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The Secret Wife of Aaron Burr
by Susan Holloway Scott

On sale everywhere September 24, 2019

PROLOGUE

Philadelphia
July 1829

I sit toward the back of the church, on a bench to one side where no one will take notice of me. No one does, either. Few things in this fine world are more invisible than a small and wizened old woman with dark skin.

Besides, today belongs to Jean-Pierre, not me. I watch him walk slowly to the pulpit, his shoulders squared and his steps measured. His forehead is broad and wise, his jaw firm with resolve, but it is his eyes that no one forgets, a gaze so filled with fire and courage that other men cease to speak in his presence, awed into silence before he says a word. He is my son, and so handsome that my heart aches with it.

“How fine Jean-Pierre looks today, Louisa,” I whisper proudly to my daughter. “He’s the very image of your father.”

Louisa’s brows are sharp and neat inside the curving brim of her bonnet. Despite my years, I am not sufficiently feeble that I require a keeper to guard me from mischief, but Louisa insists, and now sits so close beside me that her skirts spill over mine like a rustling wave of parrot-green cotton.

“John is nothing like the Colonel, Mama,” she whispers back, using the English version of her brother’s name as well as their father’s rank. “Nothing.”

I smile and nod, although I know better.

“Then you forget,” I say. “I marvel that any father and son could be so much alike.”

“Don’t say that before John, Mama,” Louisa warns. “You know his opinion of the Colonel.”

Still I smile, though sorrow hides behind it. *How did my little family come to this?* I wonder.

“Your father loved you and your brother both, Louisa,” I say softly. “I expect he loves you still.”

“But he doesn’t love you, Mama.” Even whispered, the words still wound, more than Louisa will ever understand. “Not as he should. Not as you deserve.”

“He did when it mattered,” I say, as I always do. “Now hush, and heed your brother.”

Jean-Pierre stands in the pulpit, his head bowed as he composes himself. Sunlight from the arched windows streams around him. The congregation is content to wait, expectant and eager. My son is here in St. Thomas’s by special invitation of Reverend Douglass to discourse upon the subject of freedom. Jean-Pierre seldom speaks of anything else, so dear is freedom to him, and to all those who have come to hear him.

Freedom: a powerful word, with more meanings than there are wildflowers in a summer field. If I were standing in my son’s place, I’d tell things differently. I’d speak of war and deceit and betrayals, of promises sworn yet broken and suffering that was nearly beyond bearing. But I’d also tell of trust and hope and love, a cautious finger on the balance against loss and sorrow. I’d tell of the girl that I was and the woman I became, both now so long ago. All of it would be the story—and the cost—of freedom. *My freedom.*

But that can wait for another time. Today belongs to Jean-Pierre. He begins, and I smile proudly as a mother does. Yet his voice, rich and deep, so much echoes his father’s that the old memories begin to return again, and this time they refuse to fade away. I close my eyes, determined to listen more closely, but that only draws me deeper into the past, and away from the present.

And here I am again.

Here I am.

CHAPTER 1

Pondicherry, India
August 1768

It was in my eighth summer, when the monsoon rains drummed at their heaviest, that my uncle Rahul sold me to Madame Beauharnais for two rupees.

How easily the thing was done! My uncle, a weaver of fine cotton muslin, had come to fetch my three cousins and me from the house where we were employed as thread spinners. The summer months were best for spinning, when the rains made the air wet and the thread swell, and we worked as long as the sunlight would permit. Each evening my back ached and the tips of my fingers burned from the hours spent with my spindle, twisting the thread as fine as a spider's web.

I didn't dare complain. Since the British soldiers had left Pondicherry and the French again had power over us, work was scarce, especially for Tamils like us. I was neither the youngest nor the most nimble at spinning, and if I were to lose my place Uncle Rahul had vowed to cast me out from our family. As long as my grandmother, my *ammatti*, had still lived, I'd known my uncle's threats were empty, but since she'd died of a winter fever last December, I'd lost the one person who had loved and protected me. Despite my every effort to please, my uncle's dislike of me had only increased. Now he struck me whenever he wished, and I woke each day fearful of what he might do next.

The spinning and weaving houses where my family worked and

the warehouse nearby were all owned by Monsieur Beauharnais, a French gentleman who seldom troubled his workers with his presence. Yet on this evening, as my uncle and cousins hurried through the murky late-day rains, the Beauharnais carriage with its matched gray horses stood waiting by the front door of the warehouse. The carriage's glass-paned lanterns shone bright through the rain, their dancing little flames reflected in the puddles around us.

Snapping his fingers with impatience, Uncle Rahul motioned for us to keep by the wall in the narrow street and to walk with more haste, so as to cause no possible inconvenience to Monsieur by our presence. But as I quickened my steps to keep pace with the others and not be left behind, my bare feet slipped in the muddy street. I pitched forward onto my hands and knees, and slid into the glow of the carriage's lanterns.

"Veeya!" My uncle grabbed me by the back of my blouse and jerked me upright. "Why must you be so clumsy?"

I scrambled to find my footing among the puddles, and from ill humor alone Uncle Rahul wrapped his hand around my long braid and snapped it hard, so hard that I cried out.

With a scrape of glass and metal, one of the windows of the carriage slid open, and a woman's face—ghostlike through the rain, pale and white-haired—appeared from the shadows within. She spoke in French, a language I did not then know, and at once one of the footmen hopped down from the back to stand beneath the carriage window.

"Madame desires to know if this child is your daughter," the footman said to my uncle, translating the lady's words into Tamil. Despite the footman's French livery, he was Indian, most likely a higher caste than we were. As the rain dripped from his laced cocked hat, he gazed down upon us as if we were the basest creatures imaginable.

At once my uncle released my braid and bowed low from the waist toward the carriage window.

"She is not mine, oh, most esteemed madame," he said in the wheedling voice he used with foreigners. "She is the bastard of my dead sister. Yet I keep her with me from charity, in the holy name of Krishna."

I stared down at my mud-spattered clothing. My uncle might

speak of charity, but from my birth he had treated me as an irredeemable stain upon our family. My poor mother had been no more than a girl when a party of British soldiers had fallen upon her one night as she'd walked home. With tears in her eyes, Ammatti had told me how these foreign men had used my mother like ravening wolves, and afterward discarded her broken and bloodied beside the road. She hadn't died then, as she'd longed to do, but nine months later at my birth. I alone had lived on, unwanted and despised by my uncle for the sins of my unknown father.

Madame Beauharnais spoke again, and the footman nodded.

"Madame desires the girl to step forward," he said, "so that Madame may see her face."

Uncertain, I hung back. I was the ugly one among my cousins and friends, the one who wasn't pure Tamil, and I was always mocked for the light golden-brown color of my eyes and skin and for my ill-shaped nose, both marks of my tainted blood.

"Do as he says, Veeya," my uncle ordered.

I'd little choice but to step forward into the light of the carriage's lanterns and raise my face for the French lady's scrutiny. Mud daubed my hands and clothes and the rain dripped from the *dupatta* that had slipped from my head to my shoulders.

I didn't flinch or look away, but met her gaze evenly, as if I'd every right so to do. At that time, I did. She stared down her long, quivering nose at me, considering, judging, like some terrifying deity. I had never before seen a Frenchwoman this close. I didn't realize that her face was dusted white with powder, or that the glowing red circles on her cheeks were painted with carmine, or that there were tiny pillows stuffed into her hair to make it stand so high and straight from her brow. All I knew then was what I saw, and if smoke had next puffed from her nostrils I would have accepted that as well.

Within a few moments, my courage began to slip away, and I scuttled back from the carriage and to my uncle's side. The Frenchwoman scowled, and flicked her be ringed hand upward like sparks as she spoke again.

The footman nodded, though he did not hide his surprise or his disgust at the message he was to relay.

"Madame fancies the girl," he said. "Madame offers two rupees for her purchase."

I shook my head, not wanting any of this. Two rupees was more than my uncle could earn in a season of labor, more than I would earn in three years' time. My uncle refused to look at me and I began to inch away.

But my uncle was faster. He caught me by the wrist even as he thrust his other hand forward toward the carriage, his palm open and stained blue with indigo. The footman dropped the coins into it, and my uncle's fingers closed tight over them. Without a word to me, my uncle then shoved me forward.

This time it was the footman who caught me, and with his arm around my waist he lifted me high onto the box on the back of the carriage, at least six feet above the street, and sat me there as if I were a doll upon a shelf.

"Stay," he said sharply. "Madame orders it."

I twisted around to look to where I'd last stood with my uncle and cousins, hoping against reason that my uncle might change his mind. But already the four figures were hurrying away with their heads and shoulders bent against the rain.

The carriage swayed beneath me, and I realized that Monsieur Beauharnais had climbed inside to join his wife. I heard the footman close and latch the door, and then he clambered onto a small ledge at the back of the carriage, standing so that his face was nearly level with mine. He'd a nose hooked like a parrot's beak, curving over his upper lip, and he scared me, doubtless as he intended.

"Hold on, bastard," he warned, placing my hand on a leather strap designed for the purpose. "If you fall, you will be crushed by the carriage wheels, and the driver will not stop."

My perch was precarious on account of the box's painted board being slick with rain, and as the carriage lurched forward I clung to the strap with all my strength to preserve myself. We traveled very fast through the now-dark and narrow streets, farther and farther from Black Town, the part of Pondicherry where I'd always lived, and into White Town, where I had never dared venture.

When at last the carriage stopped, I still held fast to the strap, fearing what would happen if I didn't. The house before me was enormous and grand, and in the dreary rain it seemed to glow like a giant paper lantern lit from within.

The hook-nosed footman jumped down to open the carriage's door, and I could hear Madame and Monsieur quarreling. Other servants hurried from inside the house with wide umbrellas to shelter Madame and Monsieur from the rain as they climbed from the carriage and entered the grand arched doorway to their house. I huddled on my high perch until at last the footman recalled my presence, and returned to lift me down. With his fingers gripping my shoulder, he led me through a gate and into a covered courtyard, where we were met by other servants who gathered about us. They spoke over me in jabbering French, and prodded at me with their fingers. One man came forward with a length of rope and, seizing my arm, began briskly to bind the rope around my wrist, as if I were no more than a little beast to be tethered into submission.

But as soon as I felt the rope across my skin, I howled with panic and wrenched my arm free. Surprised at my boldness, the others stopped their talk to stare, and I took that opportunity to run away toward the gate.

I did not go far.

Instead, I was grabbed and pushed facedown against the puddled paving stones, with a knee pressed to my back to hold me there. Still I flailed and fought, sobbing as they jerked my wrists together behind my waist and bound them together. Then I was pulled to my feet to be led stumbling across the courtyard, and thrust into a small shed that was scarce more than a box. The door was slammed tight and bolted closed, and the footsteps and voices faded away.

I curled on my side where I lay on the damp dirt, my eyes squeezed shut against the darkness. I'd cut my lip when I'd fallen, and over and over I licked at my own salty blood. I wanted to cry again, but now the tears wouldn't come. Instead I lay there, listening to the racing of my heart and the beating of the rain overhead.

And yet somehow I did sleep, only awakening when the door to the shed opened and let in the pale light of morning.

"Fah, look at you," the woman said, addressing me in clipped Hindi. She was tall, with shoulders as broad as many men possessed, and wide enough to block the sun with her shadow. She was dressed in a patterned yellow cotton saree with brass bangles along

her arms, strands of red beads around her throat and rings in her ears, a white French apron with red strings tied around her waist, and a ruffled white cap with a red bow on her head.

“What a filthy little beast you are!” she said. “You must be made decent before you are presented to Madame.”

Awkwardly I rose to my feet. “Forgive me if I am filthy, mistress,” I said as politely as I could. “It’s not my own doing, but because others have made me so.”

“You’re a bold piece, to blame others for your disgusting dirt.” The woman frowned as she saw that my hands were still bound, and briskly untied the rope. I whimpered as I tried to flex the soreness from my wrists and arms, but she’d no patience for that, and instead led me across the yard and ordered me to sit on a small bench. There she handed me a dish of rice and lentils, which I devoured without shame, it being my first meal since yesterday morning.

As soon as I was done, she took me to a large basin beneath a cistern that stood in one corner of the courtyard. She bid me strip away my clothing, and when my still-numb fingers did not move fast enough for her she ripped away the worn cotton of my blouse and *pavada* and tossed them aside. I began to protest, for I’d no other garments, but she cut my words short.

“Rags,” she said as she ladled water over my head. “Madame has provided others for you.”

“But I wish to keep my own clothes, mistress,” I said, huddled in my nakedness. However ragged they might seem to her, my clothes were my only belongings, and I was loathe to part with them.

“Your wishes mean nothing,” the woman said. “Your only desire must be to obey Madame.”

“But, mistress—”

“No more addressing me like that, either,” she said, scrubbing me hard with a rough cloth. “You will call me Orianne, the name that Madame calls me. You will learn to speak French, so you may better serve Madame.”

“How?” I asked, bewildered. To me French sounded like so much harsh-sounding gibberish, impossible to decipher, let alone speak.

“If you are clever and listen, you will learn,” Orianne said. “But take care. Although Madame will not speak Hindi or Tamil her-

self, she knows enough to catch you out if you're impudent to her in those tongues. Always recall that French is the language of this house, and spare yourself a whipping."

"But you are not French."

"Listen to me," she said sharply. "This is the house of Madame and Monsieur Beauharnais. They are French, and we are their property, which makes us French as well. If you wish things to go easily for you here, you will learn to listen and obey, and not to speak unless to reply."

Because of my uncle's temper, I'd long ago learned that there could be considerable safety to be found in silence. Thus I nodded, and kept quiet as I'd been bidden.

I shivered as Orianne sluiced last night's rainwater over my shoulders. When she judged me sufficiently clean, she handed me a bundle of clothes. These garments surprised me, and pleased me, too, for everything was of brightly colored silk. I'd never in my life worn silk, and the fabric slipped over my skin in a way that cotton never had. There were loose green trousers, gathered into cuffs at the ankles like *salwars*, a long blouse with a deep neckline, and a short sleeveless pink jacket with shining golden sequins sewn along the hems. Being a child, I was awed by the splendor of these garments, and thought of how much my cousins would envy them, if only I could show them.

Orianne frowned as she helped me dress, pulling the drawstrings on the blouse and trousers more tightly around me.

"These clothes belonged to another, and another before her," she explained briskly. "But those girls grew, and ceased to please Madame, and then they were sold away. You are small. Pray that you remain so."

"I can spin," I said, hoping that my single skill would make me sufficiently useful. "I can—"

"Do you believe Madame cares for that?" Orianne said scornfully. "That's not why she bought you. No, no! You are to be her new *poupée*."

"Her *poupée*?"

"A doll, a toy, a poppet." Orianne drew a comb from her pocket and began to smooth and braid my hair. "All the French ladies keep young slaves—some girls, some boys—to wait upon them.

It amuses them. You will accompany Madame wherever she goes about the town, and stand behind her chair at meals, and oblige her in every way she wishes, whether at home or abroad. Do you understand, little one?"

I didn't, though I nodded anyway. "My name is Veeya, Orianne."

Orianne's mouth tightened. "Your name is whatever Madame chooses to call you. Now come."

She took me firmly by the hand, her skirts brushing against my arm as she led me across the courtyard. In this unfamiliar new world, I drew comfort from her large hand around mine, our palms pressed together and our fingers linked. The linen of her apron smelled of the kitchen, of turmeric and cumin and the other spices she'd been using.

By daylight the main house where Madame and Monsieur lived was even grander than I'd realized in last night's rain. Painted pale yellow with delicate white columns circled with carved flowers and vines, the house was still new, having been built with the rest of the new White Town after the British had burned the old one. A row of arched doorways were screened by shutters with woven cane to permit fresh air from the sea to pass into the house, a rare luxury in Pondicherry, especially in the seasons of rain. Even now a male servant stood at the far end of the veranda, tugging the rope that swung a large punkah back and forth to create a sluggish breeze through the house.

The black-and-white stone of the veranda's floor was smooth and cool beneath my bare feet, and as we passed inside beneath one arched doorway I tipped my head back and marveled at how high the ceiling was above our heads. There were other wonders, too, paintings in gilded frames, tables and chairs with legs carved like the feet of animals, and gleaming candlesticks of precious silver, and I would have lingered had Orianne not pulled me along beside her.

"Recall what I have told you," she whispered fiercely when we finally stopped before the door of one of the rooms. "Obey Madame in all things, else you shall be punished."

She entered the room, and I followed. At the far end was the woman from the carriage: Madame Beauharnais herself, sitting before a large dressing table. I could now see how Madame's skin was

painted chalky white, with pink circles on her cheeks and black rings around her watery blue eyes. To me her eyes were those of a demon, lashless and staring, and her thin, sand-colored hair, in untamed disarray about her shoulders, was fit for a demon as well. Beside her a woman much like Orianne was combing and pinning Madame's hair into place, and against the far wall stood a footman, a darker-skinned African, yet dressed in the same French livery as the footman had worn last night.

Beside me Orianne bowed low, her skirts fanning around her on the polished stone floor. Not knowing better, I had remained upright. Too late I realized my error, and sank down as well, so low that my forehead pressed against the floor.

But I wasn't fast enough to please Madame. She spoke crossly in French, her displeasure clear to me even if her language was not.

"*Non, madame.*" Orianne's voice had become so unexpectedly meek that I would not have recognized it. Although she rose slowly, carefully looking downward, I remained on my knees, uncertain of what was expected. Before me were Madame's bare ankles and feet, swollen and crossed with blue-patterned veins, and thrust into heeled, backless slippers that were too small for her.

"You are to be called Eugénie," Orianne said, repeating Madame's reply into Tamil. "That is the name Madame has chosen for you. Eugénie."

To my dismay, Orianne was then sent back to the kitchen. I'd thought her my ally, and yet here she was as powerless against Madame's orders as I was myself. I was told to remain, and ordered to stand to one side where Madame pointed. When at last Madame was done dressing, I was taken to her carriage with her, and made to crouch on the floor at her feet as we rode to another house.

Here we were greeted by a group of chattering French friends, dressed like Madame and equally idle. At first these women exclaimed over me, and patted my cheek and stroked my hair as if I were only another of the small dogs that yipped and yapped around their skirts. Soon enough, however, they forgot my presence, and for the rest of the afternoon Madame bid me stand behind her chair while she and the others gossiped and played and wagered at cards, long and tedious hours for any child. If I dared to sigh or wriggle, Madame would swiftly reach around and slap my arm, my

shoulder, my cheek, whichever part of me was most convenient to her: sharp, stinging reminders of my place and purpose.

Nor was I excused when we returned to the Beauharnais house. Again I was ordered to stand behind Madame while she dined with Monsieur, neither of them speaking during a meal that seemed to stretch without end. My legs ached from standing, and my stomach growled and rumbled pitifully from hunger. I watched as dish after dish of rich, fragrant food was brought for Madame and Monsieur, while I had been given nothing since morning.

When their meal was finally done, the skies were dark and the cicadas buzzed and sang in the trees around the house. Monsieur's hookah was brought for him. I was made to follow Madame to her rooms, and again to stand while her maid undressed her for bed. I was so hungry and tired that I swayed on my feet, and only the dread of punishment kept me awake.

On Madame's dressing table sat a silver salver of sweetmeats, little cakes with candied fruits dusted all over with sugar. Although they'd been brought from the kitchen for Madame, she ignored them, and little wonder, too, considering all she'd eaten earlier.

But I looked at the little cakes with the greatest longing as my empty stomach gnawed at itself. I'd never before seen such cakes, let alone eaten one, and the longer I stared at them, the more alluring they became. Finally, as the maid began to snuff the candles for the night, Madame recalled my presence, and languidly ordered me through one of the other women to take the salver with the unwanted cakes back to the kitchen.

I bowed low and backed from the room as I'd been instructed. The footman closed the door after me, and there in the shadow-filled hallway I was alone for the first time all day. I looked down at the salver in my hands, and with no other thought beyond my hunger, I swiftly stuffed one of the cakes into my mouth.

Such supreme sweetness, such tenderness upon my tongue, such unimagined flavors of fruit and cream! In that moment both my hunger and my misery were forgotten, and I stopped chewing, the better to savor the pleasure of the cake upon my tongue.

I heard the door behind me open, and candlelight spilled into the hall. I gasped and turned quickly about, so quickly that I dropped the salver with a clatter, scattering the cakes that I hadn't

eaten. Before me stood Madame in her nightdress, with the footman beside her.

There was no hiding my guilt. Madame saw it at once, how my cheeks bulged with half-eaten cake and my fingers glistened with sugar, and I in turn saw the fury that now lit her pale eyes. She barked an order at the footman, who caught me and pinned my arms over my head against the wall. I fought him in fear and panic, dreading what would follow, but he held me fast until Madame returned, a rattan cane clenched in her hand.

She grabbed a fistful of my silk blouse and yanked it upward, uncovering my bare back. As soon as the rattan snapped across my nakedness, I cried out, and jerked forward. The pain of that first blow only increased with the next, and the next after that. Eight in all: I counted each one, one small way to concentrate on anything other than the searing lines that now crisscrossed my back.

The footman twisted me around to face Madame, and released my hands. Madame's breath was coming in harsh, ragged gasps, and the rattan in her hand twitched through the air with a muted hiss like a cobra's.

"Gather up that rubbish, Eugénie," the footman said sharply, translating Madame's orders. "You have proved yourself to be a thief, and Madame will never forget. Now go. *Go.*"

With trembling hands I collected the salver and the broken cakes, and backed from Madame's presence until the end of the hall. Then I fled from the house and across the courtyard toward the kitchen, where, in the manner of that place, Orianne and the others had already heard of what I'd done, and how I'd been punished.

Orianne took the salver from me and lifted the back of my blouse, clicking her tongue. Madame's rattan had not broken the skin as a whip would, but it had left marks that were already rising into welts as hot as burns across my back. I was crying now, too, heavy tears of shame and guilt and pain and despair together that slid freely down my cheeks.

"You must learn to obey Madame, little one," Orianne said softly. "She owns you now. You can never forget that. You are her property."