

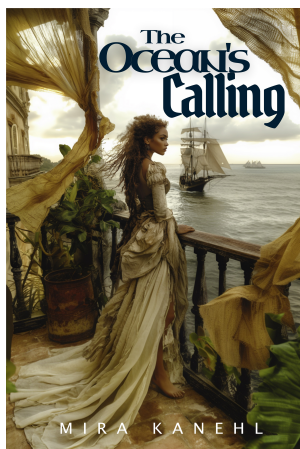
THE OCEAN' CALLING

FIRST CHAPTER ONLY

ONE VIRTUE AND A THOUSAND CRIMES

BOOK 2

MIRÀ KANEHL



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DAUGHTERS OF THE NIGHT

New Orleans, August 1812

I played with the frizz on my *parties intimes*, lounging on the fainting couch by the fireplace, when the door opened and mama's lover entered my boudoir.

Aye, Gilbert.

I leaped to the bed and covered myself.

He had the remarkable habit of looking like a horse, and I never could quite figure out why. Perhaps it was the exceptional largeness of his teeth. His eyes always had a secret sadness in them, as if a whip pestered him, and with his lips drooping, the wrinkles in his face created a tormented look. "How ..." he said with a grating voice and closed the door. "Long?"

I scoffed and opened the window overlooking the Mississippi, and the night air assailed my face with sour droplets of rain. It stung my skin and crawled down my cheeks like the tears I had shed. A distant deep and rumbling bellow echoed in the mist rising like a giant specter across the Father of Floods. A crocodile in the marshes.

There it was, creeping up on me again. A nearby tree swayed suddenly under the faint moonlight like sails in changing winds, its twigs hitting the roof like loosened rigging. The windblast hissed through the cracks of the wood and wailed under the door. Somewhere in the building, one slammed, and a tile fell from the roof and clinked on a stone.

It had been but a soft whisper at first, like the ghost of my mother, or my name's, like a wavelet rolling out on shore, or a breeze caressing my shoulder. It built up while I coquetted on Gallatin Street. Aye, and now the waves clashed against my legs and the gusts whipped my hair, it having grown into an abominable tempest. The ocean's calling.

"You changed," Gilbert said behind me.

Aye, I had. Since mama died, my blood brooded. I was no longer attached to an inky slave, no longer strolled picturesque sugar plantations clouded in earthy fumes of molasses or skipped along the rhythmic churning of the sugar mill, singing. Nay, this memory was a lifetime away.

"Jeez, you're a woman."

In the milky glass of the window I saw his contorted figure stand, and his bushy eyebrows flickered between scorn and pity—though it could have been the waviness of the glass. I felt his presence behind me, dense and lurking, and the floor creaked under his weight as he stepped closer. I flinched from the touch of his fingers on my waist and pain shot across my wrist as I banged the underside of the pane. This opened an old wound.

"Don't touch me," I said, and sucked at the blood. As the metallic sweetness spread over my tongue, a crocodile with red teeth flashed through my mind, and I spat outside. These were visions from the nightmares that haunted me still, and they had begun the time I last met Gilbert. "Still want to adopt me?"

Gilbert lowered his troubled gaze. Aye, he looked rather miserable.

My hands shook, and my voice downright trembled. "How did you find me?"

He forced an equine smile and sat on the fainting couch. "I didn't believe it, had to know, wanted to see are you fine."

"You worry about me?"

"Of course ..." Fiddling with his top hat, he glanced at the bed.

Guilt plagued him—I could see it in the way he eyed my every reaction with drooping brows. He was not here to reconcile. He wanted something, and I had no mind to give it to him, whatever it was.

"Leave."

Shadows danced on his horselike features, and his voice was beastly. "You have a stone heart, Cosma Sauvage. I came with good intentions."

"Don't call me that."

He used my full name to provoke, I knew it. As if she had known all along, mama had given me the pseudonym when I was little as we fled slavery from our Scottish owners in San Domingue. At the Moulin Rouge, the name, together with played fierceness, provided a reputation. I used any opportunity to wear the black crocodile mask Madame la Directrice had fashioned because it sheltered my humiliation.

But it also reminded me of a night I wished I could forget. Sometimes, a chill crawled down my spine when I saw the croc eyes lurking, the mask laying tossed in a corner. Gilbert had been present that night—had seen the crocodiles. Hearing the name from his lips vexed my heart, for he knew as much. His provocation worked, and that vexed me even more.

"But ... that's your name, is it not?"

What had mama told him? Did he know my real name?

“Go.”

I grabbed the claw gloves, the iron nails crumbly with rust, put them on, and threw him a look promising a crocodile’s bite. I bared my teeth, straightened my back, and stretched my muscles. Perhaps I growled a little, just to stay in character. Pretence was easier.

He stood, eyes turning feverish, and flashed his astronomical teeth before he said, “do you also have nightmares?”

I clawed him across the cheek. “What do you know about my dreams?”

His hand skimmed over the delicate pink line. “I—uh ...” He scrambled backwards, just to play along, I suppose. A secret fever took possession of his eyes.

Dynamism took control over me, and I strode towards him, leaving only the doorway as an escape.

“I have them too, and hideous thoughts, crazy, hideous thoughts.”

The iron hissed like nails on a blackboard as I clasped the door’s metal handle. The hairs on his arms rose.

“Your own doing,” I said, and let the door swing open. In came a whiff of smoke, alcohol, and sex.

Aye, while I spent my time arguing with a horse, the others were counting their chink. The Moulin Rouge was filling with ripe customers, ready for the plucking.

Gilbert saw me glance down into the hall. He pinched his lips and stared at me, then punched the wall and stormed out.

I slammed the door, tore off the gloves, and threw them onto the bed. It wasn’t that I resented he could force me to submit to him if he wanted it, but that I knew, deep within, that I’d do it even if circumstances didn’t force me, and hate myself for it. I paced back to the window and inhaled the gloomy, rain-filled air. Slurred singing and shouting echoed over the sloshing waters, and the lights reflected golden on

its glossy surface. A handgun fired in the brawl on Gallatin, resulting in a deceptive moment of serenity.

Aye, there was little romance in being a public woman. I protected what I could of myself between summer epidemics and sweet-bitter rapes, between yearning and death. For matters of the heart are quick to dwindle in such conditions. Or worse, drive one off the brink of sanity—and the river's edge, as they did to so many here.

And yet, my heart burned with love, for despite all, I wasn't angry.

"Honey?" Tourmaline's bubbly voice flitted into the room as if on clouds. With the light falling on her from behind, her hair leaked over her shoulders in glowing white and her translucent dress wrapped around her like morning fog. She was a rare beauty. "Another gladiatorial sample?"

I gave her a lopsided smile and closed the window, then turned to face her, shaking my head. The outlawry on Gallatin street had intensified, and ever more brutal men sought the Moulin Rouge. Madame la Directrice responded with cruel rules, following the notion of an eye for an eye. She had made an example of any man who harmed one of her *petites bêtes*—her little beasts—for everyone on the street to see. I cared little for their fates, it was only fair. I knew what the men who ventured here were capable of, I wore scars to remind me. But something else did haunt me, and Tourmaline knew it.

She slung her arms around me.

The soft cotton of her dress absorbed my tears as her warmth melted my anger. I breathed in the perfume clinging to her clothing and the buttery scent of her skin. With her, I felt safe. I wiped my hand across my cheek, and upon seeing the cut, she kissed it.

"*Nkrabea*," I said in Akan, and shook my head. *Fate*. I was too far from the path for which my soul had come to earth,

and inharmony was the price I paid. *The ocean*, my heart whispered, and I ignored it because Tourmaline wanted to stay at the Moulin Rouge.

Her light-blue eyes stung as if they saw through me. "It's the dreams, isn't it?"

"Aye," I lied. I hadn't had nightmares in some time, though they returned wavelike. It was Gilbert. Danger followed him like a stallion follows a mare in heat, and he taunted it and wallowed in the craze left in his wake. I didn't want him near.

She smiled sadly and tucked a frizzy strand behind my ear. "Let me help you, honey." Coquetry flashed over her lips.

I forced a smirk and slumped onto the mattress, running my finger over the re-hardening crust.

She sighed and sat beside me, swaying me a little as the mattress gave in. "It'll pass. The pain isn't devouring you—you are in the painful stage of growth. And you will come out of it stronger." She always said something like this, and it was always true, but the words were empty shells to me now. I could not outgrow Gilbert.

She turned my head by my chin, and her soft fingers brushed over my jawline to my ears, then slid onto my shoulder. Squeezing my hand, she whispered in my ear. "Or shall we find ourselves a leg before Madame la Directrice discovers us alone again?" She snickered and tied my hair into a bun, then grabbed the flask of perfume from the table and shrouded us in an intense magnolia fragrance that stung my lungs. She cocked her head. "You pull my heartstrings so."

The tiny bottle clinked on the wooden top, and she drew me close until the cool of my tears on her dress pressed against my cleavage. I gave in to the softness of her lips, which tasted of whiskey and apple.

It had been but frolicking at first—calling clients for a *ménage à trois* and dripping sleeping drops into their drink to allow a peaceful rest, for men did all kinds of things after sundown. Working together was also safer than being exposed to their whims alone. Our tomfoolery turned into planned tricks which left the clients delirious and us cuddling. Whispers of our rare acts behind closed doors reached curious ears, our *Moulin à trois*—Mill of Three—being particularly requested.

With time, Tourmaline and I became closer than natural, filling me both with the thrill for the forbidden and the fear of being untrue to Asase Ya. Asase Ya is the goddess from our Ashanti lands in Africa, and I believed in her for neither the Christian nor the Mohammedan god had answered my prayers. I worried Asase Ya would punish me for a love that could bear no fruit—for she is the deity of fertility, of the land, and of truth. I feared she might turn me into a man if I remained with Tourmaline. And Gilbert's appearance had trumpeted her disapproval.

I would be a pirate, free like my father was, despite knowing piracy and romance are antonyms. Tourmaline cared only about comfort. How could I unveil this to my complacent daughter of the night?

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