

Queen Sugar: An Excerpt

June

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Three days ago, Charley Bordelon and her eleven-year-old daughter, Micah, locked up the rented Spanish bungalow with its cracked tile roof and tumble of punch-colored bougainvillea and left Los Angeles for good. In an old Volvo wagon with balding tires and a broken air conditioner, they followed the black vein of highway—first skirting the edge of Joshua Tree, where the roasted wind roared in their faces, then braving the Mojave Desert. They pushed through Arizona and New Mexico, and sailed over the Texas prairie.

Twenty-four hours ago, they crossed into Louisiana where the cotton and rice fields stretched away in a lavish patchwork of pale greens and browns, and a hundred miles after that, where the rice and cotton fields yielded to the tropical landscape of sugarcane country.

Now it was the next morning, their first full day in Saint Josephine Parish. They hadn't seen a house or car since they turned off the Old Spanish Trail, and the road, which crossed over the Bayou Teche, was leading them farther away from town, farther out into the country, and Charley—who'd never seen real sugarcane before yesterday—thought she should have trusted her instincts; thought that if she'd just listened to the small voice that whispered take the map, they'd be there by now. Instead, she had listened to her grandmother, Miss Honey, with whom she and Micah now lived. "Put that away," Miss Honey had said at breakfast that morning as Charley spread the map over the kitchen table. "I know how to get there. Just let me get my purse." Now here they were—Charley and Micah and Miss Honey—wandering hopelessly, like three blind stooges, through south Louisiana's cane country, creeping down one ragged back road till it dead-ended in a grass-choked gulley before trying another, while the sun got hotter and the air grew soupier; burning up precious time as they searched for the turnoff that would lead Charley to her fields. She had inherited eight hundred acres of sugarcane land from her father, Ernest. For the last ten months, she had pored over more aerial photos and assessors' maps than she cared to count, signed documents and placed phone calls. She had planned what she could from a distance. The fields Charley had thought of for almost a year were out there—somewhere. Land she had to get ready for the harvest in October. God help us, she thought.

It was eight forty-five. Charley was supposed to meet Wayne Frasier at nine. The cup of Community Coffee, with its bitter note of chicory, had made her queasy. Maybe it was the coffee, but maybe not, Charley thought, as she remembered how her mother accused her of being a city girl and warned her not to make this move. Charley swore her mother was wrong, but now she thought maybe it was true. She was accustomed to measuring distance in freeway off-ramps, not hectares or miles, weighing things in pounds rather than bushels or tons. The only crop she had ever harvested were the Meyer lemons that hung lazily from the trees along her backyard fence. The only soil she ever tended came in bags from the Home Depot. She exhaled heavily. If she were a country girl, she thought, she could scan the horizon and know which of these godforsaken roads led to her fields. But she wasn't a country girl. Not even a little.

Charley turned to her window and caught a scent of Louisiana on the June breeze; the aroma of red clay, peppery as cayenne, musty as compost, and beneath it, the hint of mildew and Gulf water. She marveled at how different the landscape was from anything she'd know back in California: the stretch of Highway 5 between Los Angeles and San Francisco with its endless miles of almond and pistachio orchards, vast stretches of orange groves whose blossoms perfumed the air on early spring mornings, rolling acres of grape vineyards, tomato and cotton fields, and of course, the uninterrupted miles of reeking cattle lots—all of it with the spiny silhouette of the Sierra Nevada, like a promise, along the horizon. Charley imagined Los Angeles, with its traffic and smog and relentless sprawl, and beyond it, the never-ending coastline and immeasurable Pacific, ridiculously beautiful in the honeyed light of a southern California afternoon. Now the

vast Pacific had been replaced by an ocean of sugarcane: waist-high stalks and slender, emerald-green leaves with tilled soil between. Cane as far as her eyes could see.

Charley glanced at Miss Honey. Dressed in a butter-yellow polyester dress belted high on her waist, ginger stockings rolled like doughnuts around her ankles, and white orthopedic sandals, she sat in the passenger seat clutching her white leather purse. Charley wanted to ask if they were getting close, but remembered how yesterday, Miss Honey scolded her for arriving three hours late. “Well, it’s about time. You said noon,” Miss Honey had said, standing on the top porch step. “I started to think y’all had changed your minds”; how Miss Honey had flicked that purple plastic fly swatter as if it were a riding crop, and reprimanded her for cutting her hair. “You used to have long, pretty hair,” she’d said. “Good hair. Now you look like a man.”

More minutes passed. A weather-beaten farmhouse set back from the road, a cluster of small wooden shacks in the distance that looked strangely familiar. Were they driving in circles?

“I’m sorry, Miss Honey,” Charley said. “But are you sure this is the right way?”

“Of course I’m sure,” Miss Honey said. “If that man Frasier said your place was off the Old Spanish Trail, then this is the way. This used to be an Indian road.”

Micah, who had been fiddling with an ancient Polaroid camera Miss Honey had given her, reached over the backseat and tapped Miss Honey’s shoulder. “You can’t say Indian. It’s Native American. Indian is offensive.”

“Oh, really?” Miss Honey said without turning around. “Do you know any Indians?”

“Native Americans,” Micah corrected. “Indians live in India.”

Miss Honey laughed, though Charley thought it wasn’t a laugh of delight or amusement. “Well, the Native Americans I know like to be called Indians,” Miss Honey said, fingering her purse strap. “Bunch of ’em live in the woods behind my house.” She turned to Charley. “They built a big casino with a Mexican restaurant and a fancy steak house over in Charenton. Lights up the whole sky at night.”

Charley nodded, and was about to suggest they go gambling sometime, feed the slots or take their chances at blackjack, when Miss Honey said, “Nothing over there but a pack of jackals if you ask me. Jackals and sinners.”

They drove on.

Out in the fields, a gaggle of laborers followed doggedly behind a tractor. Up ahead, the remnants of an old sugar mill—brick smokestacks, rusted corrugated siding, dust-caked windows—loomed over the cane.

Miss Honey dabbed her neck with a wad of tissue and smoothed her gray candy curls. “I can’t stand riding in a car with no air-conditioning.”

Charley nodded and added tune-up to the list of chores she’d tackle as soon as they got back to Miss Honey’s and she was able to unpack.

“Baby,” Miss Honey said, “look in that cooler and hand me a Coke.” She raised her hand, palm side up, to her shoulder. Charley recognized the gesture. Her father held his hands the same way, right down to the fingers curved as though he were gripping a ball. “Hand me a boiled egg,” he’d say during their cross-country drives to Saint Josephine when she was a girl. Or, “Reach in there and give me a couple of those cookies,” and she’d root around in the cooler he’d packed until she found what he asked for, excited to put just the right thing in her daddy’s hand.

Micah handed a bottle of Coke over the seat and Miss Honey twisted off the cap. She drew a small square packet from her purse, tore it open, and poured the contents—a tablespoon of

powder the color and consistency of cornstarch—into the bottle. She swirled the mixture until a head of hissing foam rose along the glass.

“What’s that?” Micah asked.

Miss Honey took a swig. “Stanback. I take it for my headaches.”

Charley was no chemist, but she considered the properties of Coke: water, corn syrup, a healthy dose of caffeine, and guessed at the Stanback: aspirin for the pain, a little sugar to cut the bitterness, some type of amphetamine for an extra boost, and figured the combination would give quite a buzz. She wondered, as Miss Honey nursed the concoction, closed her eyes, and leaned back against the headrest, if her grandmother wasn’t mildly addicted.

Micah leaned over the seat. “Can I try some?”

“Don’t even think about it,” Charley said, and both Micah and Miss Honey looked at her as if she’d just blurted out a string of swearwords. “I mean—I’m sure Miss Honey needs her medicine. There’s water in the cooler if you’re thirsty.”

“Why your father bought land way out here is beyond me,” Miss Honey said, a moment later. “If he wanted to own a business he should have bought something in town. Russell Monroe has been trying to sell his barbershop for two years. I know he’d have let it go for nothing. And I hear some rich white fella from New Orleans just bought the old bank building on Main Street. Gonna turn it into a snazzy hotel.” She waved a dismissing hand toward the window. “There’s no one out here but a bunch of crackers.”

Charley felt her shirt clinging wetly to the knobs of her spine, and debated whether to tell Miss Honey how yesterday, soon after they crossed into the parish, she saw another car, a pickup, approaching fast in her rearview mirror. It rode her bumper, then slid parallel.

“Don’t look,” Charley had told Micah, though she couldn’t help but look herself. The passenger, a white kid in a backwards baseball cap, stared at her for several long seconds, surveyed her car, then turned to the driver, who leaned forward. Charley turned her gaze back to the road, but the driver kept pace with her, even though he was driving in the opposite lane. She held her breath. Her hands shook. Finally, the pickup pulled ahead, glided in front of her, and for what felt like forever, she couldn’t see anything but the lettering on the tailgate, the silhouettes of two naked ladies on the mud flaps. She eased her foot off the brake and fell back. The truck gunned its motor and seconds later it was gone, the glow of its brake lights disappearing as it rounded the curve. Were they in danger? Who could say, but for a moment, Charley wondered what her father had been thinking to leave her a sugarcane farm in south bumfuck Louisiana.

“You never know why people do what they do,” Charley said now, speaking louder so Micah would hear. “You just have to assume they’re doing their best.” And then she repeated the lines she’d been saying for the last ten months, the lines that had become her mantra: “I think this move will be good for us. An adventure. A fresh start.” Charley wasn’t saying this just for Micah’s sake, she was saying it for her own. Because the truth was, she needed this farm. It was the opportunity she’d been hoping for. Until now, her life hadn’t gone the way she planned. She loved her job teaching art to inner city kids, but it barely paid the bills or ate into the mountain of grad school loans. She drove a car that should have been scrapped for parts, and lived in a house she’d never own. She was thirty-four, and widowed, and may just have been a terrible mother. She needed this farm, wherever it was. She needed a second chance. She needed momentum. And a good shove.

“I reckon.” Miss Honey dabbed her neck with her tissue again. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad y’all are here. It’s been too long. But sometimes, you go looking for adventure, all you find is disaster.”

“What do you mean, ‘disaster’?” Micah said. “What’s going to happen?”

“It’s just a saying,” Charley said, but for good measure she decided not to mention the pickup or how, for the rest of the drive, she pulled over every time a truck came up behind them.

The paved road they’d been following led to a dirt path—a generous way to describe the strip of trampled ground deeply rutted with tread marks and grass growing up between. A wooden stake with the carved letter L leaned to one side.

Charley felt a rush of excitement, a warm tingling that spread over her arms and down her spine, causing her to feel a little lightheaded. “This is it.”

Dust billowed behind the Volvo until the path ended at a bank of trees. Woods stood tall and impassable to the left, but up ahead to the right sprawled open space. Charley’s heart raced as she imagined what was out there: fields so splendidly verdant she’d feel short of breath just looking at them. Her father left the door open and she had stepped through it.

Charley parked. Then she, Micah, and Miss Honey made their way over the clotted ground.

“Holy moly!” Micah cried. “It’s huge!” She took a picture with the ancient Polaroid, then hurled a stick far into the tangle of weeds and creeping vines.

“My God,” Charley muttered. “This can’t be.” Across the field, wide and long as ten city blocks, stunted cane stalks dotted the earth, their straggly leaves a starved shade of pale green with deeply sunburned edges. Grass and weeds grew thick and matted between the rows, which were preposterously rutted with tire tracks. Even to Charley’s untrained eye, it was clear no one had been out there in months. Where were the neatly tilled rows, the lush cane plants high as a man’s shoulder? Where was the moist soil, dark and rich as ground French Roast? Under a morning sky coated with clouds gray as concrete, Charley stared out over fields that should have looked like the hundreds of lush acres she passed on the drive down, but didn’t.

“I thought this Frasier fella was managing the place,” Miss Honey said, raising her hand to shield against the glare.

“He was.” Charley twisted her wedding ring absentmindedly. “Last time we talked, he said something about replacing a tractor belt.”

“Well, I’d say he’s got some explaining to do.”

Charley consulted her watch. They were five minutes late. “You think he’s been here and left already?”

“I couldn’t tell you what he might do,” Miss Honey said. “I don’t know this Frasier from Adam’s housecat.”

“I know where we should put the cows,” Micah declared, peering through her camera’s viewfinder. “They can live out by those trees.”

“This isn’t that kind of farm,” Charley said.

“But we can’t have a farm without cows,” Micah pressed. “What about goats?”

“No goats.”

“Well, what then?”

Charley glanced at her watch again, then squeezed the bridge of her nose. “Sweetheart, why don’t you walk around and take some pictures.” White clouds, thick as mashed potatoes, drifted across

the sky. Something that looked like a flat-winged bee bounced between the blossoming vines as hot air rose from the dirt.

“My feet are starting to swell,” Miss Honey said. “I’ll be in the car.”

It was almost ten o’clock before an old Ford F-150 with a “Jesus is my co-pilot” license plate rambled down the road ahead of a long contrail of dust. George Strait’s crooning voice wafted through the truck’s open window. A white man sat behind the wheel.

“Thank God.” Charley waved. She had imagined Frasier as older, early sixties perhaps, and stocky as a lumberjack. She had imagined a man wearing embossed cowboy boots and a cowboy hat with a cane leaf braided around the band. But the man who climbed down from the truck looked much younger. Years of physical labor had worn any possibility of fat from his frame. His NASCAR jersey had Dale Earnhardt’s picture on the front and sun gilded his brown hair, which, at that moment, was wet. She walked over to greet him. “Mr. Frasier?”

“Miss Bordelon,” Frasier said, in the same flat tone she recognized from the phone. “Sorry about the time. Some accident on the road.”

“No, no, that’s okay,” Charley said, extending her hand. “It’s nice to finally meet you. In person, I mean.”

“Likewise.” Frasier gave her hand a firm shake but didn’t say anything more.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for this day.” Charley gestured toward the fields. “It’s good to see everything for myself. I’d have come down sooner, but I had to wait for my daughter to finish school. Now that I’m here, though, I’m ready to get down to business.” She waited for Frasier to respond, but he didn’t, so Charley, growing increasingly uneasy, plunged in deeper. “I know we talked about all the work to be done, but I have more questions. For starters, and I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, I was looking at the fields and I noticed . . . Well, they don’t look exactly like I thought they would.” Like they should.

“Yeah, well.” Frasier threaded his thumbs through his belt loops. He was hard-core Nashville and Grand Ole Opry. Jim Beam straight from the bottle.

“I don’t mean to question your work,” Charley said. “It’s just that I passed plenty of other fields on my drive into town and they were so neat, so orderly, and I—”

“Thought yours would look better,” Frasier said.

“Well, yes. But I don’t want you to think I’m criticizing—”

“Actually, Miss Bordelon.” Frasier looked at Charley with a pained expression, then straightened as though he’d practiced what he was about to say. “I won’t be working for you.”

“You won’t be what?”

“I took another job.”

“You what?”

Frasier fell silent. He looked down at the ground, then out over the fields.

“But when?” Charley said. “Why didn’t you tell me?” She stared at Frasier. He had an honest face, the kind you’d want to see if you were stranded along the roadside with a flat tire late at night. “Are you working for someone else? Because if it’s money, I don’t have much, but I’m sure we can work something out.” Without thinking, she touched her wedding ring again, a platinum band

that had been pounded thin in back where the jeweler made it larger. Six angled prongs framed an enormous diamond that had belonged to Davis's mother before it became her engagement ring.

"My brother-in-law pulled some strings," Frasier said. "Got me a job on a rig."

"Rig?"

"Oil rig," Frasier said. "Out in the Gulf."

Charley twisted her ring so that the diamond pressed into her palm. "But I just talked to you two weeks ago. You didn't say anything about another job."

"I know. I wanted to try it out first."

"You're kidding, right? This is a joke. We're supposed to harvest this cane in October. We only have five months."

Frasier batted at the closest cane plant, then ripped a withering leaf from the stalk. "I've been working cane since I was sixteen, Miss Bordelon. I'm shamed to admit it, but I don't have a penny saved. If I bust a knee, what'll I do? Couple years back, Mr. LeJeune took—"

"Who?"

"Mr. LeJeune. The man who owned this farm before your daddy. When he got too sick to run this place himself, his kids stepped in. But they weren't really interested. They were off in New Orleans, riding on floats, going to balls, drinking Pimm's Cups at the Columns Hotel."

"I won't be riding on floats," Charley said. "And I've never heard of a Pimm's Cup. Mr. Frasier, please."

Frasier crumpled the cane leaf in his palm. "I had to beg 'em to plant enough cane last year and they hardly took care of the cane that was here. When LeJeune died, they scraped by until they sold. Your daddy convinced me we could bring this place back. But now he's gone too."

"But I'm here," Charley said. "Give me a chance."

Frasier shredded another cane leaf. "If I don't do something now, I'll run out of money before I run out of air. I don't want to be greeting folks at Walmart when I'm sixty-five."

"But I was counting on you. I've been paying you."

Frasier pulled two checks from his breast pocket, handed them to Charley, and she saw that they were the ones she'd mailed weeks ago. "I've asked around. Problem is, this time of year, anyone worth hiring has already signed on for a job."

Charley touched Frasier's jersey as if it were the hem of his royal robe. If he wore a ring she would have kissed it. She would have knelt if he'd asked her to. "Please, Mr. Frasier. Wait one season. You've put me in a terrible bind."

Frasier looked at her with great sympathy. "Your daddy was a good man," he said. "I never met him in person, but I could tell. And I can tell you're a good person too." He brushed his hands on his pants. "But two more months and I get my union card. I'll have benefits."

"We both know I can't run this place by myself. Please. I'm begging you."

"It only seemed right to tell you in person."

Charley looked out at her fields. The cane seemed to have withered even more in the hour since she arrived. Birds, whose chipper singing she hadn't noticed until now, seemed to mock her with

their chatter. "All this time and you never said a word." A tremendous lump thickened in her throat and she turned away, willing herself not to cry. She fully expected Frasier to leave, but he waited patiently, hands wedged deep in his back pockets.

"If you'd like to go over things," he offered.

Somehow, Charley managed to write down the instructions he gave her: how to start the tractor, where to buy replacement parts, diesel and fertilizer, what tools were in the shop, directions to the Ag station. She took notes, but had no idea what to do with them.

At last, Frasier looked openly at his watch. "I guess that does it." He turned to leave, stepping sure-footedly over the ruts and clumps of soil. At his truck, he paused. "It's good land. I hope you know that. Good luck to you, Miss Bordelon."

And then he was gone.

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Once Frasier's truck disappeared, Charley walked unsteadily back to the car, where Miss Honey fanned herself with an envelope.

"How'd it go?"

"Fabulous," Charley said, sliding in. "He's a gem. A real man of his word." She held herself together long enough to slip her keys into the ignition. The engine turned over. But as she shifted into reverse, Charley thought about how much her life had slipped. Six hours ago, she felt like a girl getting ready for a dance, with lights and music and a new life stretched out before her like a red silk carpet. Now she was a girl who kept losing things: she lost her husband in a holdup he just had to resist and she almost lost her daughter. She lost her father to cancer, and now she was about to lose his strange and unexplained legacy, this sugarcane farm. She had a pad of notes she could barely read, her manager had quit, and she was out in the middle of God knew where. Charley stopped the car. She took a long, deep breath. Then she hid her face in her hands and sobbed.

"When you stood there for so long, I had a feeling," Miss Honey said. She rubbed Charley's back with the flat of her hand.

At the feel of Miss Honey's touch, Charley cried harder. "I'm sorry."

Miss Honey pressed a damp napkin from the cooler into Charley's hands. "That's okay, chère. Let it out," she said. "'Cause you got a big job ahead of you. And in a minute, you're gonna have to pull yourself together."

At the far edge of the field, Micah's yellow T-shirt and orange shorts flashed like banners against the brown earth as she started to run.

"Who'd Ernest buy this place from?" Miss Honey asked.

Charley wiped her eyes, watching her daughter approach. "Some family named LeJeune."

Miss Honey looked surprised. For a moment, it seemed as though she might say something, but she just nodded and let Charley collect herself.

"Look at these," Micah said, panting, as she reached the car. She handed four Polaroids through the window before she saw Charley's face. "Mom? Why are you crying? Miss Honey, what's wrong with my mom?"

Miss Honey opened a bottle of water and offered it to Micah. "Quiet, chère. You mamma's having a bad day."

