

*The
Mark
of the
King*

JOCELYN GREEN



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To all who feel marked by judgment.
May your life be marked by the grace of Jesus instead.



“From now on let no one cause trouble for me,
for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.”

—Galatians 6:17

PROLOGUE

PARIS, FRANCE

MAY 1719

“You shouldn’t be here.” With gentle authority, Julianne Chevalier ushered a man twice her age to the doorway of his young wife’s lying-in chamber.

“You have what you need?” Toulouse Mercier looked over Julianne’s head toward Marguerite. “My first wife died in childbirth. I cannot lose Marguerite too. Or the baby.” He gripped Julianne’s arm, pulling her close enough to smell the pomade on his wig and to see the powder dusting the shoulders of his black robe. “Marguerite lost the last baby. The last midwife did not bleed her, and so we lost the baby before it was fully formed. Please.”

Gritting her teeth, Julianne peeled Toulouse’s fingers from her arm and gave them a reassuring squeeze before releasing them. “*Oui*, monsieur, we have bled her monthly as required, and today of all days will be no different. Now, am I to attend any further questions, or shall I attend your wife instead?”

His watery blue eyes snapped. “If you require the surgeon, I’ll fetch him posthaste.”

“I’ll notify you at once should such a measure become necessary.” With a firm nod, she watched Toulouse bow out of the room and closed the door. As she unpinned her lace cap from the curls that crowned her head, she swept to Marguerite’s bed, where Adelaide Le Brun already stood watch. Julianne had completed her three-year apprenticeship under Adelaide months ago, but Toulouse insisted on having the seasoned midwife present for the birth.

“You will help me?” Marguerite’s voice quaked as she reached for Julianne’s hand.

“With all that I am.” She smiled as she unpacked her supplies and tied her birthing apron over her skirt, pinning the bib to her bodice.

“I’m so afraid.” Marguerite’s lips trembled. At sixteen years, she was nine years Julianne’s junior and dangerously slight of frame.

“We have taken every precaution.” Her fingernails trimmed short, round, and smooth, Julianne gently probed Marguerite’s belly through the thin sheet covering her. “Today will be no different.” Throughout the pregnancy, she had gathered this sparrow of a girl under her wing, providing linseed oils to help her skin’s elasticity, wraps to support the weight of the child, and advice on what to expect.

Adelaide stood by Marguerite’s head, speaking encouragement to her in low, practiced tones. With greased fingers, Julianne reached under the linen, and with her eyes still on Marguerite’s face, skirted the neck of the womb. It was still small and unwilling.

“We have some time yet.” Julianne wiped her hand on a rag. “Rest between the pains. Save your strength for the grand finale, oui?” She caught Adelaide’s eye and cocked her head to ask if she wanted to examine Marguerite as well.

“It’s you she wants, not me.” Adelaide’s eyebrows arched

innocently, but bitterness soured her tone. The mistress midwife had been practicing for three decades. But when clients began asking for Julianne, the apprentice, rather than Adelaide, something shifted between them. Julianne never intended to usurp her teacher, but her young practice had outpaced the older woman's.

Stifling a sigh, Julianne crossed to the window, opening it wide enough for healthful ventilation, and fragrances of orange and jasmine wafted in on the breeze from the *parfumerie* down the street. A hundred church bells chimed across the city. Rainwater gushed from the roof, cutting muddy channels into the road three stories below.

Marguerite stirred, and Julianne turned in time to see her belly harden into a compact ball. A grimace slashed the young woman's face. With her palms upturned in a helpless gesture, Adelaide retreated petulantly to a chair in the corner of the room.

"Breathe through it." Julianne seated herself on a stool and greased her fingers once more before reaching under the linen. During the next contraction, she pierced the membranes around Marguerite's waters with a large grain of salt. The familiar sour smell pinching her nose, she replaced the soaked rags beneath Marguerite's hips.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Adelaide crowed.

Julianne had forgotten nothing. But rather than argue, she allowed Adelaide to bleed Marguerite from the arm to ease her breathing, lessen engorgement, and soften the cervix so it would stretch and open more easily.

"Forgive me for not asking sooner, Julianne, but do you have children?" Marguerite's eyelids drooped.

"Not yet," she replied.

"'Twould be a scandal if she did, given that she's not married," volunteered Adelaide. An unvarnished attempt to undermine

Julianne's credibility, as married midwives with children were preferred for their life experience.

Julianne could inform them both that her own mother had died giving birth to her little brother, Benjamin, and that ever since she had wanted to be a midwife, to help spare other families such sorrow. She could say that she had raised Benjamin while her father drowned his grief in wine until he joined his wife in heaven. Then Benjamin had enlisted in the army and sailed for Louisiana, and Julianne had felt his loss with a mother's heart.

But today was about Marguerite, so Julianne said none of this.

Shadows lengthened on the floor. The hands of the clock pointed accusingly at the hour, and still the baby's head did not crown. *Malpresentation.*

Breathing deeply, Julianne spoke. "Marguerite, I need to put my hand inside you. I need to know where the baby's head is. Do you understand? Just keep looking at my eyes."

Mercifully, Adelaide came and held both of Marguerite's hands. Julianne's gaze locked on the young mother's eyes as she slipped her hand into the womb and probed the baby's head for the V where the suture lines of the scalp met in ridges at the back. There it was. Slowly, she wrapped her fingers around the baby's skull.

"Your baby is face up. That's why we haven't been able to make the progress we were hoping for yet. I have to turn the baby." She stood up, gaining leverage, and decided not to explain that if she didn't turn him, his jaw would hook on Marguerite's pelvic bone. "It's going to hurt, but I'll be as quick as I can. Then things will be much easier for you, and for him."

Her right hand inside Marguerite, she felt through the abdominal wall for the baby's limbs with her left. A contraction hit, and when it relaxed, Julianne shoved with her left hand

at the same time she turned the baby with her right until he rolled facedown.

Marguerite arched her back off the bed in silent agony, then fell back upon it, and still Julianne did not release the baby's skull. Through two more contractions, she held him to be sure he did not slip out of place.

At last convinced the baby was locked into the correct position, Julianne withdrew her hand and wiped it with a rag. The rest of the delivery proceeded normally, and the baby boy was born. He was nine pounds, she judged as she swiped her finger through his mouth and nose. Little wonder Marguerite had torn despite Julianne's best efforts at greasing and gently stretching the neck of the womb. She wiped him off and handed the mewling newborn wrapped in clean cloths to his mother.

Marguerite's arms shook as she accepted him. "My son," she whispered. "My son."

"You did well, *ma chère*," Julianne told the young woman. "He's perfect."

Briskly, she readied the room for Toulouse's arrival. She tied off and cut the navel string once the afterbirth slipped out. Because Marguerite was still bleeding, Julianne soaked cloths in a mix of water and vinegar, wrapped them around Marguerite's thighs, and placed one under her back.

Adelaide raised her painted eyebrow. "Shall we send for the surgeon?"

"Why? Is something wrong?" Marguerite's voice trembled.

Irritation swelled within Julianne. Marguerite was in no danger. "Nonsense. The bleeding will stop soon on its own." After all, she'd seen worse—and so had Adelaide, for that matter. "You'll be sore, but your body will heal."

Shrugging, Adelaide wiped the mother's face with a sponge and smoothed her hair back into place.

Julianne smiled at Marguerite as she washed her hands. “Ready for your husband?”

No sooner did Adelaide unlatch the door than Toulouse burst into the room and crossed to his wife in four long strides. Kneeling, he tentatively touched the baby’s velvety crown with one finger before kissing Marguerite on the cheek.

With calm efficiency, Julianne dissolved a hazelnut’s worth of Spanish wax into six spoonfuls of water and gave it to Marguerite to drink while Toulouse held the baby. “To help stop the bleeding,” she whispered discreetly.

Peeking under the sheet, she noticed that the cloths were already dark crimson far too quickly. Alarm triggered somewhere deep inside her.

While Marguerite slowly sipped the concoction, Julianne pulled from her bag portions of wild chicory, orange blossoms, and a vial of syrup of diacode and capillaire. “Adelaide, could you brew this into a tea for Marguerite, please?” Her voice was steady. Her hands were not.

“I remember a time when it was you who brewed the tea for my patients. My, how times have changed.” But Adelaide prepared the tea just the same. She gave the cup to Marguerite and coaxed her to drink every drop, though the girl drifted to sleep between shallow sips and needed to be gently wakened to finish. Clearly, she would need more time than most to convalesce.

A sickening thud. Julianne spun around to see that Marguerite’s empty cup had slipped from her grip and tumbled to the floor at Toulouse’s feet. Dread seized Julianne. Marguerite’s pallor was not that of one asleep.

“Marguerite?” Toulouse rasped.

Julianne rushed to her patient’s side. Lifted her hand, felt her wrist for a pulse, for a flutter, for some sign of life.

Felt nothing.

Toulouse yelled at Marguerite to wake up and the baby cried,

but it sounded as far away as the muffled tumult of theatergoers spilling back into the street a few blocks away. Sweat prickling her scalp, Julianne grabbed her jar of smelling salts and waved it beneath the young mother's nose, her heart suddenly a rock in the pit of her stomach. But of course no scent or sound, not even that of a husband's heart breaking or of a baby wailing for his mother, could bring Marguerite back from the dead. Her soul had already taken flight.

The baby dipped in Toulouse's arms as he dropped to his knees beside the bed. He clutched his son tighter and skewered Julianne with his gaze. "What have you done? He needs his mother. *I* need his mother."

Words webbed in Julianne's chest. She could scarcely take in that Marguerite was gone at all, let alone form a defense of her actions.

"You did this!" he cried. "You put your hand inside her; I heard you say so! How dare you invade the body of my wife when you knew her to be so narrow!"

"No, that's a common practice. I needed to change the baby's position. . . ." She looked to Adelaide for help.

"You killed her!" Toulouse's voice trembled with grief-glutted rage.

Julianne reeled. "We took every precaution. The baby was so large . . . Madame Le Brun was here the entire time. If I had been close to making a misstep, she would have caught it."

Toulouse rounded on Adelaide. "What say you?"

One word from the mistress midwife could absolve Julianne from any suspicions. Just one word. The truth.

With a scathing glance at Julianne, Adelaide looked under the sheet to examine Marguerite's condition. "*Ma foi!* The girl has torn dreadfully! No tea could have repaired this damage."

Her breath suspended, Julianne sank to her knees beside the bed, watching Marguerite's complexion grow waxy while

Adelaide conferred with Toulouse in low tones. “A preventable tragedy. If only a surgeon had been called right away. Fatal negligence.”

“What am I to do?” Toulouse moaned. “Oh, what am I to do?”

“I’ll take care of assigning a nurse. As for Mademoiselle Chevalier, you know what to do. As a magistrate, you know this—an abuse of midwifery is a public crime.”

The room swayed. Julianne clutched at the ache in her chest as her gaze dropped to the bowl of blood Adelaide had let from Marguerite’s arm. Her reflection stared darkly back at her. *How could I have let this happen?*

PART ONE



The Deep

“We believe that We can do nothing better for the good of our State than to condemn [convicts] . . . to the punishment of being transported to our colonies . . . to serve as laborers.”

—Royal Policy of France, January 8, 1719

Chapter One



PARIS, FRANCE
SEPTEMBER 1719

There it was again.

Suddenly wide awake, Julianne covered her ears. Straw crunched beneath her, needling her skin through the ticking as she inched away from the dank stone wall and closer to the warm body beside her. The bedding, like the damp air forever clinging to her skin, reeked of the waste dumped into the creek beside the prison. On the nights when it was not her turn to sleep by the wall, elbows and knees of bedfellows on either side jabbed her ribs and spine. But it was the screaming that bothered Julianne most.

“What is that? Julianne, what is that?” Whispering too loudly, Emilie propped herself up on her elbow, her hair a spiky halo around her head. Behind her, three more criminals shared the wooden platform that served as their bed.

“It is nothing, only the screaming.” Julianne would have been lying if she told the newest inmate at Salpêtrière that she would get used to it in time.

“But why are they screaming like that?”

“They are mad,” Julianne murmured. A tickle crawled across

her scalp, and she raked her fingernails through her shorn hair until she pinched the vermin off her head. Passing her fingertips over her linen, she searched in the dark for any other offenders, but all she felt were the sharp ridges of her ribs and the narrow valleys between them.

“They sound angry.” The whites of Emilie’s eyes gleamed in the moonlight.

“They are insane. And likely they are angry too, chained to the walls as they are. Maybe they know they will never get out.”

Another shriek ricocheted against the walls tucking Salpêtrière away from the rest of Paris, and Julianne felt their despair reverberate in her soul. Shackled by a life sentence, she too would never leave Salpêtrière. The *maison de force* was her permanent home now.

In the northernmost section of her building, *le commun*, hundreds of prostitutes cycled through. In the adjacent *maison de correction*, libertine women and debauched teenagers were held in isolated cells by *lettres de cachet* at the requests of their husbands or fathers. And in thirty other dormitories in this massive complex, paupers lived in groups, four to a bed: the invalids, the orphans, nursing mothers, the diseased, the venereal, epileptics, the sick and convalescent, the deformed, able-bodied women and girls, destitute older married couples.

Of course, it was the dormitory holding pregnant women that interested Julianne the most. “*I can help them,*” she had suggested, then begged to be put to use. But though Sister Gertrude had known her before her incarceration, the nun pointed to Julianne’s shoulder and shook her head. *Impossible*. A branded convict was not allowed near birthing mothers, even if those in labor were but prostitutes or mendicants.

Even if the convict was branded for a crime she didn’t commit—for such was her suspicion now. Months of lying awake

at night, replaying Marguerite's travail and death had revealed what shock and grief had kept hidden in the moment. The bowl that contained the blood Adelaide had drawn from Marguerite's arm was far, far too full. Whether by calculation or accident, Marguerite's fatal loss of blood had more to do with Adelaide's actions than with the birth itself.

Even so, if Julianne had paid closer attention to her client's weakening pulse, if she had humbly called the surgeon in time . . . but she hadn't. Whatever had driven Adelaide to go too far, was it pride that had held Julianne from going far enough in the care of her patient?

Poor Marguerite. There was no undoing any of it.

"We will never leave either, you know," Julianne whispered between the snores of the other women.

"Perhaps. There is talk on the outside."

Julianne frowned. "What kind of talk?"

"Talk of freedom, for the small price of exile."

Memories sparked. Of edicts read in the streets, of rumors swirling about a Scotsman named John Law and his plan to populate the Louisiana colony with his Company of the Indies. Of wagon convoys winding through Paris full of people and returning with naught but matted hay. Of her brother Benjamin, a smooth-cheeked boy of fourteen when she saw him last. He was a man of eighteen now, the only family she had, and still in Louisiana somewhere.

"They say Law is prowling for more colonists and taking another pass at the prisons to find them."

Julianne sat up and hugged her knees to her chest. "He wants convicts?"

Wrapped in shadows, Emilie shook her head, and Julianne could not help but notice the roundness of her cheeks. With only a bowl of soup and two pounds of black bread a day, the fullness would soon melt away. "Who can say what he's really

after? They say this time he's looking for girls of good character, a great many of them. So many, in fact, that Mother Superior has failed to supply his demand."

Julianne quietly considered this. Scant moonlight squeezed through the small windows near the ceiling, skimming the outlines in the room. Her life, which had once been full-bodied and multifaceted, was reduced to the repeated shapes of rectangles. The blocks of stone in the walls that hemmed her in. The wooden beds lining the walls, each one holding four to six inmates. The worktables and benches in the middle of the room, where she ate and stitched and listened to catechism readings twice every day. The slices of black bread, served day after day. This was all. Unlike stained-glass windows, which only needed the sun to transform their panes into a riot of living color, this existence was relentlessly, despairingly grey. The only variations were the weather that snuck in through the windows, new convicts who arrived by force, and the inmates who escaped by dying.

"They say," Emilie continued, "that a large sum would be paid to Salpêtrière for the girls, but only if enough are given. But they must be very good girls this time, not like you and me, for they are meant to be mothers, to settle the land for France."

"Who says this?"

"I heard the guards talking. Surely they would know."

Julianne nodded while her thoughts spun. From some place unseen, another scream raked the night. If Salpêtrière was to be her home for the rest of her days, if she was never to see her brother again, or a newborn babe, or the beauty beyond these walls, she feared she would join the ranks of the insane long before her sentence expired. Adrift in meaningless monotony, her spirit was draining away with no lifeline in sight.

Until now. A smile cracked her lips as a plan hoisted itself up from her swirling thoughts, unfurling with a single word.

Louisiana.



Mother Superior did not trouble herself to turn when Julianne, accompanied by Sister Gertrude, knocked on her door-frame and stood waiting for permission to enter. Against the window, the Superior's habit seemed all the darker for the light spilling around her figure and landing in pale gold latticework across this sacred space. The polished crucifix on the wall, the rich embroidery on the kneeler below it, the food and drink on the desk—all of it made the office an oasis within Salpêtrière. Clinging to the edge of it, Julianne felt like a smudge of tarnish on a silver chalice.

Sister Gertrude cleared her throat, and the Superior's head dipped in an unconvincing nod. Her pale hand emerged from the folds of her habit in a gesture so fleeting it could well have been missed.

At Sister Gertrude's touch on the small of Julianne's back, they entered. The smoky scent of cheese braided itself with the spicy steam lifting from the teacup on the desk and cinched a noose around Julianne's empty stomach. But she had not come for hospitality.

"I can help you." The words slipped out quietly and sincerely, but for speaking out of turn, Julianne bit her lip in penance. Sister Gertrude's eyes rounded in her softly lined face.

The Superior looked heavenward. "This, from a supplicant," she murmured, though whether to the saints above or simply to herself, Julianne could not guess. Slowly, the woman turned. "In what way do I need help, and how, pray, could you possibly be in a position to give it?"

"Forgive the intrusion, Mother," interjected Sister Gertrude,

her hands swallowed up by her habit, “but we have a proposal for you to consider, which I believe is worth your time.”

“In regard to?”

“Your arrangement with John Law for a certain number of girls intended for Louisiana. I believe we have found a favorable solution.” Sister Gertrude smiled, and her full cheeks flushed pink.

One eyebrow lifted on the Superior’s paper-white face. But her thin lips remained pulled tight.

Julianne looked up, and the strings of her round bonnet tugged beneath her chin. “I volunteer. To be among them.”

Now both eyebrows arched high on the Superior’s forehead. “My instructions are quite clear. Girls of good moral character only, no exceptions. Taken from the dormitories of the poor. From the orphanages. But you—” Her hand flitted toward Julianne’s shorn hair, a clear sign that she was from neither.

Sister Gertrude slipped Julianne a silencing look. Turning to the Superior, the nun smiled again and gave a slight bow of respect. “If I may speak on the inmate’s behalf for but a moment. I have known Julianne Chevalier for more than three years, well before she was accused of the crime that brought her here. Before I began serving at Salpêtrière, I was attached to the church at Saint-Côme. As Saint-Côme is dedicated to the martyrs Côme and Damien, patron saints of surgery, the church has a special connection to medicine and to the poor. On the first Monday of every month, all sworn Parisian midwives attend holy services there, and afterwards, tend to the needs of poor pregnant or nursing women who have flocked there for that purpose. Surgeons also give lessons to midwives.”

The Superior tilted her head. “I fail to see how this relates to the inmate.” Languidly, she brought her teacup to her lips, and wisps of steam curled around her veil. She set the cup back on its saucer without making a sound.

Julianne rolled her lips between her teeth and prayed for favor.

“Mademoiselle Chevalier was there as a midwife’s apprentice every month for three years. I watched her work with the poor. She is very good, rumored near the end to be better than the midwife she apprenticed with. I cannot believe she was guilty of the crime that has been assigned her.”

Mother Superior looked at Julianne for a long moment, a ridge building between her eyebrows, her mouth gathering to one side. Tenting her fingers, her gaze landed on Julianne’s left sleeve as though she could see the fleur-de-lys beneath her grey wool gown. “Nevertheless, the trial is over, and the mark of judgment is for life. You are not what Law had in mind for this shipment.”

Julianne studied the lines framing the Superior’s eyes and mouth but could not measure just how much condemnation or pity they held. “Surely my character is sufficient for that of a Louisiana colonist.”

“Your mark says otherwise.”

“Forgive me, but if they are so intent on this large number of girls, will we each be examined upon delivery?” Surely not, if the colonizers were desperate enough for settlers that they now turned to Salpêtrière. The idea that this very desperation, which she was counting on to work in her favor, could also suggest untold hardships ahead—this she blew from her thoughts like chaff. She was resolved to her plan. It was the only avenue to freedom. To Benjamin. “Mother Superior, you are sending girls to Louisiana so that they may find husbands and begin families, yes? My skills do no good in Salpêtrière. But send me with the mothers-to-be, and I can help settle the colony by caring for the well-being of mothers and their babies.” Surely she did not need to point out that if the women died, so too would the colony.

“If I may be so bold, Mother, a midwife’s skills are vital,” Sister Gertrude said.

“Law was clear. He wanted only moral girls. And she is marked.”

“He’ll never see it. Besides, the Company isn’t nearly as particular as they let on. We’ve given hundreds from our hospital, and they are combing the streets for more.”

Mother Superior hesitated, and in that pause, Sister Gertrude grew bolder.

“It is one million *livres* for Salpêtrière. Think of it! What we could do for souls here with that sum . . . but only if we deliver all the girls we agreed to.”

“I understood that we found enough already.”

“We lost another one.”

“Since Tuesday?” The Superior’s tone lifted in surprise.

“Catherine Foucault has died. I’ve just come from Hôtel-Dieu. And Julianne’s skills would be quite useful with this shipment in particular, even before they reach Louisiana. I warrant John Law has not thought of taking every precaution for the voyage.”

Silence filled the room like water until Julianne felt as though she were drowning in it. She had to escape this place that swallowed up girls and kept madwomen in chains, that let them die and counted it normal. Louisiana was the only way out for Julianne, for the scores of Salpêtrière girls who had no hope of a future here in Paris. And the only way she would ever see her brother again. She dared to whisper, “I will go in Catherine’s place. So that you may still fulfill your contract with the Scotsman.”

“My child.” The Superior’s voice was low and tremulous. “You do not know what you are asking.”

“Please. Let me help. Allow me to be useful once again.”

At length, the Superior nodded. “You leave tomorrow.” She crossed herself.

Air seeped back into Julianne's lungs, and with it, a quiet sense of victory. "May I ask—what is particular about this shipment that will require special precautions for the voy—"

But Sister Gertrude ushered Julianne from the chamber before she could finish her question.