

Twiceborn

JP ROBINSON

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DEDICATION

This novel is lovingly dedicated to the woman who has stood with me through my “best of times” and my “worst of times.” She shows the world that it is possible to be the perfect wife. To my love, my best friend, my soul-mate, my wife: Lois Robinson. Thank you.

Prologue

Saint-Michel-des-Lions Church, Limoges, France 1646

Fire. It was the only way she could describe it. The burning tendrils of faded pleasure that still snaked across her skin. The heated passion that surged in her heart whenever she thought of his name: Arnaud.

Concentrate! she sharply chided herself. But that was just it. She could not concentrate on the nobleman who repeated the vows that would make her his wife because her thoughts and her body were still enthralled with the man whose masculine scent made her heart pulse and her palms sweat as he stood at her side.

Arnaud. There it was again. Her traitorous mind screaming out for the man who had been sworn to protect her honor with his life—the man to whom she had given herself on the morning of her wedding day.

“Marriage is a sacred ritual begun in the garden of Eden when the Lord God created man and woman, uniting them in a bond of purity,” the priest intoned drily. He had obviously performed many marriages but the pouch of coins handed to him before the ceremony made him more poetic than usual. Nothing but the best would do for Monsieur de Limoges and his beautiful bride, Angélique de Toulouse.

From birth, Angélique had been sequestered from the world, knowing nothing of its evils. Her father’s goal had been to raise a

perfect child. "You will be as good as an angel of God," he told her daily. Her childhood routine was dominated by prayer, domestic arts, and hearing the Scriptures read so that she also would be prepared to rear children worthy to join the heavenly choir.

Claude de Toulouse genuinely loved his daughter, this she knew beyond a shadow of doubt. He had showered her with affection since her birth, and his love had only grown more poignant when her mother had succumbed to an unnamed illness. His love demanded she rise to his high standards. The depth of his hatred for evil was as strong as the depth of his love, and Claude had repeatedly warned Angélique of the consequence for disgracing the family name: she would be cut off from her inheritance and would never see him again.

After her mother's death, Angélique began to seek the affection of friends. Her father's protective walls limited her options to the children who lived on the estate, one of whom was a young boy named Arnaud. Claude, a stern but fair man, had not discouraged the relationship because he truly wanted to make his daughter happy. The passing years had transformed friendship into romance, and on her sixteenth birthday Arnaud asked Angélique to become his wife.

Claude had firmly refused the match, considering it unsuitable despite his respect for Arnaud who, at twenty-five years of age, commanded his small band of men-at-arms on the estate. He did recognize, however, that the time had come for Angélique to marry and invited Jean-Philippe de Limoges, a recent widower, to his chateau. Within weeks the match was set, and on her seventeenth birthday, Angélique left home for the first and final time.

Trusting in Arnaud's honor, Claude de Toulouse commissioned him to lead an armed party of men and his daughter to her waiting husband in Limoges. The two-week journey had been largely uneventful and, despite his best intentions, Arnaud found his ardent attraction to Angélique impossible to ignore. The tension had continued to build.

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“Therefore, shall a man leave both father and mother and shall cleave unto his wife. They two shall become one flesh,” the priest continued.

Angélique barely registered his words but her pulse spiked as memories of the preceding hours flooded her mind. The rapidly building attraction between them had come to a head this morning when Arnaud had rapped on her door and entered without waiting on a response. He had come to escort her downstairs but Angélique, who expected to see her maid Marianne, wore nothing more than a thin shift. *Fire.* Heat had flooded her face, and she had turned away, groping at anything to preserve her modesty but it was too late.

Closing and locking the door firmly behind him, Arnaud closed the gap between them in two strides. “Please do not do this,” he had begged, dropping to his knees.

“Do not throw away your happiness by marrying this-this old man when you know that you love me. Run away with me. Today. Now!”

“Arnaud, please do not make this more difficult than it already is,” she had begged, misery written in every inch of her pale face. “Father will not let us marry.”

He had risen to his feet, drawing her into the close embrace of his strong arms. “Kiss me,” he had whispered. She had hesitated. A spark of rebellion kindled in her heart. *One kiss only. I am far from home and Father will never know.* Arnaud placed his face inches from her own.

“You were made for this,” he whispered in her ear. *Just one kiss. I will not let him go any farther than a kiss.*

“No,” she had tried to resist. “It is wrong.”

“It is no sin. We love each other. If it were not so, why would God make you so beautiful?”

“Arnaud,” she whispered her hands pressed against his broad, well-defined chest. “It is wrong. My father told me many times that

to taste of pleasure without marriage is sin, and God will curse me for it. Besides... I am to be married today!" Her protest sounded weak even to herself and Arnaud pushed harder.

"Do you really think that a loving God who made your body and mine would punish us for loving each other? Angélique, my angel, *regarde-moi*. Am I evil because I desire you, because I need you? I crave the air you breathe, *mon amour*."

The force and the naked fervor behind his words made protests to melt away into a whirlwind of confusion. Was it true? Had she been wrong after all? Did God want her to be with this man, or would he condemn her infidelity and send her to hell? *Que Dieu m'en garde!* she had thought.

She had hesitated, and in that one moment of weakness, she knew that she could not resist him. She had leaned forward and pressed her lips against his, tasting the pleasure of what he offered. The shock of that first kiss condemned her to the inferno that suddenly raged throughout her entire being. *Fire*. She was consumed by it and by a ravenous hunger for the man who had kindled the flame.

"And do you, Angélique de Toulouse, know of anything that would hinder your union with this worthy man? Do you accept the hand of the esteemed Monsieur Jean-Philippe de Limoges in marriage, vowing to be faithful unto him until death?"

She heard the priest but, for a moment, she could not answer. She felt Arnaud stiffen, heard the swift intake of his breath. To lie in the name of God was to condemn her soul to the pits of hell for eternity. But to confess was to disgrace herself and her family name. She would be cut off from her father forever! She weighed the options in her head for only a brief moment. All eyes, except Arnaud's, were on her. She could see the puzzled expressions of the villagers who gathered for the celebration. They were wondering why this devout woman would hesitate to accept the hand of a man as kind as Monsieur de Limoges.

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Some subtle intuition caused Angélique to glance at her promised husband. His steady gaze lingered on her face for a moment and then passed over to Arnaud who still examined the cracks in the floor of Saint-Michel-des-Lions. *He suspects.* Her face flushed crimson with heat as Jean-Philippe opened his mouth to speak.

“Is there anything you wish to say, my dear?”

She could delay no longer. In her passion, she had eaten of the forbidden fruit; already her soul was being tortured by guilt. Perhaps the flames of hell were licking at the ground underneath her feet even now. Fires above and fire below—she was condemned.

She turned to the priest. “Yes. Before God, I swear that I have nothing to confess. I will honor him and be true to him until my last breath. This I vow before God and His holy saints.”

“Then in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, I pronounce you both husband and wife.”

There. It was done. *No.* Angélique immediately rejected the thought. *This is only beginning.* She had betrayed her husband and sworn falsely by God to hide the shame of her failure. The candles on the altar danced, and inside each one she imagined she saw a demon, an angel who like her had fallen from righteousness, writhing with delight at the torment she would endure from this moment on.

She groaned inwardly as she locked arms with her husband and turned to smile prettily toward the cheering onlookers.

“May you be fruitful. May your conception be multiplied and blessed of the Lord,” the priest chanted, quoting from the book of Genesis as groom and bride exited the chapel. Angélique’s eyes slid to Arnaud, whose gaze finally lifted to meet hers. What she saw in his eyes made her heart tremble. Arnaud, the man sworn to protect her life and honor, had done the unthinkable.

Like a serpent he had slid into the purity of her Eden and seduced his master’s daughter. His eyes were those of a man haunted by personal failure. *Yes,* Angélique thought. *Fire rages uncontrollably*

within us and all around us. And how many will fall victim to the pyre that we ourselves have ignited?



Jean-Philippe de Limoges eyed his wife carefully as the bells on the cathedral celebrated his union. He had planned their wedding night with great care, but no bells rang in his heart tonight. A widower whose wife had been taken while giving life to their first child, he had prayed for a long time before deciding to marry again.

Jean-Philippe had only approached Claude de Toulouse requesting his daughter's hand because he had been assured of her piety and devotion. Although he was more than twenty years older than Angélique, he had wealth and good health at his disposal.

He clenched his teeth and slammed his fist against the small table, causing an empty goblet of wine to clatter to the floor. *Why, God, why? I ask for a wife to give me the children I never had and you give me a whore?* He had spoken with Angélique privately to confirm his suspicions and, overcome with guilt and shame, the young woman quickly confessed. Arnaud had already crossed the river Vienne and disappeared into the darkness, as de Limoges had learned after dispatching a servant to make discreet enquiries.

"Just like a snake!" de Limoges muttered. "Defile a woman and run for cover when her husband comes to even the score." A part of his heart ached with the betrayal but another part of him felt an odd sense of compassion. He understood her weakness. Sheltered, and travelling alone with a handsome rogue. What woman would not struggle?

He winced. Struggle, yes. Give in—that was the part that he could not accept. And on the morning of their wedding? He clenched his fist again and stood silent despite the storm that raged in his heart

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as he weighed his options. A public accusation would bring disgrace upon his wife and himself that would last the rest of their days. Any child born in the near future would live under the shadow of an illegitimate birth—a fate that he would not wish upon anyone.

And what of my duty to God? Above all things, de Limoges sought to live as an example of Christian charity. While he did not excuse Angélique for her sin, he knew that to accuse her publicly would be to condemn her to poverty at best and death at the worst. He still felt partially responsible for the death of his first wife and child. To have the weight of another loss upon his shoulders, particularly one so young, would be too much.

De Limoges glanced toward the bedchamber where Angélique lay still, her face pale and shoulders heaving with silent sobs. He sighed deeply as he slowly walked toward her.

“I will not ask why it happened or threaten you with public disgrace,” he said. Her shoulders stopped quivering at the words and Angélique looked up at him, eyes wide with wonder.

He continued. “If there is a child from your union, I will raise it as my own.”

The tears started again but this time they were tears of gratitude. “What kind of man are you?” Angélique breathed. “Why would you show me such kindness? I do not deserve it.”

“That is true.” De Limoges did not hesitate to agree. He was no saint and his own heart was still bleeding. “But there are higher laws, higher graces to which God expects us to aspire even when we do not see the meaning of the circumstances that confront us. Perhaps it is my purpose to teach this to you.”

Angélique sat up and tentatively touched her husband’s cheek, expecting him to flinch and draw back with revulsion. He stayed still—so perfectly still for a moment she wondered if he was carved out of marble. *But this is no man of stone*, she thought. *His heart feels and he understands. He forgives me!*

Gratitude washed over her like a wave, sweeping her away in its path. “Husband.” She breathed, her voice hoarse from sudden desire. De Limoges looked up at her, detecting the change in tone. “I need to be clean. I need you to make me *your* wife.” She touched him again, laying a small pale hand on his chest. “Please take me as I am and make me your own.”

De Limoges felt something wet on the back of his hand. Startled, he realized that it was the flow of his own tears. Something broke within him and, at that moment, he realized that he also needed to make her his wife. His needs were not physical but spiritual: he understood that God had brought them together and it was his responsibility to let no man put them asunder. An ember of forgiving love began to expand in warm glowing rays across his chest. He gently, hesitantly pressed his lips to Angélique’s and she eagerly responded. Without another word, he reached for his wife and took her in his arms.



PART 1

Conception



Chapter 1

Château de Limoges, France, September 1671

Twenty-five years later

“Irresponsible jackal!”

Auburn-haired and muscular, Cardinal Hugo de Limoges hurled the insult from between clenched teeth as Antoine—his slender, yellow-haired twin—edged his Arabian warhorse past his own Cheval de Mérens.

“Prehistoric priest!” Antoine retorted, his twenty-five-year-old face split by a mocking grin. As the open gate that led to the courtyard of the family château of Limoges drew near, he balanced himself precariously in the stirrups. Spying his mother’s anxious face among the gathering crowd of servants and curious spectators, Antoine’s grin grew even wider.

He placed his palms on the pommel of his saddle, feeling the iron muscles of his horse clenching and releasing underneath him. His breathing became focused as he realized that he was risking his life at this moment, risking it for no other reason than to prove that *he* could do something his brother Hugo could not do. *What better reason could there be than that?* Antoine thought. He swung his legs wide of the stirrups, planted them on the saddle and slowly lifted his body into a crouched position.

A startled gasp rose in unison as the crowd of onlookers realized what he was doing and began to shout and point. Antoine did not

dare look at his mother now. He slowly continued to rise until he stood fully upright, his horse still galloping at full speed below him, the reins held loosely in his right hand.

“Easy, *Bouclier*,” he muttered quietly to his horse. “No need to have my brains spilled out on the ground today after surviving five years of war in the Netherlands!” The horse seemed to understand his master’s words and smoothed out his gait. The crowd saw the direction in which Antoine was headed and wisely scattered into two groups, giving him clear access to the wide stairs that welcomed visitors to the château.

Then the moment came.

Antoine bunched the muscles of his legs together and, with a leap that seemed almost superhuman from the viewpoint of those on the ground, he gracefully executed a tumble he had learned from a *jongleur* who had traveled with him to war. Flipping twice in the air, Antoine blew a kiss toward his mother and landed perfectly balanced once again on the back of his still-moving animal, his feet firmly planted on the slippery saddle.

As the crowd roared its approval and his mother shrieked in terror, Antoine jerked on the reins, causing *Bouclier* to come to a shuddering sudden stop. Antoine turned, laughing now, to see how Hugo was doing.

Not to be outdone, the dark-haired twin flexed his muscles and shakily tried to ease himself out of the stirrups. “*Allez, allez Bleuet*,” he grunted to his mount but the horse apparently did not understand. It only shook its head and continued its uneven gait. Hugo swayed dramatically to the right side of his mount and grabbed desperately at the pommel.

The horse, not understanding this strange distribution of weight, reared unexpectedly, dashing Hugo’s hopes of remaining in the saddle. The large twin crashed onto the cobblestones that formed the large circular courtyard at the base of the wide steps. Antoine’s

mocking grin was replaced by outright peals of laughter. And he was not alone.

The crowd, while not wishing to disrespect the son of their master Jean-Philippe de Limoges, hid smiles, winks and muted laughter behind weather-beaten hands while averting their eyes from the embarrassed and infuriated man who lay sprawled on the stones with nothing damaged but his pride.

The fair-haired twin smiled down at his brother. “How’s the view from down there?”

Hugo staggered to his feet, furious. “One day, brother... ” he began but was interrupted by a female voice—his mother’s voice.

“Oh, my son, are you alright? Nothing broken, I hope!” Angélique was at his side, inspecting him as she had whenever he hurt himself as a child.

“Mother!” he snapped. Angélique jerked back, startled by his angry tone. Hugo softened visibly. “I’m sorry mother. It is just that I am not a boy anymore. I am a man now!”

Antoine swung down from the saddle in one fluid motion. “Hmmm... yes, a man. You know, Hugo, there’s a saying that a man never stands taller than when he is on his knees. You, my pious priest, have outdone yourself: you’ve landed on your back!”

“Antoine”—his mother turned to him furiously— “*mais qu’est-ce qui t’as pris?* What were you thinking? You could have been killed and your brother hurt!”

Angélique began to scold her son but got no further as he gathered her into his arms and lifted her, squealing, across the threshold to where his father, Jean-Philippe de Limoges, waited, eyes glittering with pride at the man who stood before him. Now nearing seventy years old, Jean-Philippe still stood tall and slender, his silver hair containing faint traces of the yellow from his youth. Antoine was the mirror of his father, complete with the rather unusual yellow hair, sky-blue eyes and slight but muscular frame. Hugo, however, did not

resemble Jean-Philippe in appearance or in nature and the unspoken differences rankled him.

While Angélique called both boys “son,” both husband and wife recognized that the priest’s words had indeed come to pass though not in the way he had intended. Angélique had indeed conceived but, in a rare twist of fate, Arnaud had fathered Hugo in the morning and de Limoges had engendered Antoine in the evening.

The villagers believed she was blessed. She had borne not only twins but twin *sons*. They thought that God was finally rewarding Jean-Philippe for his piety but he knew that God was testing his faith to its limits. For while Angélique was indeed mother to both boys, he knew that he was the father of only one: Antoine.

Privately, he had gone to his wife’s side the night of the twins’ birth. She had lain sweaty and panting in the middle of crumpled sheets still stained with traces of bright blood. De Limoges contemplated the scene for a moment before speaking. One child with fair hair like himself, the other with dark hair like Arnaud. “So,” Angélique had wheezed at last, “I have been fruitful.”

“Yes.” It was all he could say. “Yes.” A passive acceptance of reality, not a word of joy and anticipation. A word that symbolized his willingness to take up the cross that he did not feel he rightly deserved. *Why God?* He had forgiven his wife’s transgression, but now he would be reminded of her infidelity every day by being forced to raise a child that was not his own—a child who did not even resemble him!

“Yes,” he said again.

Maternal love had stricken a stab of fear into Angélique’s heart.

“You will not send him away? You will keep your word?” she had anxiously asked.

“Yes.”

And then he had left.

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The effort it had taken to say that one word of committal had nearly sapped his strength, but it was nothing when compared to the effort and self-control that it took to raise a son that was not *his* son.

Jean-Philippe reminded himself daily that the boy was not to blame for the circumstances of his birth and that he should focus on his good qualities. Hugo had a strong interest in taking up the cloth, in part because he wanted to gain Jean-Philippe's approval. His interest in religion was greater than Antoine's, but to Jean-Philippe, it seemed that the boy was interested in knowing *about* God but not in *knowing* God. Religion was a source of power to Hugo, an exhilarating force that could give him the ability to control his fellow man, not a living experience as far as Jean-Philippe could tell. *And that, he thought, makes all the difference in the world.*

As Antoine stood before him now, however, he felt that he was indeed truly blessed. At twenty-five, his son had distinguished himself in the king's service and had been deemed worthy of receiving the rank of *capitaine*. As a boy, Antoine's slight build had made him the victim of Hugo's merciless bullying. At first, Jean-Philippe had spoken to Hugo and urged him not to use his greater size to intimidate Antoine, but he soon noticed that the continued altercations with Hugo hardened Antoine and made him push himself to succeed.

When Antoine began military training as a cadet, he easily surpassed the other students in athletic ability, mental capacity to grasp military concepts and good looks. The former, Jean-Philippe attributed to the boy's desire to compete with his brother; the latter he attributed to himself.

"*Entrez vous deux!*" he boomed. "*Antoine, embrasse-moi!*" Within a moment, he held his son in his arms and then at arm's length as he inspected him again.

"How are you, Father?" Antoine could barely speak beneath the crush of his father's embrace. "I am old, my son!" his father cheer-

fully replied. "I am an old man who has developed a weak heart but the sight of you brings new life to me."

"You see, Angélique?" He turned to his wife. "Five years away at war and our son returns to us with a hero's courage and with a hero's face!"

His wife smiled demurely. "You mean a face like yours?"

"But of course!" he replied with a wide smile. "Where else could such rugged handsomeness have come from?" During this light-hearted exchange Hugo stood silent, still fuming over his humbling entrance.

"Hello, Father," he finally said.

"Ah! Hugo! Welcome home. It is good to see you after—how long has it been— three years since you left us?" No matter how much he tried, Jean-Philippe could not bring himself to call Hugo *son*. He shook his hand firmly but with reserve.

"It has been seven years, Father," Hugo replied. "Four in Rome and three with the king."

"Ah yes." De Limoges stepped back. "Forgive an old man for his poor memory."

Before Hugo could respond Georges, the head steward, coughed discreetly. "*Pardonnez-moi, monsieur*, but dinner will shortly be ready. Perhaps the gentlemen would like to... ahem"—he eyed Hugo's stained garments disdainfully—"refresh themselves before dining?"

"Why, yes, of course, Georges," Angélique said, gracefully laying her hand on Hugo's shoulder. "Go, refresh yourselves, my sons, and then join us in the *salle à dîner*. We anxiously wait to hear all of that has happened in your years away. Your letters were like our cook's creations. While we enjoyed them, each one has only served to whet our appetite for more." Dismissing them both with a wave of her hand, she caught her husband by the sleeve as he too turned to leave the foyer. "My husband, a moment please." When her sons

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were out of hearing range and she was certain that she was alone, she turned to him.

“Jean-Philippe, since they were children Antoine and Hugo have fought a bitter war, each seeking to gain first place in your heart. Now that they are home I am worried that this rivalry will only get worse.”

De Limoges eyed his wife carefully. “What do you want me to do about it?”

She hesitated, knowing that what she was about to ask would cut him to the soul, but then plunged ahead. “Is there not room enough in your heart to love both equally?”

Her husband staggered back as though she had struck him.

“What madness are you asking of me?” he hissed. “Is it not enough that for twenty-five years I have raised and sheltered one who is not my own? Without a word of complaint? All that you have asked of me for him I have done! Since his return, I have felt such pains in my chest.”

Angélique hesitated, knowing that a year ago the village physician had sternly warned her husband against becoming nervous or upset. “Too much excitement might be fatal,” he had warned. She felt that this was one of the times she had to ignore the doctor’s advice.

“You have done much but I am asking for a little more. Show him more love. Call him your son.”

“Never!” Limoges was trying very hard to keep his voice from rising, but temper colored his cheeks and flashed from his normally placid eyes. “I will not share what is Antoine’s with a boy who is no more than a bast—”

“Don’t!” Angélique cried out, placing her hand over her husband’s mouth. “Do not call him that. I know what you have dealt with. I love and respect you for it. But can you not see that this rivalry will tear our family apart? Though you don’t speak of it, your

favoritism is only too plain to those who have eyes to see. It has already begun to destroy us!”

De Limoges had ripped her hand away and turned his back to her while she was speaking. When he faced her again, his expression was flat and his eyes were coldly accusing. “*Non*, Angélique, you are wrong. It is not *I* who have destroyed us.” He swept past her without another word and stormed to stairs.

Angélique covered her face with her hands. In all her marriage, she had never heard Jean-Philippe speak so harshly. The fact that she knew his words were true hurt her more than any physical blow ever could have done. Twenty-five years later she was still paying the price for her sin.

She swayed briefly, catching herself on the edge of a nearby divan. Two identical pillars surrounded the chair at her side. A humorless smile twisted her lips at the irony of the image. A woman standing between two pillars. A mother caught between her two sons with conflicting loyalties to both of them and to her husband. *Je ne suis pas assez forte! I'm not strong enough for this*, she thought. A dull ache had begun to hammer at the back of her skull, and now its heat spread throughout her head.

“May God have mercy on us all,” she moaned. “*Why?*”



“*Why!*”

Hugo’s face was purple with rage as he dashed the ornately carved candelabra to the lush carpet. He spit out a curse as he hurriedly stamped out the small flames. He glanced around quickly to make sure that no servants were within hearing range. Hugo had purchased a cardinalship and was endorsed by King Louis of France himself. It would not do for anyone to hear him utter profanity.

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No one was near enough to hear the cries of his mouth or, for that matter, the cry of his heart. Four years away from home being trained in the strict order of the *Basilianus Italiae, seu Cryptoferratensis*, the Institute of a Consecrated Life in Rome had earned him the personal recommendation of Pope Clement as confessor to the king and queen of France. He had served as a member of the king's council as Louis made war against the Protestant heretics for another three years only to return to this! What did all he had achieved matter if he could not earn his father's love?

"Not 'Welcome, Hugo my son! I'm so glad to see you,'" he growled. "A shake of the hand and a smile that could freeze a cooked fish. That is all I get! But Antoine! 'You've come back a hero.'" He mimicked de Limoges. Hugo sighed deeply. "No matter how much I serve the mother church, no matter how much I strive to make myself worthy of him, it is never enough. Always Antoine... brave, courageous, looks like him, thinks like him. I will never be good enough to lick Antoine's boots after he walks through the mud in Father's eyes."

The stinging memory of his public humiliation came flooding back, and with it came a dark, shocking revelation—an epiphany that started Hugo down a path he had often sensed existed but had never accepted much less explored.

You hate him. The dark voice rang out in his skull like the solemn clanging of a funeral bell.

"No!" he muttered to himself, refusing to admit the truth. "I do not hate him. He's my brother... I just... "

You just hate him. There it was again—cold, dark, and merciless in its insistence.

"No!" he cried out louder this time. "I just... "—he paused and could deny it no longer—"hate him."

Hatred. Yes, that was it. Pure unadulterated hatred for his twin. It was not only that Antoine was favored by their father. Neither was

it just that Antoine seemed to be a natural leader while he stumbled around in the shadows. It certainly was not the silly race debacle that still caused his backside to feel sore... no. It was Antoine's smug surety that he had Father's love.

A feeling akin to relief coursed through him as he vocalized what he had hidden in his heart for so long. He said it again, tasting the words and relishing the freedom that they brought. "I. Hate. Him. I *hate* Antoine." He realized that he meant every dark syllable.

You always have hated him.

"Yes, yes! I always have! Before he became a *capitaine*, before his ridiculous display of horsemanship, before Skyla—" Here he stopped. He had sworn never to think of her again. But that was a big part of it, was it not? *Skyla*.

He had first seen her when the king had sent a small delegation to the enemy fortress of Charleroi in order to verify the well-being of French prisoners of war. For Hugo's part he had not cared if his brother had been captured. *Let the arrogant idiot rot in prison*—but the investigation was part of early treaty negotiations. It was then that he had seen Skyla. From the first glimpse he knew that he *had* to have her, but the heretic had eyes for one man. Hugo sneered at the mirror in disgust. For Antoine! Antoine, who had never known the pain of a father's rejection would also never know the pain of unrequited love.

Hugo forced himself to face the facts at last. He hated everything that his twin brother represented: his grace, his looks, his past, and his future. Everything.

What are you going to do about it? This time the voice was soft, almost purring like a cat whose fur was being scratched the right way.

"Well... what can I do?"

The absurdity of the conversation finally struck him. He was talking to no one. He was alone in the looming darkness of his room. Stumbling over to the fireplace underneath the marble mantle, he

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stirred up the embers until the dim glow of coals roared into a steady blaze.

It was there, while staring into the fire and musing over his consuming jealousy that he heard the words. Two words that would alter the course of his life.

Kill him.

Kill his brother? The priest in him immediately took exception to the idea, but just as quickly, his mind began to rationalize the idea by twisting Scripture. Had not Joshua exterminated all who stood in the way of his plans? Did not even Jael, a woman, kill the man who had formerly been a friend of her family?

If I am to know peace, if I am to be happy, then Antoine must die.

This was not an irrational crime of passion that was born in a moment. This was the birth of an evil that had been conceived twenty-five years ago when two sons drew their first breath at the same moment. Twenty-five years had brought the growing antagonism to a head, but the seed of this killing had been sown and resown in every act of aggression and resistance by the two boys.

As soon as Hugo acknowledged the fact that he would kill his brother, a settled peace stole over him. It was not a question of *if*... only *when* and *how*. The fire burned, and as it did, the pieces of the ultimate crime came together like a jigsaw puzzle being guided by some unseen hand.

“Yes...” Hugo mused while stroking his freshly shaved chin. “Perhaps this *is* God’s will to punish Antoine for his arrogance. To punish him for loving the heretic woman Skyla.”

And then inspiration struck.

The sheer simplistic genius of the plan made him clap his hands together in delight. He would kill Antoine by using the weapon that his brother would never suspect in a thousand lifetimes. He would murder his brother by using the woman whom he himself had wanted and whom Antoine still loved: Skyla.