

THE LUSTRE

by Kate Policani

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Cover art by Chris Barker.

This book is for Cynthia! You liked it better than anyone, and your enthusiasm was the rocket fuel to propel it into publication.

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A theme verse for all of my writing (and the rest of my life) is Psalm 19:14 "May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer."

IDRIS CAHIL – A Good Man, Fiery and Impulsive, Young and Inexperienced

Isa was a siren. All the curves of her body were hypnotic, undulating with her movements, each angle more glorious than the last. Creamy skin with an olive tint glided over the curves, beckoning me to touch. Her legs were long and supple.

Somehow her everyday clothes seemed like an invitation rather than a covering. Sliding over her body, her long ebony hair caressed her, highlighting her enthralling gestures. Lips, full and red as nectar-swollen berries, parted to utter spellbinding words in a sultry alto tone. Her words were both fascinating and difficult to comprehend due to my distraction while watching her speak. Her amber eyes glinted with intelligence and mischief. I didn't stand a chance.

I was eighteen, as was she, but I felt awkward and coltish. She was spectacular. Somehow, though, she liked me. Against all laws of likelihood, she wanted me.

I was bewildered at her appearance in my life. It was as if a star had fallen into my outstretched hands and somehow didn't incinerate me.

"Yes, I'm supposed to be married, but I don't like him," she pouted, her eyes more dangerous than her appealing body language belied. "He's old and stuffy. I just know he won't let me do what I want."

I could only agree. There was no power in me to even contemplate error in this enchantress's logic. He may have been an indulgent fiancée, just as enthralled by her as I was, but my thoughts never strayed from her glory.

Why our families introduced us at this crucial time, I have never ascertained. It could be that they thought I was too young to appeal to her. Maybe they didn't give credence to her objections to her marriage, or maybe she disclosed them just to me. Hindsight makes me wonder, but at the time none of it even occurred to me as a question. She wanted me and the world was new-made around that fact.

It was probably a month before her wedding to Hans, a suitor I didn't know and didn't ask about. Our families were reuniting after many years of separation. Our parents had been dear friends and Isa and I had seen each other before we could walk. They moved away years before and had just returned, I suppose to marry Isa to Hans. The four parents and two children met on a frequent basis, sometimes more than three times in a week. We met at her home and ours, avoiding meal hours.

We were encouraged to get to know each other "again" as if we could have remembered each other from diaper days, and we were left alone on the far side of our spacious foyer. We were ignored except for occasional calls for us to acknowledge a fact about ourselves. We were objects to them, lost as they were in their recaptured relationship, not individuals to include.

It was impossible that they didn't see my fascination with their daughter and improbable that they missed her enticements. I was clueless why none of it concerned them.

"They won't let us be together if they know, and we can't let them suspect our plans, Idrie. Promise me you won't tell them!"

Her nickname for me turned my insides liquid and my head into a bubble filled with steam. I promised her.

The day we ran away together, everything was prepared and meticulous. Isa soon knew my strengths and my weaknesses after a few weeks, and her planning was perfect. We left early in the morning, giving excuses to staff and tutors that we were "taking a stroll." We brought nothing with

us but the clothes we wore—and cash. I gathered all the cash I could find and she did the same, though I turned out to have found much more.

We took taxis to meet at the train station and took a train to the remotest station she could find. Then we took a succession of busses to the tiny town she had chosen.

She had convinced me that we could make it on our own.

Our people didn't run away and get married like we did. It was common for a girl to get married at eighteen, but boys never did. A responsible man must be established to support a wife and children, to protect them. We had nothing. Isa should have married an older man who could care for her and protect her. She should have married Hans. I wasn't ready for those responsibilities.

But Isa wanted it, and what she wanted, she always got. So we ran away and hid among the Humans. We married at a justice of the peace in our new little town under assumed names, wearing clothes bought for cash at a thrift shop. Her dress was faded and a little worn at the seams, but still hugged her gorgeous curves in an embrace that was just as loving as did the designer outfit she wore at our home that first day.

Our apartment was miniscule and ancient, the evidence of amateur repairs glaring at every turn. The furnishings that were included were odorous and ugly, but they were ours. The kitchen was a miniature replica of an actual kitchen, but we didn't need to use it, so we didn't care about that either. It was our love nest and it earned its title.

We were very happy for a time, pretending to be Human and feeding wherever people's emotions ran high. The bingo parlor, the sports bars, the disco, the hospital, and the courthouse were perfect places to find our nourishment if we made a circuit of it. We did just fine, great in fact, until Isa became pregnant.

Our chosen hometown, ideal because there were none of our people living anywhere nearby, proved to be vacant because it did not have enough residents to support one of us well, let alone a pregnant woman.

We both went hungry. We became desperate, but we would not go back. Isa wouldn't hear of it, and though we fought many bitter hours, she simply wouldn't go. I knew that short of tying her up and smuggling her home, I would not be able to make her return. She was too smart for me to trick her, and too careful. I would not leave her alone and pregnant. In her mind, to go back to our families was to be separated, baby or no baby. She was sure they would take her away from me even if we were legally married. She believed they would still make her marry Hans. Though doubtful, I wouldn't push her when she was so fearful.

The day that Angelina was born was one of the most bittersweet of my life. We dared not go to a Human hospital, and we had no midwife. I tried to convince Isa that we may need help and we could convince a midwife to be silent, but she absolutely refused. She was sure it would ruin our life together.

Birth is not dangerous for our kind, and though inconvenient, we managed. All our worry was forgotten, though, as soon as our tiny angel came into the world.

Angelina, as Isa named her, was as fair as her mother was dark. Where Isa was sultry, Angelina was vivacious. Her wide blue eyes seemed to know all about everything that was happening around her, and find delight in it. Also contrary to her mother's traits, Angelina was easy to please and made few demands on anyone. Even as an infant, she seemed to avoid making trouble.

Life was a little better for us after Angelina was born, but she was small and not strong. Isa couldn't provide enough nourishment for her by herself without more feeding, so we gave Angelina Human formula provided by Social Services. That wasn't proper food for a baby of our kind, and Angelina was frail. Our infants need nutrients in mothers' milk that Human formula does not have.

I loved my girls with all my heart, but didn't have the strength of character to admit my mistake and give them up to save them. If I had called Isa's family or mine, they would have come

and taken us back. It would have been better. But I was too weak to make that happen. I sacrificed Angelina for Isa's wishes.

When Angelina was old enough for solid food her strength improved. We could get coupons from DSHS and feed her suitable food. She grew stronger and stopped getting sick, but she was still small. The evils of Isa's stubbornness and my passivity became less glaring.

Angelina was our little cherub, always happy and delightful, even when she wasn't feeling strong or well. Her little personality sparkled. It was looking at my little darling child in thrift store clothes that tempted me to thwart Isa, give up, and go back to my family. Isa could tell when I was growing irresolute, and she would set me straight when I was weak. But to see our beautiful, dazzling little girl in poverty almost brought me to my senses. Almost. Like I said, we were foolish and stubborn.

Every second I was away from Angelina and Isa was torture. But I had to have a job where I could earn money for our needs and also find food. Isa managed our home, caring for Angelina during the day and going out by herself in the evenings to feed. It was improper and unsafe, but it was all we could do.

When Angelina was five years old, Isa and I did two unthinkable things. First, we put poor little Angelina into Human school. If we were to stay in hiding we would have to blend in. Isa wasn't suited to homeschool our Angelina, and if we didn't send her to school, the authorities would be called and we would be found out. So we abandoned her among the nasty little Human children, under the uncaring and unaware supervision of the Human teachers.

We made sure Angelina kept herself apart from them, which caused her more pain than if she had fit in. It was unpardonable for us to force her to be educated together with Humans who were in ignorance of what she was. It was inexcusable that she was learning their distorted knowledge. But she had to remain aloof to prevent them from discovering what she truly was. She appeared to be just like them and they resented her reserve. Her goodness, compared with their Human tendency for every kind of mischief and error, set her further apart.

Detachment and goodness, together with her beauty and small size, made her a target for the Human children's jealousy and frustration. Poor Angelina was ostracized and abused. Still, we sacrificed her for our stubborn purposes.

Our second sin, perhaps the worse transgression, was that we used Human birth control to prevent Isa from becoming pregnant again. Humans think nothing of denying themselves the blessing of children, but then they have thirty years or more in which to bear them and can bear a child or more per year. Sometimes they even get multiple children at a time. Our women can have just one every five years and then only for a span of fifteen years. Our crime felt necessary at the time due to our financial crisis, but it was our indulgence of our stubborn willfulness. We denied Angelina siblings and our people of precious new members. It was unforgivable.

Angelina's rescue came to us the spring she was twelve years old. He came in the morning, before I had left for work and after Angelina had boarded her bus to school.

"My name is Luciano Quorra," he said when we opened the door. I began to panic, because I knew he was one of us, and we were discovered. "You are in distress," he soothed. "I haven't come to harm you. I want to help."

Intrigued but still panicked, I invited him inside. I was unable to speak for fear I would betray something, so I just looked at him, expectant. He was elegant and affluent, dressed with impeccable style, and radiating refinement.

"I know that you are Idris Cahil, and that you live here with your wife, Isa. I know that you have a daughter," he volunteered.

Once I stopped hyperventilating I blurted, "How?"

“Someone informed me. A woman who says she is Isa Akanasha’s friend told me about her elopement. Your families have hushed up the matter, but it seems Isa’s friend was willing to tell me more than she is willing to tell your families.”

That is when Isa burst into the room. At first she was frightening to behold, ready to take any measures to prevent Mr. Quorra from thwarting us. When he reassured her that he wished to help and knew how to make everything just as she wanted it, she became sweet, but wary.

“I have a plan to give you all that you want without trouble, if you are willing to cooperate. You have a daughter, I know. She is attending Human school, and she has never met another of our people apart from her parents. Is this correct?”

We acknowledged his information.

“Are you expecting another child?” he asked. It shot to the heart of our deepest sin.

Isa’s eyes flashed and she challenged, “We are not. We have prevented it.”

Mr. Quorra suppressed his reaction and turned very pale. He felt the horror of our sin.

He took a moment to collect himself and proposed, “If you will, and most importantly, your daughter will agree, then I will take her to my home. I will raise her as she should be raised, in luxury, educating her with dignity under peerless teachers. When she is grown, I will find a suitable husband for her, or if we suit each other, I will marry her myself. Also, I will provide for you two to live in a proper fashion, together, and have the means to have more children, as is right.”

“What’s the catch?” Isa demanded.

“You must be legally married under your right names and reunite with your families. I am certain that they will not contest our arrangement. They are so desperate to have you back that they will be glad to accept you if there is no impediment.”

Isa yelped, “You have talked to them!”

“I have told them that I was searching for you based on some information that I came across, but that I was doubtful it was accurate. I was operating based on your friend’s confidences. You see, she married my younger brother. When I visited, she seemed very worried about you, and I offered to help.”

“That little...I knew I shouldn’t have told her anything! I thought I could trust her!” Isa stormed.

“You *can* trust her, Isa,” soothed Mr. Quorra. “She never told your parents, and when she thought that I could be of help and not endanger your privacy, she told me what she knew. She never even mentioned your name until she agreed that I had a good plan.”

Isa fumed, then pondered. She scowled at, entertained, liked, and then adored Mr. Quorra’s plan. As usual, I adored all of Isa’s expressions and agreed with her. The change was stunning. Mr. Quorra transformed into her Santa Claus and she couldn’t be more delighted with him. To our stubborn minds, Luciano Quorra’s offer was manna from heaven. He would fix everything. All he asked in return was that Angelina would go to live under his care and marry him when she grew to be of age if she wanted that. If she didn’t like to marry him, he would help her to choose a worthy husband.

He wanted to go retrieve Angelina from school as soon as he could. We gave him permission and a note for the principal. It was a good thing, too, because Isa and I would have had to take the bus, and Mr. Quorra had a limousine.

How could we not cooperate with his offer, giving us all we ever wanted? Our determination was confirmed when we saw how enchanted Angelina was with him and how happy to agree to his plan. It felt perfect. It was perfect. But it didn’t take away my guilt.

Giving my little girl away was one of the most difficult things I have ever done. My sorrow was compounded by the fact that relinquishing her was better for her than staying with her parents.

Isa and I cried for weeks. At first I feared that our sorrow would drive us apart. But my generous Isa forgave me for being an inadequate provider, and our shared grief united us.

CONNER LATIMER – Wise One Teaches

Angelina Cahil was by far my most extraordinary student. She was angelically beautiful, respectful, intelligent, never misbehaved, and never gave any teacher any trouble. Still, I felt bad for her.

I had seen her at the school starting when she went into kindergarten, since it is a K through twelve school. But since she wasn't in my class yet, I had a mere awareness that she was there and that I would teach her one day.

The other teachers were puzzled by her detachment from the other children, and one mentioned that her parents told her to keep them at arms' length. It was a mean thing to do if her parents did tell her that, but it wasn't without reason, I could see. She was better than all of them.

When she moved up to my class, eighth grade, it was difficult to teach her. It wasn't because she was backward—just the opposite. She was just so dazzling that I couldn't focus my thoughts around her. Her bright blue eyes, looking at me with such trust and intelligence, unnerved me.

Angelina was far ahead of the other children in her class and that widened the gap. She was a year younger, having skipped a grade, and she was small for her age. The other children thought she was a snob and ridiculed her over every trifling thing they could think of. But all they had to taunt her with were trivialities, like her secondhand clothes, because Angelina was so perfect. They were jealous.

Besides, middle-schoolers are all horrible all the time anyway. The fact that she wasn't awful made her almost inhuman.

It was a crappy little school in a crappy little town. You had to be pretty backward to belong here. It doesn't say much about me, does it?

Angelina's presence had a holy quality and distracted me from teaching. It was a good thing that the whole class was new to my teaching or they would have noticed how spacey I was that year, trying to teach and not stare at Angelina.

My dreams at night became filled with her; her little hands writing, her little feet waiting by my desk, and her ethereal blonde hair in its unfortunate cut blowing across her pale cheek. I recognized that it was inappropriate, and I never acted on it, but it was always there.

The day she left was surreal. A tall, handsome, elegant man wearing an expensive suit was ushered into the room by Principal Naren. You would have thought Mr. Quorra was royalty the way Naren kowtowed to him. But then, Naren was always a bootlicker. He loved to be in charge, but get him near someone important and he turned into an apple-polisher in a millisecond. I'm pretty sure that is how he attained his position as principal, because it wasn't for his intelligence.

"This is Mr. Quorra. He is here to take Angelina home," Naren boasted. A princess was hidden in his school and the king was here to rescue her. It made perfect sense.

Mr. Quorra recognized Angelina as soon as he came in the door, and of course he was there to take her away. He looked at her like she was a rose among the weeds, and she was. Here, finally, was someone worthy of her presence. I was irritated. The other children were astonished by him in his suit that fit well, unlike all the cheap suits in the school system.