

THE CROWN

FADE IN:

CLOSE ON an eye in an oil painting, on canvas. We PULL BACK as:

ERIN V.O.

This story - a few weeks of my life - began over 200 years ago, in Europe.

We now see that the eye is of a white horse - its eye bright and wide. As we PULL, we eventually see the rider of this rearing horse - Napoleon Bonaparte - his hand raised above the horse's head, his red cloak sweeping around his body, his serious face under his wide military hat. This painting is Jacques-Louis David's "Napoleon Crossing the Alps."

ERIN V.O. (CONT'D)

That's Napoleon Bonaparte. I had a teacher once who called him Napoleon Blownapart. We didn't laugh either. Anyway, the General did a tour of Europe at one time. It was pretty successful, as was he. Napoleon later became Emperor Napoleon I of France. He was short, though. Short guys sometimes over compensate. He couldn't over compensate the British, who stopped his last European tour at Waterloo.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. LSU LECTURE HALL -- DAY

A graduate history class at Louisiana State University, being taught by PROFESSOR AUSMUS, a man with gray hair and a bright face. Some of the students in the class wear LSU gear - go Tigers! We SETTLE ON:

ERIN COX. Twenty-four, long dark hair, dark-eyed. A stunner who is also a bit awkward. She's taking notes rapidly, tongue sticking out, hanging on every word.

ERIN V.O.

My future and Napoleon's past were about to cross paths.

AUSMUS

All right. That's all for today, graduates. I still have to see research notes from some of you, for your dissertations. Don't make me come after you.

Erin gathers up her books and notebooks and stuffs them into her shoulder bag. She goes right up to Ausmus as all the other students avoid him. He smiles and begins to pack up his own things.

ERIN

Did you read it?

AUSMUS

You know, all the other students in my graduate courses are still in the research phase of their dissertations. You, Ms. Cox, have already presented me with a draft of yours.

ERIN

I wanted to have enough time to do rewrites.

AUSMUS

You're not a screenwriter, Ms. Cox, you're a historian. Research and learning about your subject - in your case the War of 1812 and New Orleans - is the most important step in any writing.

ERIN

I did the research.

AUSMUS

There's always more to do. Historians never finish their writings, they abandon them. I'm just hoping you didn't abandon yours too early.

ERIN

I haven't. And it's just a draft.

AUSMUS

Give me another draft in two weeks after - *after* - you've double checked your notes and gone over your own research again. Okay?

He picks up his now-full briefcase and heads towards the door.

ERIN

So you didn't read it?

Ausmus just waves as he exits.

EXT. NEW ORLEANS -- DAY

Some random shots of New Orleans - the Super Dome, Bourbon Street, the French Quarter, swamps.

EXT. NEW ORLEANS STREET -- DAY

Erin, still carrying her bag, is walking along a not-so-busy street in Big Easy. The street seems moist and a slight fog/mist hangs overhead.

As she walks, she notices a small row house that is having a sidewalk sale. Some other people have stopped to look at some of the items a MAN is selling from his home. Erin stops to look over the things - mostly stuff like old pictures, paintings and frames, some ancient-looking furniture and vintage clothing.

ERIN

All for sale, huh?

MAN

Stuff was my grandma's, her grandma's, right on down the line. My grandmother just passed.

ERIN

Sorry to hear that.

Erin looks over some of the smaller items on a folding card table. She examines an old desk clock, fingers through some sepia-toned photos and glances at some old kitchen gadgets. Finally, her eyes settle on a dusty 12-inch-by-12-inch painting of Napoleon on his horse - a print of David's "Napoleon at St. Bernard" behind glass and surrounded by a fabulous (yet dusty) gold frame. She picks it up. She likes it. She notices the pen-written \$20 tag stuck to the wood frame.

ERIN (CONT'D)

I'll give you ten bucks for this.

INT. ERIN'S APARTMENT -- DAY

Erin enters her quaint, graduate-student apartment. A couch, a slip-covered chair, a small kitchen table with one chair and a large desk fill out the apartment's sitting area.

Erin drops her bags. She holds up her just-purchased framed painting/print to her fairly-empty walls, trying to find the perfect spot to hang it. She finally presses it against the wall above her couch. As Erin handles it, one of her fingers goes through the paper backing behind the painting, just inside the frame.

ERIN

Shit.

She turns it over - there's a hole in the brown-paper backing of the painting.

ERIN (CONT'D)

Not that bad.

Erin begins to flip the painting back over when she sees something move behind the paper backing, next to the frame. She shakes the painting and frame and notices what looks like a sheet of paper behind the painting.

INSIDE KITCHENETTE.

Erin places the painting face down on her kitchen counter. Using a small knife, she begins to carefully cut away the brown-paper. Finally, she exposes the painting's "inside" - there is a piece of paper stuck behind the print.

Confused, Erin very carefully removes the piece of "tanned" parchment, which is folded. Gingerly, she unfolds it, revealing a little more than half of a very old sheet of paper - the bottom portion is missing.

The sheet has five columns and about 20 horizontal lines. It's hand-written in French with black ink. The paper was obviously torn in half, with one of the lines interrupted by the rip.

Erin notices the year written along the top of the parchment sheet - 1821.

ERIN (CONT'D)

1821. No way.

INT. AUSMUS' OFFICE -- DAY

A small office on the campus of LSU. Books fill the space - on shelves, on the floor, on each other. Ausmus is sitting at his desk, which has books stacked around it. He is grading some student's papers when a knock at his door wakes him.

AUSMUS

Enter at your own risk.

The door opens and Erin enters, carrying a folder.

AUSMUS (CONT'D)

No, Ms. Cox - I still haven't read it.

ERIN

Sorry to bother you, Professor, but I was hoping you'd take a look at something.

She walks behind his desk and stands next to him.

AUSMUS

Another research paper?

ERIN
You can say that.

AUSMUS
Odd answer.

Erin opens the folder and removes a smaller envelope. From this, she carefully takes out the 1821 parchment and gingerly places it on the desk in front of Ausmus. He moves his desk lamp closer to get a better look.

AUSMUS (CONT'D)
Oh my. Looks old. Where did you get this?

ERIN
I evidently bought it at a tag sale. It was wedged behind a frame with a print of Napoleon in it.

AUSMUS
Napoleon?

ERIN
A print of one of David's works.

AUSMUS
The General's favorite painter.

ERIN
The year didn't escape me either, sir.

AUSMUS
Or me. 1821.

ERIN
Napoleon died in 1821 on the island of St. Helena, near Africa, where he was exiled. Again.

AUSMUS
Very good, Ms. Cox. Highest marks.

ERIN
My French doesn't get high marks, though.

AUSMUS
Mine's not bad. This looks like some sort of inventory list or shipping invoice. Seems like a lot; books, clothing, some gold, guns, all made it to New Orleans.

ERIN

It doesn't say from where, though.
 'Lie' -
 (points)
 'Island.' Could be anywhere.

Erin seems impressed that she remembered that from high school French. Ausmus is amused by her.

AUSMUS

This is interesting -

Without touching the sheet he runs his finger down the paper, along a column on the right-hand side.

AUSMUS (CONT'D)

This says that everything arrived in New Orleans - Chartres Street - safe and sound. See how they're checked off. But this last item here, where it's torn, wasn't checked. It was shipped, but didn't make it to New Orleans, or so it seems.

Just above the tear is half a box - but it does seem like the box isn't filled in like the others above it.

ERIN

What was the item?

AUSMUS

It looks like it says 'guirlande.'

They both pause, running through the French vocabulary in their heads. No good. Ausmus finally gives in, stands and looks over a couple of the books on his shelves. He takes one down and flips through it as he sits. We finally see it's a English to French dictionary.

AUSMUS (CONT'D)

Guirlande, guirlande, guirlande.
 Here - "wreath."

ERIN

Wreath? Really? That's not terribly exciting.

AUSMUS

No. But you know - if this is real, you have a small piece of history.

ERIN

Which I bought for ten bucks. How do I find out if it is from 1821?

AUSMUS

Well, you could pay for some expensive chemical dating tests.

ERIN

Hey, I know. You could get the history department to do it?

AUSMUS

(amused)

Right. I can't even get a new office computer.

Erin starts to pack up the parchment - always careful.

AUSMUS (CONT'D)

Maybe there's another way.

ERIN

What's that?

AUSMUS

Get someone to look at it for free. Tell a reporter about your story. Maybe someone more in the know will see it and, bam, you'll have your confirmation.

ERIN

Maybe they'll want to buy it. Help pay for these graduate courses.

AUSMUS

Now you're thinking like a true historian.

Erin takes her folder and heads towards the door.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. NEW ORLEANS BAR -- NIGHT

The bar/restaurant is not very packed. Some are at the bar, some are sitting at the tables, some are at the booths along one of the walls.

Erin is in one of these booths, reading a newspaper.

ON NEWSPAPER - There's a photo of Erin with her piece of parchment - a story next to this picture. "GRAD STUDENT FINDS PIECE OF HISTORY" is the headline.

A waitress, LOUISE, brings her a stacked sandwich on a plate crowded with potato chips.

WAITRESS

Here ya' go, Erin.

ERIN

Thanks, Louise.

Louise notices the newspaper - it triggers a thought.

LOUISE

I meant to say I read about you this morning. That's an unbelievable story. Is it really real?

ERIN

Think so. I'm hoping someone will show some interest.

LOUISE

You watch it, girl. They'll be more interested in you than that piece of paper.

Louise laughs and leaves Erin to her sandwich.

INT. ERIN'S APARTMENT -- NIGHT

Erin enters her dark apartment and flips on the lights -

- her apartment is in shambles. Everything is dumped on the floor, her couch is turned over, the table is tossed in a corner and her chairs are piled near the door. She steps in as her door closes, stunned that her apartment has been assaulted.

Shocked, she walks into the used-to-be sitting area. Out of nowhere, two powerful arms grab her from behind, covering her mouth. A man - PAUL BASS - actually lifts her off the ground. Tall and thin with a bearded face, Bass is powerful and he shows it as he controls the squirming and kicking Erin.

BASS

Quiet! We're here for one thing.
Quiet!

Erin looks over Bass' hand at DAVID McCLENDON, a solidly-built African American. He walks up to her.

MCCLENDON

We want to know where it is. He's gonna' take his hand away from your mouth. Just tell us and we'll leave. Scream and I'll punch you in the face. Understand?

Erin nods.

MCCLENDON (CONT'D)

Now - where's the parchment?

Erin glances quickly around the room, not locking on anything in particular. In her quick search, she notices the painting she purchased at the tag sale is still on the wall, just crooked to one side.

MCCLENDON (CONT'D)

Let her go.

Bass uncovers Erin's mouth.

ERIN

It's at school. LSU. I'm a graduate student in the history department there. It's history. They're holding it for me.

Bass and McClendon share a quick look.

ERIN (CONT'D)

Look around. You guys ripped apart everything I own.

Erin smiles as best she can. McClendon lifts a radio to his face and turns away from Bass and Erin.

MCCLENDON

(into radio)

She says it's not here.

PIERCE

(filtered)

Then where is it?

MCCLENDON

(into radio)

She said at school. LSU.

INSIDE CAR - OUTSIDE ERIN'S APARTMENT BUILDING.

Sitting behind a steering wheel is KENT PIERCE, 33 with a serious face, he holds a walkie-talkie radio.

PIERCE

(into radio)

She's lying.

ERIN'S APARTMENT.

McClendon looks at Erin.

MCCLENDON

(into radio)

We've gone through her whole place, dog.

PIERCE
 (filtered)
 She's lying, Mac. Believe me.

Just as this comes over the radio, Erin slams her foot into Bass' knee, dropping him to the floor. The grad student-turned Rambo picks up her full book-shoulder bag and swings it at McClendon, who turns to her just in time. WHACK. The bag cracks him across the face, sending the radio and some of his spit across the room.

Quick like a bunny, Erin rips her Napoleon print from the wall, avoids the injured Bass and tears ass out of her apartment.

APARTMENT BUILDING HALLWAY.

Erin gets to the stairs quickly.

ERIN'S APARTMENT.

McClendon and Bass gather themselves. McClendon picks up his radio.

MCCLENDON
 (into radio)
 She's on her way down to you.

BASS
 Tell him to be careful.

The two slowly make their way out of the apartment.

APARTMENT BUILDING STAIRS.

Erin takes the last few steps in one leap. She bursts through the outer door -

OUTSIDE ERIN'S APARTMENT BUILDING.

- and runs right into Pierce, who snatches her up.

PIERCE
 Where you goin'?

He presses her face against the wall. Pierce starts to grab for the painting but -

- his arm is yanked from behind. A fist smashes into Pierce's jaw, dropping him. A foot holds him to the ground. Pierce looks up at -

- LEW DONNER. Thirty seven, tanned, and in very good shape, Lew presses his foot against Pierce's chest.

LEW
 Hi, Kent. Surprised?

PIERCE

Now that you mention it.

LEW

Good.

Lew throws another punch into Pierce's jaw, knocking him out. He looks over at the still surprised Erin.

LEW (CONT'D)

Nice to meet you, Ms. Cox. You can either come with me or deal with the guys coming from your apartment. Your choice.

ERIN

Who are you?

LEW

A friend. A friend who truly knows what you have there.

She glances at the piece in her hand. Erin nods and the two move off together.

APARTMENT BUILDING STAIRS.

Bass and McClendon make it down the stairs.

OUTSIDE ERIN'S APARTMENT BUILDING.

Just as Pierce stands, shaking the cobwebs, Bass and McClendon come through the building's doors. All three men study the area - Erin and Lew are gone.

PIERCE

Shit.

MCCLENDON

What happened?

PIERCE

I was about to ask you.

BASS

She's one tough mother.

MCCLENDON

That's right.

PIERCE

You assholes.

MCCLENDON

You didn't have any luck with her.

PIERCE

She had help. Donner was here.

Pierce walks away.

MCCLENDON

Donner?

BASS

Shit.

Finally, Bass and McClendon follow their partner.

INT. CAR -- NIGHT

Lew is driving this rental car. Erin sits next to him still clutching her tag-sale painting.

LEW

Are you all right?

ERIN

I'm fine.

She turns the painting over and removes the envelope she showed Ausmus earlier. A quick glance inside the envelope confirms that the parchment paper is still inside. Erin puts the envelope inside her jacket and tosses the painting in the back seat.

ERIN (CONT'D)

Where are we going?

LEW

To get a drink. And to answer the questions you have.

Erin looks Lew over.

EXT. NAPOLEON HOUSE, NEW ORLEANS -- NIGHT

Lew pulls the car up to the curb outside the Napoleon House - the 200 year old landmark in the French Quarter.

ERIN V.O.

This is the Napoleon House.

LEW V.O.

We have a theme going.

INSIDE NAPOLEON HOUSE.

The Cafe of the Napoleon House is famous as a haunt for artists, writers and, of course, vacationers. Its deep wood paneling and European-style are very welcoming - while being quaint at the same time.

Erin and Lew enter and are led to a small table against one of the walls. Erin looks at the bust of Napoleon near the entrance as a WAITRESS comes up to them.

LEW
Two Pimm's Cups.

The waitress moves away to get the Napoleon House's most famous beverage.

ERIN
I guess you've been here before.

LEW
I have.

ERIN
So who are you?

LEW
My name is Donner. Lew Donner.

ERIN
And why the interest in me?

The waitress comes back with the Pimm's Cups. Lew waits for the waitress to move away before-

LEW
No offense, but I'm more interested in that piece of paper you're holding in your jacket. And I'm hugely interested in not letting those other pricks get their hands on it.

ERIN
What? Did they break up with you or something?

LEW
(avoiding)
I just don't want them to have it.

ERIN
You want to destroy it. I can't let you ruin a piece of history.

LEW
I don't want to damage it.

ERIN
Then you want it for yourself.

Lew takes a big swig of his drink.

LEW

Not necessarily. You can keep it.
But you'll have to come with me.

ERIN

Why would I come with you?

LEW

Because I know where the other part
of that sheet is. And I also know
that whoever has both pieces would
be well on their way to finding
something worth more than that scrap
of paper. An item worth way more
historically, Miss Historian.

Erin now seems a bit more at ease. She drinks.

ERIN

Go on, Mr. Donner.

LEW

Lew. Call me Lew.

She gestures to him to continue.

LEW (CONT'D)

Do you know why this place is called
the Napoleon House?

Erin loves historical questions, especially softballs like
this one.

ERIN

A former Mayor of New Orleans - a
man named Girod - offered Napoleon
this house as a refuge during his
second exile after Waterloo. He was
to live upstairs, on the second floor.
Easy.

LEW

But Napoleon never made it.

ERIN

He died.

LEW

Tough break.

ERIN

He probably wouldn't have ever gotten
off the island of St. Helena, anyway.

LEW

I beg to differ.

(MORE)

LEW (CONT'D)

He was well on his way. At least some of his belongings were forwarded here.

Light bulb time for Erin - she slides her drink to the side and wipes down the table with her napkin. As gently as possible, she removes her parchment from her jacket and lays it on the table.

ERIN

You think this is - was - Napoleon's? Come on.

Lew leans over and looks at the paper, never touching it.

LEW

Now that I've seen it, I'm sure this is the little guy's. I repeat, I've seen the other half.

ERIN

You can't prove this was his.

LEW

But I bet I can make a convincing case.

ERIN

I'm all ears.

Lew begins to point at the paper with his pinkie. He highlights each of the following things -

LEW

The destination is New Orleans, where we're sitting. But there's no set terminus - outside of "lie." Island. Guess who was on an island?

ERIN

Ha! Big coincidence.

LEW

All right. It's in French. Not English. Not Spanish. Not Italian. French. I have that going for me.

ERIN

But we're in the French Quarter, Copernicus.

LEW

Again, true. But look at the items that are listed. Gold. Furniture. Lots of clothing. Weapons.

(MORE)

LEW (CONT'D)

Not stuff from your typical poor immigrant.

ERIN

Yawn. Lots of rich Frenchmen came to New Orleans 200 years ago. Come on.

LEW

Yeah, but you said so yourself. A wealthy person wouldn't be forced to live on the second floor of this building, right?

Erin concedes the point with her body language.

LEW (CONT'D)

And the other portion of this sheet came from right upstairs here.

ERIN

How do you know that?

LEW

Because that's where I stole it from.

ERIN

You're a thief?

LEW

Pretty much.

Erin begins to fold up the parchment, but Lew stops her.

LEW (CONT'D)

I'm not going to take this from you.

ERIN

So you have the other part?

LEW

Not exactly. I was caught with it in Crab Key. I went to jail for a year and they stuck the sheet in their Island Museum.

ERIN

Why didn't the police in Crab Key return it to the Napoleon House?

LEW

This is the beautiful part. Because the Napoleon House didn't even know it was here. It was walled up behind the plaster upstairs.

(MORE)

LEW (CONT'D)

I found out about it, broke in late one night, cut it out of the wall, and sealed the hole up tight. Clean as a whistle.

Erin sizes him up, waiting.

ERIN

You're on a roll.

He points at the ripped section of the parchment, zeroing in on the word "guirlande."

LEW

'Guirlande.' Means wreath.

ERIN

I know.

LEW

It, unlike most of Napoleon's other stuff, never made it to the Big Easy. It was stolen from the ship when it was docked at Crab Key. Probably by a seaman or two. The rumor is he or they buried this wreath on the island somewhere.

Lew turns the sheet over. He points to a drawn line next to the frayed tear. This simple curved line, like the parchment, has been cut off.

LEW (CONT'D)

This line, I think, has something to do with where the wreath is buried.

It's all too much for Erin. She puts the parchment back in the envelope and stashes it back in her jacket.

LEW (CONT'D)

I guess I lost you.

ERIN

Something like that. Buried treasure?

As Erin drinks, Lew reaches into his own jacket and removes a piece of paper. He places it on the table.

ON PAPER - a color printout of David's "The Coronation of the Emperor Napoleon" is in the center of the paper. The rendering shows Napoleon, dressed like an Emperor, about to place a crown on his wife's, Josephine's, head.

Erin puts her drink down and looks at the printout. Lew points at Napoleon's head.

ERIN'S POV - as she leans in, Napoleon gets closer and closer. She focuses on the gold wreath on Napoleon's head.

CLOSE ON ERIN'S EYES. They go wide.

ERIN (CONT'D)
Napoleon's crown.

LEW
His coronation crown. A golden laurel wreath. Worth a fortune. You'll be able to touch history - an item that rested on the head of an icon.

Erin shakes her head.

ERIN
Wrong.

LEW
Wrong? Whaddya' mean?

ERIN
Napoleon's coronation crown was melted down in 1819 at the Paris Mint.

LEW
Boy, did you pay attention in history class.

ERIN
It gets better. Only one of the 44 leaves survives today, stuck on a snuff box or something. The leaf fell off after the ceremony in 1804.

LEW
The crown wasn't melted down. The Napmeister squirreled it away. He never gave up his one true crown. Your sheet here is evidence to that.

Erin's mind is racing as she once again looks at her sheet.

LEW (CONT'D)
We can find the crown, Erin. Once we join that piece of paper you have with the one locked away on the Island of Crab Key.

ERIN
Why should I trust you, thief?

LEW
It's either come with me and get the crown ourselves and keep those hostile
(MORE)

LEW (CONT'D)

pricks that just redecorated your apartment from nabbing it. Or, go your own way, have those guys catch up to you, kill you or worse, steal the paper and get the crown for themselves.

(pause)

Listen, I know you don't know me from Adam, but I showed you all my cards here.

Erin ponders ...

INT. NEW ORLEANS' POLICE STATION -- NIGHT

Erin sits at DETECTIVE JURGENS'S desk in the busy New Orleans' precinct. Detective Jurgens comes back to his desk carrying a printout. He is a tall man with slicked-back hair. Erin's parchment is on his desk.

JURGENS

I've let our cruisers know about the men who were at your apartment. If they're still in the city, our guys will find them.

Erin nods.

JURGENS (CONT'D)

As for this Lew Donner who helped you out -
 (he looks at his
 printout)
 Lewis Donner - he's a convicted thief.

ERIN

That's what he told me.

JURGENS

Lucky for you, nothing violent in his record. Usually steals stuff at night, where there aren't too many people.

ERIN

(more to herself)
 Avoids conflict with people. But not today.

JURGENS

You'd be surprised at how many unsavory characters aren't into drawing blood, if ya' know what I mean.

ERIN

Not violent.

JURGENS

Like I said, lucky for you.

He picks up his coffee mug.

JURGENS (CONT'D)

Another cup?

She shakes her head as he moves away from his desk. Erin looks at the parchment.

ERIN'S POV - she focuses on the word "guirlande."

Erin breaks her stare, glances over at Jurgens at the coffee maker, then gathers up her parchment. She quickly leaves the desk and heads for the door.

EXT. CRAB KEY ISLAND -- DAY

Sunny and bright - a great (fictional) Caribbean Island. White beaches, blue, clear water, drinks with umbrellas in them, hotels, bars, wet t-shirts, thongs and great bodies everywhere.

OUTSIDE CRAB KEY AIRPORT.

The airport is smallish, but does a good business. It mostly handles puddle-jumper aircraft.

INSIDE CRAB KEY AIRPORT TERMINAL.

The well-kept terminal shines. First impressions are so important.

Lew strides through the terminal, carrying a bag. He seems a little depressed until -

Erin appears next to him, also carrying a bag. They keep walking.

LEW

Jesus. Now this is a surprise.

ERIN

For me, too. I thought I'd make your day. I also figured you might need my help to get the goods.

LEW

I do need your help. I really do.

ERIN

Good.

(MORE)