

THE
BARTERED
Bride
ROMANCE COLLECTION

9 Historical Stories of Arranged Marriages

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Cathy Marie Hake, Kelly Eileen Hake,
JoAnn A. Grote, Amy Rognlie, Janelle Burnham Schneider,
Lynette Sowell, Pamela Kaye Tracy

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Print ISBN 978-1-68322-643-7

eBook Editions:

Adobe Digital Edition (.epub) 978-1-68322-645-1

Kindle and MobiPocket Edition (.prc) 978-1-68322-644-4

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Published by Barbour Books, an imprint of Barbour Publishing, Inc., 1810 Barbour Drive, Uhrichsville, Ohio 44683, www.barbourbooks.com

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Printed in the United States of America.

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JOIE DE VIVRE

by Lynette Sowell



Dedication

To Kathleen Miller Y'Barbo.

You have truly blessed me with your friendship
and mentoring moments over the past few years.
It's been a joy to see this brainstorm of ours come to life. *Merci!*

To Lisa Harris.

Thanks for your critique,
and for all the critiques we exchanged during those early days
when I was in my first critique group ever.
I'm glad our paths have crossed again in "Writing World."

As always, to Zach and Hannah.

You add to my *joie de vivre*.
Thank you for letting me take the time to follow a dream.
Follow the dream God gives you.

And to CJ.

I love our life together.
Thanks for always believing in me
and encouraging me to never give up.

Chapter 1



La Manque, Louisiana—July 1819

Hurry!” Jacques LeBlanc shouted over his shoulder. “We’ll be late!”
“If Papa LeBlanc is angry, it’ll be your fault.” Josée Broussard held her skirt high enough with one hand to keep from tripping on the hem. “You’re the one. . .who let Philippe. . .fall into the bayou.”

She gasped for breath. Little Philippe bounced on her hip while she trotted along the path through the tall grass. The boy was too small to keep up with their hurried pace yet heavier than a sack of flour. Josée tried not to think he might not settle down to sleep tonight after Jacques telling him the legend of the great snake of Bayou Teche.

Jacques paused and faced her. He grabbed her hand, and the touch made her stomach turn like the curving dark waters behind them. *Jacques has been my friend for so long, why should his hand make me feel. . . ?* Josée’s skirt swirled down around her ankles.

He smiled, and his black eyes sparkled with a secret. “Ma’amselle Josée, it’s your birthday, and Papa will be in a good mood. *Bon temps* tonight!”

She tried to smile but bit her lip instead. Couldn’t Jacques carry his younger brother?

Prickly heat surrounded them like a heavy blanket. Josée longed for the cool bayou, thick with moist air but cooler than where the larger LeBlanc house stood, farther away from the banks of Bayou Teche. Papa had turned from the bayou to farming.

Philippe wriggled from her hip and ran. *Not through the garden!* Jeanne and Marie scolded him where they stood by the house, their arms reminding Josée of flapping hens’ wings. She waved at them.

“Happy birthday, Josée!” they called.

“Merci. I’m sorry Philippe ran through your garden.”

Jeanne, six months older than Josée, ruffled her littlest brother’s hair. “Why so wet, then?”

“He thought he was a fish,” Jacques said. The sisters both laughed then fell silent and stared at Josée’s and Jacques’s hands clasped together.

Josée pulled free and wiped her palm on her skirt. "It's hot today."

"*Oui*, and you're brown already, just from being down by the water." Jeanne linked arms with Josée. "We must get you ready for the party tonight. I think Mama has a surprise for you."

"Wait for me." Marie followed behind.

"How does it feel, being eighteen?" Jeanne leaned closer. "Now you've caught up with me."

"Eighteen's not much differen' from seventeen."

"Ah, t'is different. When you're eighteen, you're a woman. As soon as I turned eighteen, Josef Landry asked Papa for permission to marry me." Jeanne sighed. "He already has a small farm next to his papa's. Then once his house is built. . ." She sighed again.

Josée laughed. "I can guarantee you that no one will be asking your papa's permission to marry me."

They entered the LeBlanc farmhouse, and the three girls climbed the ladder to the loft where they shared half of the space with the boys. A curtain divided the long loft in two.

Mama LeBlanc, the only mother Josée had ever known, had hung a new dress where they could see it. Mama turned as the girls entered the loft. "Beautiful, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Yes, it's very beautiful." Josée wanted to cry. She held scant memories of her own parents. The fact that the LeBlancs accepted her as one of their own comforted her, yet the same fact reminded her that they had taken her in when she had no one.

"*Merci*, Mama." She hugged the short, stout woman who stood beside the dress.

Mama LeBlanc returned the hug then held Josée at arm's length. "Your papa LeBlanc has another su'prise for you tonight."

"I wonder if he's found a man for you, Josée!" Jeanne started brushing her own black tresses. Marie, sixteen, giggled and flopped onto the mattress so hard that a tuft of Spanish moss stuck out the side.

Josée touched the soft cotton frock and almost shuddered. Marriage? A man? Yet if she were to marry anyone, it would probably be Jacques. At least he would make her laugh and listen to the songs she made up. But she, Josée Broussard, orphan, had nothing to offer a man. "I couldn't imagine."



All afternoon, Edouard LeBlanc had endured the squeals and laughter that disrupted the tranquillity of his secluded LeBlanc bayou cabin. If he hadn't caught enough fish for the day already, he'd have sent the brood back to the big house. To him, violating the quiet of the bayou was sacrilege.

Edouard stared up at the canopy of cypress trees that blocked most of the late afternoon heat. He had time to shave before the party. No sense in hurrying. If it wasn't that Papa had requested—no, demanded—his presence, Edouard would be content to lie in his hammock and watch the fish jump from the bayou tonight. Or maybe not. A wayward mosquito found Edouard's arm, and the sting spurred him to leave the hammock and enter the cabin.

JOIE DE VIVRE

Today Josée Broussard turned eighteen years old. All grown up and always with a song on her lips and spring in her step, Josée's ways needled him like pesky mosquitoes. Not that he'd been close enough to feel any bites. Listening and watching her from a distance was enough.

Edouard prepared his shaving mixture and propped up the chunk of mirror, a remnant from an old looking glass. Careful of the long scar running from under his ear to the end of his chin, he used the long shaving blade to remove his scruff of beard.

The scar made its appearance on his face. He would dare anyone to stare at him tonight, like Celine had done on his return from the war. Believing in a cause and following its course had made him follow Jean Lafitte to New Orleans five years before. If he had known his actions would cost him his only true love, he would have planted himself along the Bayou Teche and never have departed from La Manque.

Satisfied he'd removed enough of the beard, Edouard put the glass away. After sunset, maybe the light of the bonfire and lanterns would give enough shadows to cover most of the scar. He found his comb and pulled it through his wet hair then secured the length in the back with a leather thong.

Edouard limped to the bureau at the other end of the cabin and took out a clean but rumpled shirt. He could endure the fiddle music and the songs as long as he didn't have to dance. Storms approached. His bad leg told him so.

Out of respect for Papa and because of Josée's birthday, Edouard resolved to go to the party and stay no longer than necessary. Then he could retreat to the cabin and try to forget the life that swirled around him persistently and tried to draw him in.



Josée's sides ached from laughter. She smoothed the skirt of her new dress and gave Mama LeBlanc another smile of gratitude. Jeanne had helped her put her hair up on her head, and she felt as fancy as any lady over in Lafayette. Merry fiddle music matched the bonfire's roar, and Josée tapped her bare feet to the beat of the drum played by one of the village boys.

Then she saw *him* at the edges of the crowd. A tall man with eyes as black as the murky bayou water at midnight. Jacques's brother, Edouard, the eldest of the LeBlanc clan.

"Looks like my brother made it to the party," Jacques murmured into her ear.

"I. . .I'm glad." Although, Josée wasn't sure how she felt. Dark. Brooding. His eyes spoke of a soul deeper than the waters that flowed through La Manque. She wondered if he ever laughed. The only time she ever saw him was when she and the other LeBlanc children would go to the bayou to fish and play by the water. If the children grew loud, Edouard would hop into his pirogue and drift away.

Whenever Josée would ask Jeanne or Marie if they should be quieter, one of them might say, "Ah, pah. It's just Edouard sticking his head from his shell like a *tortue*."

Tonight she could feel his gaze on her when Jacques gave her a bottle of ink as a gift and when Jeanne and Marie gave her their present, a writing pen. Where had they found such treasures?

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Josée was, as they called her, “the smart one” and could read and write. Perhaps the LeBlanc children admired her, even if they did not grasp the use of such activities. Tonight when she met Edouard’s gaze, she couldn’t tell how he regarded her. *A’bien*, she wouldn’t let his opinion bother her. She stuck her chin out and tried to stand like a lady.



“My son, my eldest.” Papa clapped him on the back. His voice boomed loud enough to be heard over the crowd’s chatter. “You honored your papa and your family by comin’ tonight.”

“I could do no less.” Edouard knew he should have left after the dances began. Yet the sight of Josée, her hair up, and flitting like a bird around the bonfire, her arms linked with his sisters’, had made him stay. Several times he caught her stare at him. Did she see the scar, or was she watching his limp? He dared her to say something.

Here she was now, arm and arm with Mama LeBlanc, so close he could see the skin peeling from her sunburned nose. Her hair glowed almost blue black in the firelight. He wondered if she looked like her *mère* who had borne her. She gave him an uncertain smile.

Then Papa bellowed again, “*Mes amis* de La Manque, tonight we celebrate! Josée Broussard, raised as my daughter since she was but six, is now eighteen years old!” He gave a great laugh. His belly shook and the buttons on his vest threatened to pop. A few whoops and hollers and cheers rose up from the merry group.

Josée’s already bronze skin glowed with a deeper blush that crept to her neck, which curved gracefully to her shoulders. Edouard’s throat felt like he’d put on a tie tonight, except he had not.

After the cheers gave way to silence, Papa continued. “Tonight, I have a special surprise for Josée an’ another member of my family.”

Edouard saw Josée dart a glance at Jacques, who jerked his head in their direction. Then he watched Josée’s gaze shift to him, and he saw her eyes dawn with a sudden, horrible recognition.

“As is the custom of our people,” Papa shouted gleefully, “I announce the betrothal of Josée Monique Broussard to my eldest son—Edouard Philippe LeBlanc!”

Chapter 2



Like the tears coming from Josée's eyes, rain fell on the LeBlanc's farmhouse roof. The crowd had celebrated until late, but Josée found it hard to sleep after the family settled to bed for the night. Snores from various areas of the attic told her the LeBlanc siblings rested with as much vigor as they'd rejoiced at her betrothal to Edouard.

In two weeks, the priest would meet them at the village common house. He would marry and bury, then move on and leave them until his next passage through.

Mon Père, I do not understand Your plan. Josée rolled onto her back and looked up into the darkness, as if to see through the ceiling above her and up to heaven. *My mama—my real mère—always said You work Your will in our lives. How can this be Your will if I'm not happy? Edouard is moody and dark. Jacques is—*

Everything Edouard was not. Josée sighed. She should accept what Mama and Papa LeBlanc had decided for her—for *them*, she corrected herself. After all, her world wasn't the only world that had been disrupted. Edouard looked as if he'd been sentenced to hang.

She couldn't picture any other unmarried man in the village being happy at the prospect of marrying an orphan without a dowry. She had nothing except herself to bring to the marriage. Josée shivered and pictured lonely years ahead.

Forgive me, mon Père. I should be thankful You are providing for me for the rest of my life. Yet like a snake from the dark waters not far away, fear slithered around her heart. What if Edouard was a cruel man?

Josée flung back the quilt and tried not to disturb Jeanne who slept next to her. *She* was destined to marry someone she cared for, and he for her. Tonight the soft mattress that smelled of moss did not comfort Josée. Her feet found the cool plank floor. Perhaps a cup of coffee, reheated on the coals, might do her good. She descended the loft's ladder and entered the kitchen.

Mama LeBlanc stood at the table in the warm glow of lamplight.

"Mama?"

A wooden trunk lay open before Mama LeBlanc. "I thought you might be down, *chère*."

"I couldn't sleep." She hoped Mama did not see the traces of tears on her face. "What's this?"

"Some things from your family. Look." Mama patted a yellowed paper wrapper.

Josée pulled the paper away to find an old dress that pricked at the edges of her memory and hurt a little. Her real mère's dress. A lump swelled in her throat. "Oh. It's beautiful. I'd almost forgotten."

"We'll have jus' enough time for you to try it on and see if I need to sew the hem." Mama's rough fingers smoothed the lace. "Your mère would be proud to see you wear her dress. There's more in here for you. You may take this trunk when you move to your new home."

Josée's heart beat faster, and she nodded. A new home. With Edouard.

"The coffee should be ready. Would you like a cup?" Though her surroundings remained the same, for the first time Josée felt as if she'd changed merely by reaching her eighteenth birthday.

"Of course." Josée settled onto one of the wooden benches as if she were one of the local village women visiting Mama for a cup of coffee and a talk.

Mama LeBlanc placed two mugs of coffee between them and rested her ample form on the bench across from Josée. "Marriage brings lots of changes."

One sip of the dark brew made Josée sit up straighter. "Oui, I am sure." She clutched the mug with both hands.

"Edouard is a good man. A hurt man, a disappointed man, but a good man." The older woman exhaled deeply, as if unburdening herself. "I know, deep down in his heart, Edouard understands *le bon Dieu* carries his troubles and cares for him. But—"

"Then why couldn't I marry. . ." Josée made herself stop. She had no right to question the LeBlancs' choice of husband for her. She had grown up with the knowledge that one day she'd likely marry one of the older LeBlanc brothers.

"Why not Jacques?" Mama patted Josée's hand. "Jacques is too young. He is impulsive. He would keep you laughing, oui. However, he cares more for himself than anyone else. He is a *pourri*, a spoiled young man. I am to blame, and his papa."

"I care for Jacques, and I think he cares for me, too." Josée's dismay at the words she spoke aloud caused her to touch her hot cheek.

"Ah, but is his affection the kind of carin' that would last? *Chéri*, I love my son, but Jacques is too young to marry and shoulder such responsibility. For when marriage comes, then come *bébés*."

Bébés. Josée's mind spun like a top. She could scarcely breathe. If only she could have stayed seventeen forever.



Edouard let the July sun soak into his bare shoulders. He spread more pitch on the cabin's roof. In spite of his anger at his father's decision, he wouldn't dream of causing his family—or the innocent Josée—any dishonor. So he must prepare the cabin and make it fit for a young bride. A woman around would be like having a hen loose in the cabin all the time.

"You don't want to marry her, do you?" Jacques scuttled across the roof like a crab and squatted next to him. "Wish I was older."

"Not her, not anyone." Edouard spoke the words truthfully enough. Heat

radiated from the tar paper and roofing. Jacques was delaying their job by his talk. Edouard wanted nothing more than to be done.

“Not even Celine Hebert?”

“Celine Hebert forgot me and married another four years ago.” Edouard clenched his jaw. Jacques’s words irritated him more than the sweat trickling a path down his back.

The anguish over his lost love that had once torn his heart had dulled to a dismal memory, but Edouard still hadn’t the inclination to seek anyone else as a wife.

“You haven’t forgotten her.”

“I don’t love Celine, if that’s what you mean. What’s done is done.” Marrying Josée without any thoughts of love would be best.

“Yet you’ll marry someone you don’t care for to please Papa.” Jacques shook his head and picked up a hammer.

“For honor’s sake I marry Josée Broussard. She has no feelings for me, so we begin the marriage even.” Edouard recalled her dark-eyed expression the other evening at the party, as if she were trying to see inside him. He wasn’t sure he welcomed her curiosity. But at least she didn’t flinch from the sight of his scar. Aloud, he continued, “And perhaps over time she will forget what feelings she *thinks* she has for you.”

Jacques shrugged. “I should have never told you what I heard her say the other night, the night of Papa’s announcement and the big storm. Like I said, if I were older—”

Edouard’s gut twisted, and he glared at Jacques. “Once Josée and I are wed, you’ll not come around and cause trouble. I’m marryin’ her. You are not. And I noticed you speakin’ with several young ladies at the party. I will be faithful to Josée—mon Dieu requires no less.”

“As you try to forget your lost love Celine!”

Enough! Edouard shoved Jacques and sent him hurtling over the edge of the cabin’s roof. The young man whimpered like a pup on the ground. Edouard sprang from the roof. He managed to land on his feet, his hands curled into fists. How dare Jacques accuse him of harboring love for Celine?

Jacques leaped to his feet and doubled over. He used his shoulder to ram into Edouard’s midsection. Edouard let the motion carry him backward and onto the grass. He flipped Jacques over his head then whirled to pin his brother down.

“I . . . don’t . . . love her. Now you see why I wish to be left alone!” Edouard ground out the words. He held Jacques by the shoulders.

A sudden shadow blocked the light. Edouard glanced up to see Josée standing over them. The summer wind teased her hair, and she clutched a basket over one hip. A tendril of blue black hair, glossy as ink, wafted across her full lips.

Josée’s capable hand moved the offending wisp out of the way. “I . . . Mama sent me with lunch. You both must be hungry and thirsty.” A blush swept down her neck. She averted her gaze from their shirtless figures and looked at the cabin instead.

Edouard remembered where he was and released Jacques. He grabbed his nearby shirt and gestured for Jacques to do the same. “Jacques and I are done workin’ on the roof for today. I can finish the rest on my own. Thank you—and thank Mama—for lunch.”

Jacques, who took longer putting on his shirt than usual, busied himself with the contents of the basket. Josée ambled around to the entrance of the cabin that faced the bayou. Edouard wanted to stop her. He hadn't finished making the place habitable for a lady.

Which is exactly how Josée carried herself. He tucked his shirt into his trousers and caught up with Josée. "The cabin ain't very big. Two rooms. I have a good fireplace that is easy to cook over and makes good fires. I keep some things cool in the bayou water." He found himself in a struggle for words. He did not understand the effect this young woman had on his speech. She could see this for herself.

Yet she paused on the tiny porch and turned to face him and the bayou. "I—I wanted to see the view. If it's not ready, I won't go inside. Not yet." Then came another blush.

Edouard felt unspeakable relief. "Mornings are best here. Early, you can see the sun risin' up over the cypress trees and hear the birds calling. The pelicans feed, and you fight 'em for a catch of fish."

"It's very peaceful here," Josée said. She looked as though she was being fitted for the hangman's noose.

He knew she could read and write. Maybe Josée would be better off in a place like Lafayette, where she could be a nanny or a governess or work for a rich Creole family. If the prospect of marriage seemed as undesirable to her as to him, now would be a good time for them to talk. Maybe it would be better if they didn't marry after all.

"Josée, I didn't know my papa had planned this for us."

"I know. You looked as surprised as I imagine I did." Josée leaned on the porch railing. "Remember, like Papa said, it's the custom of our people."

"We don't have to follow the custom, not if both of us don't wish to." Edouard felt a pang at the clouded expression that crossed Josée's face at his words. "It wouldn't be the first time I went agin'st my papa's wishes."

"What about the plans of our bon Dieu? Could He be plannin' this for us?" Josée faced him again, her arms crossed across her body. "And when you went to war, it cost you greatly to go against Papa LeBlanc's wishes."

"Our bon Dieu." Edouard ground out the words. "He let me be scarred. He let my one love marry another. He left me with a bad leg. What is good about such things?"

Before Edouard could undo his hasty speech, another voice intruded. "*Bonjour*, young Edouard! We bring a gift from the Landrys, a new bed for you and your bride!"

Jean Landry and two of his sons came around the edge of the cabin. They carried a bed frame wrought from cypress wood, sturdy enough to last generations.

Edouard saw Josée glance at the bed before she fled toward the main house. First the fight with Jacques, then his words with Josée, and now a marriage bed, paraded down the path to his cabin.

Chapter 3



For the next week, Josée purposed in her heart not to speak of the conversation she had shared with Edouard on the cabin's porch. He didn't want her. Worse, he seemed angry at God, his anger like a festering wound that would not heal.

The families of La Manque had sent gifts along with gentle teasing, and others teased not so gently about the upcoming union. Josée tried to smile and give her thanks. Already she had several bolts of cloth as well as pots and pans. Edouard had already cleared a small patch of land by the cabin so she could plant a late-summer garden. The tilled land waited for her after it had lain dormant for years.

Now, Josée perched on a footstool in the center of the kitchen while Mama altered the hem of her mother's old dress.

"You will soon call the LeBlanc family cabin home, chere." Mama LeBlanc took up another section of the hem. "The first LeBlanc settler, Michel, came here after Le Grand Dérangement and built the cabin for his young bride, Capucine. Oui, the LeBlancs have much more now than then. But my Nicolas keeps the cabin to remind us of how good our God has been to us. And now our joy spills over, knowing that you and Edouard will start your lives together there."

The heat was unbearable, the prickly kind that made Josée want to run for the cool bayou, shed her garments to her pantaloons, and dive in. Marriage. In seven days, the priest would pass through La Manque and change their lives forever.

Anger that rivaled the summer heat rose within Josée. "Mama, I do not think Edouard wants to marry me. He. . ." She struggled to find the words. On that day when the Landrys brought the bed, at first Edouard seemed proud of his cabin, as if he wanted her to like it. Then he changed, as if he believed she didn't belong there and wanted to convince her of that, too.

"Edouard has spoken to his papa." Mama seemed to consider her words carefully. "He somehow thinks that you are too good for this place, and for him."

"Why? La Manque has always been my home." Josée sighed.

"You can read. You can write. You speak like one who has been to school."

"I know that my mère would want me to study. So I have, borrowing books and helping Jeanne, Marie and the others. Books aren't much use to them, though."

"Edouard is searching for reasons which do not exist. His papa has persuaded him that marriage is for the best." Mama LeBlanc patted Josée's shoulder. "There. You can put your other dress on. This one will be fine for the wedding. Perhaps you

can find Edouard and bring him a piece of that pie you made for supper last night.”

Josée’s pulse thudded in her ears. “I don’t think pie will convince Edouard.”

“Go. Speak to him. I have been married many years, and I know this: Good conversation and a slice of pie cure many things.”

Minutes later, Josée headed toward the bayou cabin. She clutched a plate of pie covered with a cloth napkin. She felt as if the *teche* waited, coiled and ready to strike, as she approached the cabin. When she rounded the corner, she saw Edouard stretched out in his hammock, his eyes closed. *So the teche sleeps.*

Josée cleared her throat. “*Pardon*, I brought you some pie.”

Edouard opened his eyes and sat bolt upright, as if embarrassed to be caught lounging. “*Merci.*”

She could not gauge his expression. He took the plate from her hands, and Josée watched him taste the pie. She tried not to grip the edges of her apron. She wanted him to say something. Why wouldn’t he? Should she speak first? An inner nudge suggested she sit on the porch step. And so she did, though keeping silent about the pie and the more urgent matter of the wedding nearly smothered her.

“The pie’s good. You made it?” came Edouard’s voice. He settled onto the step next to her and took another bite.

“*Oui.* Mama said I should share it with you, and she said that you talked to your papa.” Josée watched the bayou drift silently by. She took a deep breath and let the dark green canopy of trees calm her.

Mon Père, help me. I want whatever You have for us, Edouard and me. Help him see it, too. She heard a bird’s call far away through the trees.

He finished the pie, acted as if he were going to lick the plate, and then stopped. Josée would have chuckled if Edouard’s silence hadn’t made her want to drag conversation out of the man.

“I . . . my papa says I am much like his papa, who built this cabin.” Edouard gazed out at the dark water. “He lost many things. His home in Acadia. My papa’s mama, Capucine—she, too, knew loss.”

Josée watched his hands. He placed the plate on the top step behind them then rested his chin on folded fingers.

“Jacques, he is like Papa, so full of *joie de vivre.*” Edouard turned to face Josée, and she could scarcely breathe. She had never been within arm’s length of the man, and now he seemed to loom over her, although he was sitting on the top step. “I think more than I speak. But you would not miss such liveliness here? My life is simple.”

“It’s—it’s peaceful here.” Josée realized she was studying the scar on Edouard’s face, dulled by stubble. “And I would not miss Jacques’s liveliness so much. When we marry, I will not think of him again.” She shifted her gaze to his eyes. Their brown depths almost begged her to explore the secrets inside.



I haven’t wanted to kiss anyone since—

Edouard wished that he no longer thought of Celine but of the young woman who had willingly come and offered him part of herself with a simple piece of pie.

He had sensed Josée's urgency to speak and gave her credit for her silence. Her mouth opened and closed like a fish several times while he ate the pie.

Now while she waited, her mouth, well, it practically begged for a kiss. Thoughts of fish left his mind.

He stood and tried to keep his wits about him. This was Josée Broussard, who tutored his younger siblings and had somehow grown up when he wasn't looking. And soon she would become his wife.

"Josée." Edouard bent, took one of her hands in his, and pulled her to her feet. "My papa has arranged for us to marry. I doubted his choice at first, but then I do not trust easily. I cannot promise you much. I have little. But"—he gestured to the cabin behind them—"the cabin is snug and the bayou is good to me. I will provide for you, and you will lack nothing."

Her fingers tightened around his hand. "Edouard, I know you will. While you may not, as you say, have the joie de vivre of your papa, you work hard. And I promise you I shall be true to the vows we make before *notre* Dieu. I can do no less. I will be a good wife to you."

At that, Edouard raised the hand he held to his lips and sealed their agreement with a kiss.



Josée carried the memory of Edouard's chaste kiss for the next several days. Sometimes she found herself rubbing the spot his lips had touched with the thumb of the other hand. No longer did she want to cry when considering the idea of the upcoming marriage. It was also too late for her to make plans to escape to Lafayette or another large town.

Jacques even kept away, which was also a relief to her. She didn't understand how the dizzying sensations Jacques used to cause inside her by his very presence instead occurred at the mere thought of Edouard. She wanted to find a reason to visit the bayou cabin yet didn't want to overstay her welcome. And perhaps Edouard was only making the best of the situation he'd found himself in. She reminded herself he didn't promise to love her.

She did cry, though, when she slipped her mère's dress over her head and Mama LeBlanc fastened the buttons at the back. The afternoon sun made long shadows through the windows.

"No, no tears today! This is a day of joy for our families." Mama dabbed at Josée's full eyes with a handkerchief. "Plus, your Edouard would be worried to see you with red eyes."

My Edouard. Evidently Mama LeBlanc carried the notion that love would grow between them. Josée tried not to think of love.

Mon Dieu, I submit to Papa and Mama LeBlanc. For the rest of our lives, Edouard and I will be together.

"I wish it was my turn." Jeanne's wistful voice summoned Josée from her thoughts. "Papa and Josef have agreed to wait until spring. And Mama and I have yet to sew my new dress."

THE BARTERED BRIDE COLLECTION

“You’ll be happy to move into a new home, too.” Josée resisted the urge to suggest to Jeanne that she and Josef take her and Edouard’s place in front of the priest.

All too soon, the LeBlancs set out by wagon and across Breaux’s Bridge to the common house where the villagers gathered. Josée did not see Edouard; perhaps he had traveled alone. Her throat hurt. She wondered if she would find her voice once it was time to say her vows.

Two other young couples of La Manque also waited to be married, and Josée didn’t mind sharing the day with them.

She saw Edouard standing by himself outside the common house as they approached. She felt herself smile. He stood tall and broad in his suit coat, his ink-dark hair pulled back from his face and shoulders, his face clean shaven. He hadn’t seen them yet, and Josée’s throat constricted when she saw what had caught his attention.

Celine Hebert—no, Celine *Dupuis*—had arrived, her features evident even from a distance. Her husband’s back was to them as he helped Celine from their farm wagon.

And the closer Josée got to the common house, she wondered if she saw regret in Edouard’s eyes.

Chapter 4



The pounding drums matched the beat of Edouard's heart. He and Josée led the *promenade* of newly married couples as the entire party performed the traditional wedding march around the edge of the grounds. The well-wishers' cheering grew louder than the blare of horns and the wail of fiddles.

Edouard clutched Josée's hand, whether to hold himself up or keep her from toppling over, he didn't know. One thing he did know was they were now officially married.

He did not look at Celine, though he knew her to be there with her husband. He had glimpsed signs of a life growing inside her, and tonight as he whirled Josée into his arms at the dance, whatever he felt for Celine died inside him.

Surprise entered his wife's eyes. Maybe he held her too tightly. *His wife*. Perhaps they would learn to love each other.

At that, he found himself stepping on her feet. "I'm sorry."

Josée drew in a sharp breath but stayed in the circle of his arms. "I don't dance so well, either."

"Oh yes, you do. I've seen you." He should have kept his mouth closed. Now she would know he sometimes used to watch her play with the others on the banks of the bayou. "Here. We'll sit down to give your feet and my bad leg a rest."

Edouard kept an arm around her as they headed to the edge of the crowd where the LeBlancs had spread blankets on the ground along with the other families of La Manque. The other two married couples continued to dance, and the villagers rejoiced with them.

He looked at Josée's slippered feet. Where she'd found dancing slippers was a mystery to him. "Do your toes hurt?"

She smiled a slow smile at him and blushed. "The cow has done worse to them on milkin' days." Looking as delicate as a blossom as she took a place on the blanket, Josée had opened a door inside him he thought had been shut forever. With one smile. But he could ask nothing of her that a husband had a right to demand, not without having her heart first. He would not crush the sun-kissed flower that sat at his feet.

Edouard's throat felt like the time he'd been out fishing for two days and his water jug ran dry. "I—I'll get us somethin' to drink." He stalked off toward the family's wagon to find the water cask and a cup.

Someone clapped him on the back along the way, and Edouard tried to make out the face in the shadows cast by firelight. Josef Landry.

“Edouard, mon ami, you are undone. No more eating what you will, no more sleeping and working when you want. *Quel dommage!*” Josef’s grin took the bite out of his words.

“Oui, it’s a pity.” Edouard shook his head.

“So where do you go with the long face?”

“To get water for us.”

“Ah, the hen is already pecking at the rooster!” Josef let out a whoop and slapped his knee. His gaze darted over to Jeanne. “Dance, ma’amselle?” With that, Edouard’s sister gave a toss of her black hair and entered the crowd with Josef.

Edouard reached the family wagon, found the cask, and fumbled for a tin cup. Papa waved at him from where he sat with Mama. They should have chosen a better husband for Josée. He did agree that Jacques was unsuitable—the boy would probably have broken her heart—but marry *him*? In truth, Edouard had not thought much beyond the actual idea of being married—past the ceremony—and on to life with a woman underfoot.

A pecking hen. Someone to tell him not to track dirt in the cabin, to work, to not sleep when he wanted. He had not shared a bed since he was a child and piled in with Jacques. Marriage was a different matter altogether. The hangman’s noose settled around Edouard’s neck once again. *Mon Dieu, why are You doing this to me?*

The contents of the cup nearly sloshed over the sides. Edouard looked down to steady his hand and nearly collided with a figure in his path. Celine, with her husband looming beside her.

“Bon temps *ce soir*, non?” Jean-Luc Dupuis shook hands with Edouard.

Edouard shrugged. “*Je ne sais pas.*” He did not know if tonight was a good time, nor if the days to follow would be either. Celine looked like a startled *grosbek* about to flap its long wings and soar away over the bayou, instead of ending up as someone’s supper. Edouard hoped his expression read that she had nothing to fear from him.

“A’bien, Edouard, I wish you and your bride long life, happy years, and many children together.” With a nod, Jean-Luc whisked his wife away from Edouard and toward their wagon.

Many of La Manque stopped to speak with Edouard on his way back to Josée. He did not regret so much his decision to keep to himself and stay at the bayou.

He wondered if any of them whispered, “That’s the one who left our village to join with Lafitte. He should have left well enough alone.” Did they laugh at the hermit saddled with a lively wife? Or was she the object of their pity?

No matter how many well-wishers greeted him, cheered him, punched him good-naturedly in the arm, Edouard knew that their sincere efforts could not ensure him and Josée much of anything.



Josée let her feet tap to the sound of the merry dance. She longed to have someone whisk her out into the happy group of villagers. But she remained seated on the

blanket and clapped along with a few of the others. Where was Edouard?

"He's left you alone, has he?" Jacques's lanky form blocked her view of the firelight.

"Edouard is getting us a drink." Josée would not rise to her feet. Jacques, she knew, wanted to pull her to the dance. The band now played a mournful ballad of a lost love.

Jacques reached down for her hand.

"Non. I'm waiting for Edouard."

"One dance?" Jacques's voice took on a wheedling tone.

Josée shook her head. "I promised. . . ." She did not think it would be difficult to refuse Jacques's request.

"Find someone else to dance with." Edouard stood next to Jacques. Josée had never seen such a look on her husband's face. Like a gator prepared to attack, Edouard's expression should have been enough to make Jacques leave them alone.

"Josée looked like she was not havin' fun."

"She is my responsibility, not yours." Edouard used his free hand to point a finger at himself, then at Jacques's chest.

Josée stood and took the cup from Edouard. She had to tug a little to get him to release it. Perhaps a distraction would soothe his irritation.

"I was resting, Jacques. Good night!" She sipped from the cup and returned it to Edouard. "Merci."

"Yes, good night," Edouard echoed. He slung the cup to the ground. It scudded across the grass. He grabbed Josée's hand so hard that tears pricked her eyes. "Josée, we'll go home."

"But—"

He swung away from the party. Josée's shoulder jolted, and she gasped.

"Edouard—" She flung a glance back at Jacques, who stood staring after them.

"I have had enough of people for one night, perhaps for a good many nights." Even in the moonlight, Josée could see the pulsation of Edouard's jaw. She trotted to keep up with him. Words seldom failed her except for now. Crickets clamored in the summer evening.

Edouard slowed his pace and grimaced. "I'm sorry I pulled your arm like that. I wasn't tryin' to hurt you. I did not think. Mon Dieu reminds me of my bad leg."

"I do not think your pain was God's doing. I think if you had remembered and walked more slowly—" Josée stopped and bit her lip. "Anyway, my arm is fine, no worse than a cow pulling on its rope, trying to get away. Jacques—"

"Jacques is an *idiote*. He does not listen, and it was not your fault."

"Thank you. I did not speak to him first." Josée squeezed his hand, but he did not return the gesture, and she blinked back tears. "Do you mean for us to walk all the way home?"

"Oui. Last I knew, I had no grosbek wings."

Humor on the heels of his outburst spun in Josée's head. "True." The trees shadowed them along the road, and Josée shivered. She let go of Edouard's hand and rubbed her gooseflesh-covered arms.

THE BARTERED BRIDE COLLECTION

They approached Breaux's Bridge, a recent boon to La Manque and the surrounding farms. A half-moon showed them the way to cross. One of Josée's slippers skidded on the new planks.

Edouard took her hand. "Careful. I don't want you to slip." Josée wondered what had happened to his earlier tones, when they had danced. The only depth of feeling his touch held was protection. Bayou Teche drifted below them.

Once back on hard ground, Josée's feet began to throb. She never should have accepted Jeanne's loan of slippers a size too small. "You'll wear them only for a few hours," Jeanne had assured her.

Edouard stopped and looked at her slippers. "You can take those silly shoes off." He shook his head. "Women!"

Josée straightened her shoulders after she found she could not wiggle her toes inside the slippers. "I'll be fine."

He fell silent the rest of the walk home. Josée never wanted to walk that far again. Between her feet and the thick silence, Josée was ready to explode. The bayou cabin waited in sight. Josée wished she had listened to Edouard and taken off the slippers, but she did not want to bend.

They moved around the side of the cabin and saw the bayou. A lump the size of an apple lodged in Josée's throat. Her new home. A breeze tugged on the moss draped on the cypress trees, and their branches moved as if to wave her inside.

Edouard climbed the steps and flung open the door. "Er. . . I will rebuild the fire."

Josée followed him. "No, I can." At least she hoped she could. Around the LeBlanc family, most of them took turns. And most of the other females would end up helping Josée coax the smoldering embers to life.

Feeling Edouard's gaze on her, Josée kicked off the slippers by the door and crossed the room. She fell to her knees and glanced at Edouard, who lit the lantern.

"Do you have moss?"

"There's a box by the hearth." Edouard sat on one of two stools at the table and took up a knife and a piece of wood.

Josée found the moss and placed it on the glowing embers. She wanted to beg the moss to catch fire but did not dare ask aloud.

"Burning a hole in the moss with your eyes won't start the fire."

Her face flamed. "I always had help with the fire. I thought I could do it."

Edouard swung around and set his whittling down. "I'll take care of it. You, you, just. . ."

Josée realized he did not know what to do with her. She was not a new cow or a chicken that could be fenced in or cooped up.

Her throat hurt. "Are you hungry?"

"No, no." While she watched, Edouard soon had the moss aglow and piled some kindling on top of the flames. "I am fine."

She stood back, feeling useless as a leaky cup. They were not the first couple wed because of a family's wishes. No one was guaranteed love.

I want to be happy again.

JOIE DE VIVRE

“There.” Edouard stood and brushed dirt from his trousers. “A fire. In case it rains, we will not be cold tonight.”

The distance between them might have been miles, but Edouard made no move to get closer. He tossed his hat onto the table and gestured to the doorway leading to the back room.

“If you are tired, you can. . .”

A bien, so that was it. Josée’s gaze glimpsed her quilt, spread over the bed tucked in the corner of the back room. The bed, handcrafted for them. New, never used. The remembrance of the Landry’s pride when they toted the bed to the cabin as a gift flickered in her mind.

“Thank you.” Josée rubbed her arms. The gooseflesh would not go away, and she dared not draw closer to the fire. . .and Edouard.

“I . . . I . . .” Edouard shifted from one foot to the other, and he looked at the door as he spoke. “I’m going to check the pirogue. I must go fishin’ soon.” With that, he clomped to the door and left the cabin.

Josée burst into tears. Her feet felt like she had walked on glass for three miles, her head pounded, and she realized she was hungry because she failed to eat any of the lavish dishes brought by the villagers to celebrate the weddings. She satisfied her hunger pangs with generous gulps from the water bucket.

She found the trunk Mama LeBlanc had sent down to the cabin earlier that day and took out a soft chemise for sleeping in. She washed her dusty feet before climbing onto the soft mattress.

Josée said her prayers, missing the whispers of Jeanne, Marie, and the other girls alongside her as they prayed. *Notre Père*—

Our Father. She had never felt so alone in her life. Josée finished praying and tasted more tears before sleep overcame her.