Charmaine said, but it was too late. McKean was upright, and she was still mindful of the skinks.

“Hullo, McKean,” Dolly said a little shyly, throwing her head up to look at him. Only with her eldest brother did she ever seem to be a doll-like child.

“Hi, Dolly dear,” he said. “And what’s this about calling the president ‘Uncle Jumbo’?”

“He said that we might—Penn and I, you see, because we’re still children. He said that his nieces and nephews call him that, and that he’d like it if Penn and I did,” Dolly explained as McKean and Merritt, also now upright, carefully collected Rosalie and her four babies and put them into a pot with a lid. The women scattered to the far corners of the room again, except for the courageous Mrs. Trimble, who started sweeping up the broken crockery.

“He did, huh? Okay, Diggers, is that the last? Scoot along, then—oh no, buddy, I don’t think you’d better set them free in the greenhouse,” McKean said, grabbing Merritt’s shoulders and turn-

ing him. Merritt was headed to the door that led into the greenhouse, which led into the conservatory, which led into the dining room. “I can foresee great tragedies arising from that course of action,” McKean added gravely. “They’ll be fine out in the garden.”

“Not the kitchen garden!” Mrs. Cross warned, waving her wooden spoon again.

“No, no, ’course not,” McKean said quickly.

“Aw, McKean,” Merritt said. “They’re just skinks. Rosalie and her little babies.”

“So we all have seen. Come on, I’ll show you a good place out under the pergola,” McKean said, slapping him on the shoulder. They started out the back door and as they passed Dolly, her face fell. McKean stopped, turned, and said, “Well? Aren’t you coming, Dolly? I know—how ’bout piggyback? You too big for that now?”

“No, McKean, I’m not too big for that,” she answered solemnly.

“Hop on, then. Bye, ladies!” he said, after Dolly had settled on his back and secured skinny arms around his neck.

“Oh, I am so in love with that man,” Charmaine said.

Colette, frowning prodigiously, turned to Mrs. Trimble. “Excuse me. Did he say—the president? Of the United States?”