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# *Not Quite Dead*

*Sela Carlsen*

## *Dedication*

To my ever-patient husband, to my mac-and-cheese-loving children, to my non-writing friends who celebrated and cried with me, to my writing friends who did the same, plus a whole lot more. Struggling Writers, Brit Pack and Library Ladies—this one's for you.

## *Chapter One*

Sabine Harper stood in front of a crumbling crypt with her younger cousin, Lily, waiting for the original airhead to try to raise the dead. After years of questionable decisions, she could now categorically state that this was the stupidest thing she had ever, ever done in her life.

Lily, in her newly purchased Goth-girl garb, raised her black manicured hands and began to intone what she probably thought was a spell for disinterment. It sounded like pig Latin. The rest of the Moron Squad marched solemnly around the grave, carrying black candles. Sabine backed away and leaned against a convenient cypress tree, waiting for the drama to be over so she could go back to her boring, warm, well-lit home.

The incantation seemed to be over. Lily and her ghoulish friends watched the grave expectantly, until the flame from one of the candles licked up the cowl of a girl who sported enough body piercings to set off airport metal detectors. She shrieked, dropped the candle, and whisked off the cape before it did any damage.

No girl going up in flames. No zombie rising from the grave. The air of anticipation faded and the little group sat down dejectedly.

Sabine, who had started when the girl screamed, settled back against the tree to wait through the debriefing and commiserations. As irritating as it had been to disrupt her evening for this funereal little display, it was a lot more exciting than what she had planned—watching a video and eating a bowl of cereal in front of the TV.

A step sounded next to her and she jumped again, this time with a scream half caught in her throat. She looked around and saw a tall man come out of the shadows behind the tree. His manner seemed direct, not

furtive as one would expect from a man who walked through cemeteries in the dark. Still, it was hardly reassuring.

"Sorry to startle you," he said.

"No problem." There were people all around, but she was wary.

"What's going on here?" He was even taller than she first thought, she realized as he stood beside her. He had to bend down to speak softly to her. She couldn't see much of his face in the dark, but his features seemed regular, his eyes dark, and his teeth white.

She glanced back at Lily. "They're raising the dead."

He looked over at the graveside gathering and raised an eyebrow. "Is it working?"

She angled her head to look at him disbelievingly and he grinned down at her. She smiled back as they leaned into the sturdy trunk of the tree.

"Not so far."

"And what are you doing here, since you obviously don't believe in this?"

"See that little blonde over there? The one with the spikes in her hair? That's my cousin. I'm here because my aunt would dig *me* a grave if anything happened to her during this phase she's going through of thinking she's a witch."

The man nodded.

"If you don't mind my asking, why are you here?" she asked.

"Just checking on an old friend."

"I'm sorry." She placed her hand on his arm for a moment. "Where is he?"

"Right over there." He pointed at the tomb where Lily and her friends were sitting. The tomb whose inhabitant they had tried to raise. Sabine gasped in horror.

"Oh my gosh. I am so sorry," she said as she pushed away from the tree. She started toward the group, ready to tell them off for disturbing the grave, when candlelight flickered over the date of death on the vault.

1882.

She stopped and turned back to the man, who smiled at her again, showing his fangs this time.

She lunged for the group at the same time chaos erupted all around her. The stone covering of the raised grave exploded and a figure sprang out of more than a century of dust and decay. Sabine watched in horrified silence as the screams of the wannabe witches echoed in her ears. The former owner of the grave, whole, undecayed except for his clothing, and covered in stone dust, began to walk with malicious intent toward the man with whom Sabine had spoken.

The dead man stopped. He turned his head and pinned her with his gaze. He took one step in her direction, then seemed to change his mind again and ran off into the darkness—after the guy with the dental issues.

The Moron Squad had scattered, leaving the cousins alone in the dark—alone if you didn't count Fang Boy and Zombie. Lily and Sabine backed away from the ruined grave.

"It worked," Lily whispered, her pupils so dilated that only a thin rim of blue showed around the black. Sabine grabbed her hand and found her voice.

"Run!"

The dead man had looked at her—right *at* her as though he recognized her. Sabine pulled her stumbling charge between the monuments to the parking lot and shoved Lily into the passenger seat of the car. She dashed around to get in her side when she ran into a wall of solid, cold flesh and looked up into the face of the man with whom she had spoken by the tree.

Sabine glanced around his shoulder, checking for the zombie.

"Sorry, *belle*. He always needed coffee the moment he woke up. Our dear Willem isn't firing on all cylinders yet, so I gave him the slip." The vampire's voice was pure heaven with the purest upper-crust Creole accent. He sounded like a beignet tasted, crisp, smooth and sweet. Then he destroyed the illusion by smiling at her again. He didn't bother to hide his long canine teeth as he wrapped one hand around her left arm. Which left her right arm free.

Sabine didn't even think. She did the very thing all the self-defense articles talked about and used the weapons she had at hand. Her right hand still held her car keys and she slammed them up, leaving a bloody gash down the face which, in the white-green glare of the street light, she

could now see was angelically beautiful. He let go and stumbled back, cursing as he retreated into the darkness. She got into the car, gunned the engine, and squealed out of the lot, locking her doors and her mind to the horror she had just seen.



He was back.

Willem Breaux had no idea how long it had been since he had seen his love and the vampire who had destroyed them both. He had no clear idea of what he was supposed to do or even what had happened to him. The last thing he remembered was looking into the face of the vampire as he raised the stake to kill it. Then the excruciating pain of something stabbing into his own back. He heard someone—was it Rose?—sobbing and begging his forgiveness, but he didn't understand for what as his life slipped away. His soul screamed for vengeance as the dark overtook him.

He was aware of the passage of time. His memories were of fighting the gray fog and sometimes winning. When he won, he found himself in the presence of three women. The Fates. Clotho spun the thread of each man's life, Lachesis measured its length and apportioned to each his fair share of happiness and grief, and Atropos cut each thread when it had grown to its end.

The first time he saw the women, he was furious that his life had been cut short. Surprisingly, Atropos agreed. She had not intended to cut his life's thread until he was old, but mortal, or rather, immortal intervention had waylaid her plans. He sank back into the gray.

The next time he rose from the fog, they turned as one and considered him with pale eyes. "We are agreed," said Atropos. "No one, mortal or immortal, may interfere with our plans. You shall have your vengeance."

One last time he was with them. They gathered around him. "We can give you no gifts beyond what your heart finds. And because your thread is cut, when you walk in the light, we can only make one place safe for you—that which was yours before. Our blessing follows you, Willem Breaux. We claim your vengeance for our own."



As soon as he felt their hands on him, his world exploded. He fought his way out from under a stone slab, and the first thing he saw was Richard St. Ivraie, his most hated enemy, across the field of tombs. Then he sensed her. Rose. His lover. His betrayer. He wanted to go after her, but he didn't know whether he wanted to gather her in his arms and kiss her, or if he wanted to punish her. It was easier to go after the one thing he knew he had to destroy.

He chased the creature through the quiet streets of Robichaud, Louisiana, but lost him when they came to a group of low, ugly buildings near the riverfront.

Lost, indeed. His mind still felt foggy. What he wouldn't give for a cup of strong chicory coffee.

The Robichaud of his memory was truly gone. Rows of blank, worn stone replaced his wooden storefronts, dim signs touted unfamiliar wares. What was fiberglass sheeting?

One sign gave him pause. "Denby Stone Monuments". Edward Denby had been his assistant. Not a gifted stonemason, Edward nevertheless had a steady head for business. Willem ignored the clench in his chest and told himself he was glad that at least this portion of his legacy had not died.

Loud thumping music spilled from the last of the stone buildings. The sign that proclaimed it "The End of the Line" flickered with uncertain light. A man stumbled out, shouting drunken farewells to his companions. Cynicism lifted a corner of Willem's mouth. Some things never changed.

He pressed deeper into the shadows and continued his exploration. Too many things were new, too much had changed. He needed explanations and a place to rest, so he set out in the direction of the one place he truly hoped still stood.

His home.

## Chapter Two

Sabine dragged Lily out of the car and marched her to her aunt's front door. When it opened, she shoved her cousin through it and said, "Aunt Dena, I don't care if you have to chain her in the attic, you don't let her out of your house until I say so, is that clear?"

Sabine's extensive family regarded her as steady, cheerful, and easy going, maybe even a little boring. Because of those traits, they turned to her when they had little things that needed sorting out or watching over. Little things like Lily. Dena had been more than willing to drop Lily into Sabine's hands the minute the child got a whim that was more than her mama's *delicate* nerves could handle. But this was it. She quit. She was sick of being the responsible one.

Sabine stumbled back to her car and kept her mind a careful blank as she drove back to her house, not yet ready to consider everything that had happened.

Still on autopilot, she let herself into the small, old cottage she owned near the river. She didn't even turn on the lights before she walked over to the sofa, curled up in one corner of it, and cried.

This had to be a nightmare. She never cried when she was awake, but it was okay to pitch a fit during a nightmare.

"Rose."

Sabine looked up at the unexpected noise and saw a filthy man standing in the middle of her living room with his clothes in rags. She drew a breath to scream, but never made a sound. He was next to her in a flash, his hand covering her mouth. The blood ran out of her head so quickly, she thought she might faint.

“Rose,” he said again, and gathered her in his arms, crushing her to him as if he had missed her. After a moment, though, his embrace changed. He held her upper arms and pushed her away from him. His blue eyes glittered coldly and he spoke, his voice gravelly with disuse. “You betraying little *putain*.”

The synapses in Sabine’s brain stretched to keep up with the fact that what lay before her eyes was real. The stretching created a void and through the void, her own voice echoed, quavering and thin.

“Who are you?”

“What do you mean, who am I? Don’t you recognize me? Or has it been too long since you stabbed me in the back?”

She tried to pull out of his hold, but those strong arms pinned her to the back of the couch. A tiny, focused part of her mind droned *useless*, but her body struggled on.

“I don’t know who or what you are. I saw you step out of a grave tonight and run after a...a...vampire.” The void in her mind filled with hysterical laughter. She wasn’t sure whether it released itself from her throat or merely pushed against the skeletal limits of her brain.

“That’s right. The vampire you betrayed me for. Richard St. Ivraie.” He gave the name a French inflection and his accent was pure Creole.

“No. I don’t know any Richard St. Ivraie. I know I saw a vampire for the first time in my life tonight, right before the walking dead arose.”

“That can’t be possible, Rose. I know you loved him. How could you love a monster like that?”

Sabine heard heartbreak in his voice. “You’re both monsters. You came out of a grave. Please, please let go of me.” It never hurt to be polite to the insane.

“A monster?” He shook her and she shrank farther away from him. “I loved you. We were going to be married until you betrayed me with that fiend.” His eyes narrowed and she turned her face as his voice lowered to a whisper. “And then you murdered me.”

Her limbs were leaden now, all the adrenaline used up. As blackness rose in front of her, she pleaded with him. “I am not who you think I am. I am not Rose. Sweet heaven, you have to believe me.”

"You are my Rose. I would know you anywhere. Your hair, your face, even your eyes are..." He stopped. "I need light."

He looked around and his brow furrowed. He squeezed his fingers around her arm in warning before he said, "Fetch a lamp."

The man, blotched in gray and brown smears of dirt, made as if to rise with her. The incongruity of his action when there was a lamp on the end table, not two feet away, fired a lone spark in her mind.

He released her arm. Too terrified to disobey, she reached out and switched it on. The man sucked in a quick breath, his eyes widening before he returned his gaze to her. He snatched her chin in his hand and studied her eyes.

"They're green." His face contracted as he regarded her suspiciously. "What's your name?"

"Sabine Harper."

"Sabine." One muscled arm reached past her and picked up the lamp. He shone it directly into her face. "Your hair is too dark. And your eyes should be brown."

"Well, they're not. That's what I've been trying to tell you." Fear evaporated to be replaced with fury.

He was silent. The anger in his own face melted away, leaving a stoic mask.

"The blonde who was with you. Who is she?"

"That's Lily. She's my cousin." Sensation rushed back to limbs gone numb with terror. Nerves pricked painfully in her head and blood pounded at her temple. "She and her stupid little friends were playing a game tonight, mumbling spells, trying to raise you from the dead. I can't believe it worked."

Willem shook his head. "It didn't work. Not unless she's Rose."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I." He looked down at his hand on her arm and grimaced. "You might be Rose and you might not. How long have I been..."

"Dead?" she supplied. "How long have you been dead? According to your tombstone, over one hundred twenty years." Sarcasm dripped in her tone. This was ridiculous. Sabine wrenched away from his loosened grip. "If you knew a Rose during your lifetime, I can pretty much guarantee

she's dead, too. Unless she's decided to go for a little walk tonight and stretch out her decayed skeleton. Who are you anyway?"

"My name is Willem Breaux. This used to be my house."

She muttered an oath. "Great. Just great. Vampires, the walking dead, and now I live in a haunted house."

"It's haunted?" He leaned back from her.

"You're here, aren't you?" Sabine took deep breaths, keeping her eyes on the man who had invaded her home. His home. Whatever.

"Why, exactly, are you here?" she asked.

Willem rose stiffly and wandered over to the French doors leading to her spacious back yard. "I'm here to kill St. Ivraie."

"Who?"

"Richard St. Ivraie. The vampire you saw tonight."

"Fan-freakin'-tastic. Vampires. Dead man walking. I have completely lost my mind. You are a figment of my twisted imagination, right? That's it. No more Stephen King movies on late night cable."

"I beg your pardon?"

Sabine sighed and tried again. "You know what? Just for fun, I'm going to go along with this. I'm going to pretend this is real to see if my subconscious is trying to tell me something important." She took a deep breath and pasted a patient smile on her face. "Okay. You've been dead for over a hundred years. Why now? Why after all this time?"

"Because he's back. He stole my woman, turned her, and she murdered me. This time it's my turn."

Sabine snorted indelicately. "Nice. I thought vengeance was the Lord's." She rose and he followed her into the kitchen.

"I'm not a ghost," he said, as if that would help.

Sabine filled her tea kettle with water. It soothed to her to go through the simple ritual during troubling times. "What are you?"

"I'm not sure." He leaned against her counter and watched her assemble cups and teabags while she waited for the water to heat.

There was nothing left for her to do with her hands and she stopped. She turned to focus on him. There was a ghoul—imaginary, but very male—standing in her kitchen. He was dirty, but otherwise didn't look as

though he had lain decomposing for over a century. Maybe he wasn't a ghoul.

He was something, though. His hair was probably dark blond under the dirt and since his clothing hung in rags, she had a pretty good idea that he had lived an active life, if his muscles were anything to go by.

The shrill whistle of the kettle broke the silence. Sabine poured hot water over her teabag, then hesitated. "I don't know if you drink, or eat, or sleep. Should I pour you a cup of tea?"

"Yes, please."

A ghoul with manners.

He smiled at her and he was beautiful. Fully male with a charming twinkle in his eyes. She shuddered and turned away as tears sprang again to her eyes.

"Are you all right?" he asked. Since they'd come into the kitchen he had watched her closely, examining her body, her hair, her face.

"Sure. I'm not usually a crier, but it's been kind of a rough night. Anyway, it's okay to cry during psychotic breaks." She turned a half smile on him over her shoulder. Then, as if she entertained cadavers all the time, took the teabags out of the cups and asked if he wanted milk or honey.

He barely waited for the burning liquid to cool before he began drinking. The taste of something must have awakened his appetite because his stomach rumbled like the vibrating of a bass fiddle. She looked over at him. He might have flushed, but she couldn't tell under the dust.

"Hungry?" she asked, smiling into her mug.

His lips tilted up and he put his empty cup on the counter. "Now that you mention it, I could do with something to eat."

"As long as you don't want to drink my blood or snack on my soul, I think I can fix you up."

He ran his thumb under his lip as if to check for fangs. The dark gleam in his eyes, combined with the sensually assessing look on his face, made Sabine's body tingle in a rush from head to toe. Not a ghoul. Definitely male. And so Sabine found herself frying eggs and ham at four

o'clock in the morning for a man who had died generations before she was born.



Sabine gathered towels and fresh linens as she led him down the hall to her guest bedroom with its connecting bath. At first, Willem had only wanted to wash his hands before he ate. Then he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror. He scared himself. He couldn't blame her for being terrified of him in such a state.

Willem hesitated at the door of the small room. One hundred twenty years had changed a lot of things. His eyes lighted on the porcelain bathtub and he breathed a sigh of relief. At least people still took baths.

Sabine must have seen his confusion because she slipped in past him and began to chatter, displaying everything as though it was normal for her to find someone who didn't understand the workings of modern plumbing.

"I'm not sure what kind of fixtures you're used to, but I don't think showers were around much yet." She bent over to demonstrate and, suddenly, cleanliness wasn't uppermost in his mind.

"Pull this thing out to turn it on and twist this way for hot or..." *Bon Dieu*. He'd never been one for double entendres before, but everything she said was arousing him. Her chatter faded away and she blushed. Charming. She made him feel slightly less of an idiot at his slowness upon waking from his death.

"My dad's old bathrobe," she blurted.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I mean, I don't have any clothes for you. But I have my dad's old bathrobe. Will that do for now?"

"Anything." He shook his head. Southern hospitality, legendary in his own time, couldn't explain Sabine's actions to him. Willem wasn't certain what he would have done had he found a...whatever he was in his home, but he knew he wouldn't have offered it a cup of tea and a bath.

"You don't have to do this, you know."

"I know. But this is your home, too."

"That's very gracious of you." He'd nearly forgotten that she thought he was imaginary. She was humoring him. But Willem wasn't stupid enough to turn down an offer of such magnitude, imaginary or not.

She hesitated a moment.

"Go," he said. "I'll work out the rest of it." Sabine hummed an indefinite answer, the kind women give when they're not too certain about the intelligence of the men around them, and left him to bathe.

Willem shed his clothes, sneering in disgust at the moldy pile they made on the floor. He scooped them into the wastebin and looked at himself in the mirror. He knew he was not bad looking, but his appearance had made little difference to him in his life. The only thing his handsome face was good for was occasionally keeping him warm at night with a willing woman or attracting the attention of a lady like Rose. And look where that had gotten him.

Hot steam billowed from the bathtub and he pulled back the curtain to see water pouring from the showerhead. Willem stuck his hand in and hissed at the scalding temperature. Fiddling with the handles the way Sabine had done, he adjusted the water so he wouldn't boil the skin from his body. He finally stepped into the shower and groaned as the soothing spray sluiced down his body, washing away the filth of the grave.

The soap smelled of vanilla. He supposed he could survive smelling like a bakery. At least it wasn't roses. The towels were sheer heaven. Thick, fluffy, and clean. Clean was vital right now.

Sabine must have come in once more while he was bathing because he found a robe hanging on a hook behind the door and a toothbrush on the vanity. The thought of her in the room, while he was unclothed only a few feet away, gave him pause. Willem wiped a clear spot in the foggy mirror with the towel and stared hard while he brushed his teeth with the eye-wateringly minty paste he also found.

"You have work to do. Keep your mind on the job."

He put on the frayed plaid flannel robe and belted it, acutely conscious of a certain freedom below the waist. *And you can damn well stay down.* That was the last thing he needed right now. In order to resolve his problem and gain vengeance, he had to think with his big brain, not his little one.



Damp and clean, he sat at the kitchen table and watched Sabine move. She was quick, efficient, and still scared of him. He wasn't certain whether to applaud her belated good sense or take exception to it. The confusion irritated him.

Sabine looked much like his lost love, like enough to be her sister. He watched her sip her tea while he ate. His manners had never been quite fine enough to suit Rose, but it didn't seem to bother this woman that he consumed his food like a starving man. She simply handed him some flimsy paper napkins and asked if he wanted more.

She seemed unselfconscious in the strange, almost masculine clothing that flaunted every curve. When he first encountered her, she'd worn a large, bulky sweater against the chill of the autumn night. She must have taken it off as she cooked because he nearly swallowed his tongue at what was revealed.

Her face might be Rose's, but her body was her own. Rose had been a willowy, ephemeral thing, small and delicate. Sabine needed no corset to give her the hourglass figure so sought after by the women of his time. The dark green of her close-fitting knit shirt emphasized the luminous fairness of her skin, as well as the depth of the forest-dark flecks in her eyes.

He made his way through nearly a dozen more eggs and four ham steaks, as well as numerous glasses of water. She finally took to refilling a pitcher and placing it within his reach. It was only when he put down his fork and leaned back in his chair that the silence was broken.

## *Chapter Three*

Sabine took time while he bathed to think. She could not dispute what her eyes had told her. All her psychology teachers had been very big on believing what you saw. Unless you were mentally unstable. Then you couldn't believe anything, even if it were true.

Sabine poked at her psyche. It seemed stable enough. Therefore, what she had seen was true. Not imaginary. Real. A man had risen from a century-old grave and chased a vampire before returning to her home for vengeance against someone who looked a lot like her.

What she had seen was true because she had returned to the bathroom with the robe and a new toothbrush. And there he was behind the ugly blue shower curtain. His rotted clothing spilled out of the trashcan. She grimaced and dumped it into a plastic bag as quietly as she could. There was no way she was prepared for him to know that she was in the same room while he was naked. And hot. And wet.

*Get a grip.*

Her tongue was still stuck to the roof of her mouth when he reappeared in the kitchen. Her dad had never filled out a bathrobe like that.

She'd never seen anyone eat so much. In contrast to all her guest had eaten, she'd drunk cup after cup of tea and now it sloshed around inside her with every movement.

He finally finished and tension returned. Sabine picked at the torn corner of a napkin.

"You were really dead."

"Yes."

"But now you're not."

“For now, I’m not.”

Sabine’s eyes widened and her gaze shot to his. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that until St. Ivraie is dead and I am avenged, I live and breathe as a mortal man. I was sent back from the underworld by the Three Fates. I’m given until the next full moon to complete my task.”

“The Three Fates? As in Greek mythology?”

“That’s right. Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos.”

“How did you get mixed up with them? I mean, I thought they were a myth.” Her consciousness wobbled as she stepped into the sticky reality of what she used to think were fairy tales. “Sorry. Here I sit, talking to a man who came out of his own grave, fussing over whether the Fates are a myth.”

He smiled with her. “I wouldn’t worry about it too much. God willing, you’ll never have to meet the old hags. I thought they were myths, too, until I met them. They’ve given me a chance to avenge myself for my murder.”

“And after you get vengeance? Then what?”

“Then I can rest easy.” Willem pushed his chair back from the table, but didn’t rise. Instead, he leaned over and, putting his elbows on his knees, stared at his hands.

“For one hundred twenty years I’ve been taking every chance I could get to fight my way out of the fog and put my case before the Fates. They swore I would be avenged, but I had no idea it would take this long.”

Sabine followed his lead and stared down at his hands as well. Long fingers, blunt and tanned, with curious small scars scattered on them.

“The last thing I remember, I was about to kill a vampire and got stabbed in the back. Then to wake up tonight and see that same vampire and a woman who looks enough like Rose to be her sister...” He shook his head and his gaze met Sabine’s. “How did you say it? It’s been kind of a rough night.”

He looked out the window. “And now the night is over.” Sabine turned, and together they watched the sun pierce the darkness far away.

"At least it's Saturday. I don't have to go to work." She yawned hugely. Her neat, pedestrian life didn't accustom her to staying awake to watch the dawn.

"You work?" he asked.

She smiled. "Yes, I work. I'm a guidance counselor at the high school. Things have changed some over the last century, Mr. Breaux. What did you do for a living?"

"I was a stonemason. Edward Denby and I were in business together."

"Denby? As in Denby Monuments?"

"The same. I saw the sign when I was chasing St. Ivraie. I'm glad he kept the business. He probably made my crypt himself."

Her brow wrinkled, so he clarified. "Much of our business was tombs."

*Ohhh-kay.* "I'm going to take a guess and assume you don't have anywhere to stay."

"Good guess. I don't fancy sleeping in a broken grave."

She shuddered at the thought. "Ick. That's gross."

Sabine led him back down the hall to her guest bedroom and made the bed in nervous silence. What was she supposed to say? Nitey-nite? Don't let the vampires bite?

She finished stuffing pillows into pillowcases and stood for a moment, at a loss for what to do next. The hair on her arms prickled and her face felt flushed. Could she be totally embarrassed and still creeped out at the same time? Frustrated with herself, she stalked over to the bathroom and snatched the wet towel from the floor. She hissed in irritation.

"Men can't have changed too much from your time, Mr. Breaux."

"Willem."

"Willem, then. Women have been picking up wet towels since time began. You'd think that eventually men would learn how to use a towel rack. Doesn't say much for evolution does it?"

"Probably not."

She caught the amused tone of his voice and turned on him, ready to welcome him to her little world of petty annoyances. But there he stood, leaning back against the doorframe with his arms crossed. His large body

seemed to take up all the space in the tiny bathroom. Suddenly her peevishness shriveled.

"I don't blame you for being out of sorts. First I scare you to death, then I go and do something thoughtless like leave my towel on the floor."

Sabine blushed at her rudeness. Her mother had raised her to be a lady, and a lady never fussed at her guests, no matter what century they were from.

"I am so sorry. Don't even worry about it." She hugged the towel closer.

"Miss Harper—"

"Sabine," she whispered.

"Please don't apologize. I'm grateful for your hospitality and I'm sorry for the bother I'm putting you through. Tonight has been distinctly out of the ordinary for both of us."

She smiled brightly to hide her confusion. "Well, I am definitely ordinary." Sabine blushed and stole a quick glance at herself in the mirror. A small, unconscious sigh left her. Ordinary face, ordinary figure. Nothing new to see there. What kind of weirdo found a dead man attractive?

"Oh, I don't know about that." He pushed off from the door and took the two steps needed to stand directly in front of her. "Women tend to judge themselves too harshly. I see that hasn't changed." He moved one hand up to hold her face, the large palm warm and rough against her cheek. "Men are more appreciative of the various aspects of female beauty than the ladies give us credit for."

Sabine's grip on the towel loosened as she looked into his eyes. Willem took the damp pile from her and set it on the toilet lid. His other hand sat whisper soft on her waist. "I know you're not Rose, but there's somehow enough of her spirit in you to have called me back to finish my job."

"So is it her you see, or is it me?" she whispered. She had to know because it was vital to her that she wasn't just a space filler. Someone with whom he dallied as he searched for the one he truly wanted.

“Sabine,” he said, bringing his mouth a breath away from hers. At the sound of her name, she closed the distance between them and met his kiss with her own. Filling space would work for now.

At first they were tentative, meeting and parting again and again until soft sighs built into hard need. The hand at her cheek funneled into her hair until he had a grip on the nape of her neck, locking her to him. His other arm wrapped around her, but she needed no encouragement to press her body against his, wanting to feel the hard strength of him, needing his heat and fueling it with hers.

Willem lifted her onto the vanity and fit himself into the niche of her thighs. She felt him hard and throbbing through their clothes and hooked her legs around his, bringing them even closer together. His mouth lifted from hers and nibbled its way to her jaw, before licking a path of flame down the side of her throat.

Her shirt had laces through the deep V-neck and he widened the gap to nuzzle under her collar. His hands shaped her small waist, dipped down to cup her hips, then found their way under her shirt before skimming up her ribs to rest at her satin bra. He slid his thumbs against the sensitive underside of her breasts and she arched into him.

Sabine felt weightless in his hands. He flicked the stiff nipples through the silky fabric before covering her completely. At the same time, he moved to cover her mouth again with his, thrusting his tongue into her.

Her rough moan echoed loudly against the tiled walls of the bathroom, and the amplified sound shocked both of them motionless. Their eyes flew open, their lips still connected for a brief moment before they jerked apart.

She practically climbed up the mirror trying to get away from him and he couldn't get his hands out from under her shirt fast enough. They were both breathing heavily and Willem grimaced, then leaned over to brace his hands on his knees. Sabine slithered off the counter and backed toward the door as if he was a ravening beast who would fall on her with the slightest provocation.

As soon as she was out, he slammed the door behind her. She slid down the wall, hungry, aching, and confused. Sabine listened for him, but heard only a dull thunk on the opposite side of the door.

“Sabine?” His voice was shaky, but close.

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry.”

She blew out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. “Me, too. Goodnight, Willem.”

“Goodnight, Sabine.”

## Chapter Four

The sun shone rudely into Sabine's eyes and she rolled over to block it out, but the movement finished waking her up. With wakefulness came the return of memory. She snorted. *Yeah, right. I see dead people.*

She levered herself out of bed and padded down the hall to start the coffee, raking her hand through her hair. The dishes in the sink didn't bother her because it wasn't uncommon to see them there. But the man sitting at the table wearing a half-open bathrobe stopped her in her tracks.

"Shit." She slapped a hand over her mouth.

He lifted an eyebrow and, with his voice still gravelly from sleep, said, "Likewise."

"You are supposed to be a dream."

"I'm no dream, *chère*. I don't suppose you have any clothes that will fit me?"

He just had to draw her attention to the fact that he was sitting at her sleek maple kitchen table nearly naked. She couldn't help but stare at his incredible chest. He was stunning. The golden cast of his skin provided a perfect background for the bronze hair covering his chest. Not so much that he looked simian, but not so bare he looked like a teenager. Just enough for her to run her hands through it for the sheer pleasure of sensory stimulation. Her fingers twitched with the impulse but she controlled it.

His eyes widened and Sabine realized that his gaze was fixed—and not on her face. She looked down at herself and realized she was wearing nothing but the tacky, oversized T-shirt Lily had bought for her on her last trip to New Orleans.



She turned and ran back to her room with his laughter following her down the hall. When she reappeared, her color was still high and so was her chin. She had put on baggy, faded sweatpants and a chunky cardigan in an eye-popping shade of orange. The hem of her T-shirt hung inches below the sweater.

"Coffee?" she asked in as polite a voice as she could manage.

"Please," he answered. His lips never smiled, but his eyes were dancing. "I didn't mean for you to change your clothes, I only wondered if you had anything here for me to wear."

"I don't." She eyed him for size and mentally ran through her short list of large male friends who were capable of keeping their mouths shut. "But I might be able to borrow some of Lane's."

"Your brother, or perhaps a cousin?" His voice sounded a bit strangled, but she concentrated on making coffee.

"No. He's an old friend." She flipped on the grinder. "So, what do we do today?" she said when the noise abated and the coffee started perking.

"We?" asked Willem. "We don't do anything except find me some clothes. Then *I* will go and find St. Ivraie."

"Now, hold on one second, mister," Sabine said, turning away from the refrigerator, which was pretty well cleaned out of ham although she still had a few eggs. "I am not letting the living dead loose in this town to go hunting vampires without me. While I understand that killing St. Ivraie is way up there on your to-do list, it might also be worth taking a little time to figure out exactly what Lily and her goony friends did last night to set up your little revivification party."

"I don't think Lily had anything to do with it. I think Rose's spirit is in you somehow."

"Oh, that's just nasty." Sabine had always wondered what people meant when they said their flesh crawled. Now she knew. "There is nobody inside me but me. But..." She raised her hand to forestall his words. "And I say this hypothetically, to humor your little theory. But, if she was, why would Rose's spirit pick me? Because I look like her?"

"No, there must be some connection. Probably a blood connection to her."

“Oh no. I don’t think so. I would definitely have heard about it if there was a woman in the family tree who murdered her fiancé and ran off with the evil undead.” She rejected his suggestion and poured coffee for both of them. He took his first sip slowly, like a man who had been without caffeine for a dozen decades.

When he opened his eyes, they held the same heat as they had last night during their unexpected embrace. Which reminded her...

“Um, Willem?” She had no idea how to start, so she took a deep breath and dove in. “About last night.”

His gaze shuttered and dropped to the steaming mug cradled in his hands. “Don’t worry, Sabine. It won’t happen again.”

She was nonplussed, which irritated her. “Oh. Okay.” Was she not a good kisser? Had she been too eager? Now she was uncertain and nonplussed, which irked her even more. *He’s dead*, she reminded herself. *He’s hunting a vampire. This is not the stable, normal, ordinary guy you’re looking for.*

She made stacks of pancakes and called Lane Frederickson.

“Lane, it’s Sabine. Are you really busy right now?”

“I’m fixing to take the boys to football practice. What can I do for you?”

Sabine and Lane had gone through their entire academic careers together, even attending Louisiana State University at the same time. Years ago, idle gossip had laid odds that the two would get married, but although they were good friends, there was no spark. Sabine introduced Lane to a classmate of hers, Marcy Prejean, during their freshman year and was then honored to be in their wedding after they all graduated together.

Sabine hesitated. “It’s a little odd. I need some of your old clothes.”

“You’re right. That is odd. Dare I ask why you need them?”

“Actually, I’d rather you didn’t right now. It’s going to take a lot of time to explain.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll drop them off on my way to the football field.”

“Wonderful. I need a pair of jeans and a couple of warm shirts. Oh, and if you have some socks and shoes, I’ll need those, too.”

“What? You don’t need my underwear?”

Sabine blushed, glancing at Willem. "You wouldn't happen to have any new ones, would you? I swear I'll replace them."

"Good Lord, Sabine. What is going on?"

"Lane, I promise I'll explain when I can."

She hung up and turned to Willem, who was eyeing the phone in fascination. "There. That's one problem solved. When we're dressed, we can go visit Lily."

Lane dropped off the clothes without comment, although he did warn Sabine that he'd get the story out of her sooner or later. She waved him off and went back in the house where she found Willem examining the telephone and snagging the last piece of cold buttered toast off the table.

Good night almighty. Even in plaid, he had a rear end that would put Hercules to shame. He put the phone down, turned slowly and crossed his arms. Stonemasonry must be better than weight-lifting. He cleared his throat.

"Are those for me?" He indicated the clothes she carried over her arm.

"Hm, what?"

"Those clothes. Are they for me?"

Sabine went fiery red. She knew because she felt her hair follicles frying.

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure they'll fit because Lane is, um, well, you're both, uh, you know, big guys."

"Big guys?"

Sabine's hands flew awkwardly, indicating height and broad shoulders. She suddenly had an image of him zipping into a tight pair of jeans and her eyes nearly rolled back in her head. She had to get a grip on herself. It was completely unlike her to act like a lust-crazed wannabe. She was intelligent and educated, modest and well-mannered. Why was this man, who shouldn't even be here, making her so crazy?



Willem followed her down the hall, watching her hips sway under the hideous sweater. Watching her watch him, seeing the expression, the emotion, the sheer lust on her face had aroused him. Much good it would

do either of them. Sabine Harper was a good woman. Last night had been a fluke, he was sure.

And this morning. It was just as well she had been making coffee instead of watching him because his eyes were definitely not on her face. She wore a loose white shirt with a caricature of a purple crawfish on it. He visually licked his way up her naked legs to where the shirt ended high on her thighs. The memory of those thighs parted for him last night brought back an arousing itch.

He tried to drag his gaze back up, but he got stuck somewhere between “Crawfish” and “luck” where the outline of her nipples was clearly visible through the thin fabric. The words sank in and he read the rest of the message. *“Crawfish have all the luck. They get their tails pinched and their heads sucked.”*

He had no idea what kind of expression was on his face because he was thinking too hard about pinching and sucking. Whatever it was, she had caught it and fled to put on the ugliest clothing he had ever seen. Almost ugly enough to deter his lustful thoughts, but not quite. He knew what lay under the layers.

When she telephoned her friend, Willem discovered that he didn’t like the idea of Sabine knowing a man from whom she could borrow clothing. The nip of jealousy was new to him and uncomfortable. He’d never been jealous of Rose.

It was best not to get involved with this woman. When he was done, he would vanish, having rid the world of one evil. It would be better to leave no ripple on the water of time, no bruises in the hearts of those he left behind.

Willem puzzled out the unfamiliar clothes. He slid the sturdy denim fabric up and put a hand over the front of his brand new underwear as extra protection against the suspect teeth of the zipper. Buttons were much safer. He also noted that the jeans were a touch tight. He was bigger than her big friend.

Even with new clothes, Willem still finished dressing before she did. He waited for Sabine by the front door. He had no right to embroil her in this. She had nothing to do with whether or not he killed the vampire. He

made up his mind and opened the front door—then slammed it shut and flattened himself against a wall, hissing in pain.

Sabine came running, her hair falling in waves around her shoulders and a hair clip in her hand.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I can’t get out,” he said, swatting at his singed jeans.

She gasped at the tendrils of smoke and began patting at him, rousing an entirely different kind of fire. He grasped her wrists and pulled her away before she noticed what her “help” had wrought.

“What happened to you?”

“I don’t know. I opened the door and suddenly I felt like I was on fire.” He slapped his hands together to rid himself of the cindery feeling. “Sure enough, I was.”

Sabine stood stock still. “But you’re not a vampire.”

“What? No, of course I’m not a...” His voice trailed away as he followed her train of thought. Vampires couldn’t stand the daylight. Willem narrowed his eyes at her.

“We watched the dawn this morning, remember? I’m no vampire. Look.” He put his hand in front of the window, not entirely sure he wouldn’t be drawing back a flaming stump. But nothing happened. The autumn sun lay gently on his palm, warming him through the pane of glass.

She shuddered, but color began seeping back into her face. “That is weird among a whole armada of weirdness. Do you mean to tell me you are stuck in the house?”

“At least during daylight, it seems.” He speared a furious look at the clear blue sky and muttered, “I wish I knew what the hell was going on.”

“This means we can’t go to Lily.”

“I keep telling you she doesn’t have anything to do with this.”

“And I’m telling you she might have some answers whether this was her fault or not.”

He transferred his glare to her as she walked back into the house. Sabine had changed out of her mismatched morning outfit. Her jeans were well worn and had the beginning of a hole in the knee. The orange sweater was gone, replaced by a bulky purple sweatshirt that fell below

her hips with “LSU” emblazoned on the front. She swept her hair into a bouncy ponytail and with only the lightest touch of makeup on, she looked young and innocent. And completely covered up.

Without seeing her face, he would never have been able to tell whether she was a full-grown woman or an adolescent boy in her ensemble. The thought of her being a full-grown woman, though, brought back the tactile memory of her satin-covered breasts lying heavy in his hands and he had to clench his fists to dispel the sensation.

“Why don’t you call her on your telephone and get her over here?”

“No,” she said in a rush. She wouldn’t meet his eyes as she qualified her response. “Not unless you want her to bring her Goth-geek friends to poke at you and chant and burn disgusting incense. Anyway, I told Aunt Dena to keep her under lock and key. I’ll IM her.”

“IM?”

“Instant message. I guess you might call it an extremely advanced combination of telephone and telegraph.”

A wooden armoire in her living room opened to reveal a flat, black window and a curved board with lettered keys, like those of the printing machine he’d seen at the newspaper office. Her hand curled over something and the screen flared to life. She must have felt him flinch because she turned and gestured for him to drag a chair close to hers.

“It’s a computer. Through it, I can access information, I can buy things, and I can communicate with people all over the world.”

“Like who?”

“Like Lily.”

Sabine logged on to her account and searched for Lily’s icon.

“But she lives in the same town. Why wouldn’t you go over or call her on the telephone?”

“Because I don’t want to actually talk to her. I’m still angry with her.”

“But talking with her on this Instant Messenger is better?”

“At least if I’m IMing her, I can edit myself.” Willem looked puzzled and she took pity on him. “Erase all the nasty names I want to call her before I actually send the note.”

Lily was online, but busy with another conversation. Sabine interrupted.

Sabine: *Lily, could you quit chatting with your friends for a minute? I need you to focus here.*

Lily: *All right. I'm here. So, what happened after you dropped me off? My mom was totally freaked out and hasn't let me out of the house all day. I keep telling her I'm, like, 19 years old. Practically an adult!*

Sabine: *Adults don't go around raising the dead, Lily. Long story short, the dead guy is at my house. It used to belong to him. His fiancée murdered him and went off with the vampire we also met last night.*

Sabine tapped her fingernail against the mouse while she waited for Lily to respond. Willem leaned back and laced his hands behind his head—a move that stretched out the seams in Lane's shirt, drawing her attention to the breadth of his chest and shoulders. He caught her watching him again and smiled.

Those lips. That kiss. Sabine shuddered so hard she knocked the mouse off the desk. Willem laughed.

Time to get back to business.

Sabine: *Lily?*

Lily: *OMG!!!!*

## *Chapter Five*

Willem forced the memory of her mouth out of his mind. He didn't read as quickly as Sabine did and struggled to keep track of the conversation flowing in front of him. Her fingers flew across the keys and he remembered them fisted in the lapels of the robe. He pushed the thought back with effort.

When Sabine asked about Willem's sudden allergy to direct sunlight, Lily suggested they wait until the sun set.

Sabine: *He's not a vampire, Lily.*

Lily: *So? He might have to work with the vampire's rules. You know, to kind of make it cosmically fair.*

Cosmically fair? Sabine and Willem exchanged a speaking glance at the comment. The kind of speaking that said, "Your cousin is a twit."

It took some time before Sabine was able to coax any semi-coherent answers out of the girl regarding rules about raising the dead. Lily couldn't think of any.

Sabine: *That is the most irresponsible thing I've ever heard in my life! Isn't there even a clause to suggest this might not be wise?*

Lily: *Well, yeah.*

Sabine: *But you didn't think it applied to you for some reason.*



Lily: *It's not like we meant to hurt anybody. We honestly didn't think it would work.*

Willem made an "I told you so" sound, which she ignored. Just to get a dig in at him, she asked whether or not there was a Rose in their family line who disappeared suddenly and perhaps scandalously.

Lily: *You mean you've never heard about Rose Chaumette?*

Their mothers were still known as the Chaumette girls. The last of their line to bear the name. Sabine's fingers arched spasmodically over the keyboard. No freakin' way.

Lily described the century-old scandal with lurid relish. Family history on the maternal side had it that Rose had landed a prosperous upstart merchant and was engaged to marry him. The union was a business arrangement.

"Not to me," whispered Willem from behind her.

The scandal erupted when, only days before the wedding, the groom was found murdered with no sign of Rose. Sharp-eyed gossips related having seen Rose at night in the company of a man who was not her fiancé. The speculation was that the mysterious lover stabbed the fiancé in the back and took off with the flighty young woman. The family never heard from her again.

Sabine thanked Lily for the information and logged off.

"So now you believe me?" asked Willem.

"Believe? What's to believe? You were murdered by someone I should probably call Great-Great Aunt Rose, you popped out of your own tomb last night, and you can't leave the house because you'll fry alive in the sun. Sure, I believe you."

She stood abruptly. "I need a drink."

"It's barely eleven o'clock in the morning."

She turned and leveled a look at him that should have drilled a hole through his head. "I. Need. A. Drink. Do you want to join me?"

Willem sighed. "Yes. I could use one."

Sabine's liquor cabinet consisted of one dusty, nearly full bottle of Jack Daniels and some Grand Marnier she used for baking. There were also five cans of beer that had been at the back of her refrigerator for about five months. Willem opted for a beer. She poured two fingers of the whisky into a shot glass and swallowed it, suffering the bright fire as it burned down her throat and into her stomach.

Her hand was shaking as she put the glass on the counter. He saw it and set his beer down before reaching for her. The moment he wrapped his arms around her, Sabine lost it. She sobbed on his shoulder, soaking the fabric, able to detect his unique scent even through the borrowed clothes.

He led her back to the soft, deep couch in the living room and drew her onto his lap like a child, where he stroked her hair and made shushing sounds at her temple.

She pulled herself together with an effort and swiped at her wet face with the backs of her hands, trying to erase the mascara smudges with her thumbs.

"What you must think of me," she said, laughing at her own embarrassment. "I swear to you I am not a crier, and here you've caught me at it twice in less than twenty-four hours." She hiccupped and the whisky sloshed in her stomach, making her feel slightly queasy. "Ugh. I should know better than to drink in the middle of the day."

She felt his answering chuckle rumble through him and was suddenly very aware of how much of her body was aligned with his. He seemed aware of it, too, as his arms flexed and pressed her closer. "I've never minded a woman's tears."

She sniffled. "Well, I mind. Crying makes me cranky."

He chuckled again. "I'll have to think of something to lift your mood, then." He shifted her closer still and with his eyes on hers, he said, "Why do you wear clothes that are too big?"

As if her wardrobe was the subject uppermost in her mind.

"What?" She tried to push back, but he wouldn't let her go.

"I would almost think you were a boy, if I didn't know very well that you are definitely a woman." His gaze dipped deliberately to the lump in her shirt that was approximately the location of her breasts.

"I dress for comfort, Breaux. Not for men." He might not let her off his lap, but she was sending out very un-cozy vibes.

"Are you truly comfortable hiding yourself under such things?" His hand somehow found its way under the sweatshirt, the dry warmth of it shocking. She sucked in a breath and arched her back, thrusting out her breasts so they couldn't be mistaken for a wrinkle of fabric.

Sabine was not ready to lose herself to him quite so easily this morning, but her body and her mind sent conflicting messages as she squirmed closer to his touch. His hands roamed further up the smooth, warm skin of her back, tracing her bra.

"That's it," she said on an indrawn breath.

"What?"

"I wear big clothes so no one will know if I'm wearing a bra or not." It was a stupid answer, but the best she could come up with while her brain cells were melting.

He mouthed the word "bra" as if committing it to memory. "But you're wearing one. Like women wore corsets in my time."

"Yes."

"You follow the rules, even when you don't have to."

Reason was starting to flow back to her with the cool breeze that wafted up her back, following his hand under her shirt.

"I can't hold a conversation while you're touching me," she said, and stood. "You have a problem with following rules?"

"Not necessarily," he answered, leaning back and crossing an ankle over his knee. A typical pose of male dominance even at rest, she thought. *I have got to stop reading those psychology journals.*

"Why bring it up? I like to follow rules. It makes things flow much more easily."

"That's true."

"You don't play by the rules, do you?" she said after a moment of shrewd silence.

He grinned. "Not unless they suit me."

"Sometimes, big guy, the rules play you, no matter what suits you."

Sabine slapped her hands together and stood up. Time for something that would keep their minds—and their hands—off of each other.

“How do you feel about banana bread?”

“Beg pardon?”

“I’m in the mood to bake. You want to come sit with me in the kitchen?”

Willem rose from the couch and pulled her close with one arm. He bent and pressed a sweet, warm kiss on her forehead. “Lead on, *chère*. I’m right behind you.”

She waved him into a chair and poured them both a cup of coffee while she perused her cookbooks. “Here we go. Banana bread muffins and...what else? Apple spice? Cranberry pecan?”

Willem looked bemused, so she asked, “Didn’t y’all have muffins?”

“We did, but it doesn’t sound like they’re the same now.”

“They’re little sweet cakes. I’ll make the apple spice ones, too.”

That brought a smile to his face. It was easy enough to see he enjoyed eating. Good. She enjoyed feeding people.

“Sabine, what have I missed?”

“Hm? I’m sorry, I don’t understand the question.” She pulled out her ingredients—sugar, cinnamon, vanilla and fruit.

“What has happened in the last century?”

She stopped with her hand in the flour canister and blew hair out of her eyes.

“Oh my gosh. What a question. I don’t even know where to start.”

“It’s obvious things have changed quite a bit.”

“Well, yes. I heard somewhere that in the twentieth century, man progressed further and more quickly than at any other time in history, and I think it’s true.” Airy motes of flour floated around her as she sifted. “Airplanes, automobiles, computers. We’ve even put a man on the moon. Everything is faster and more efficient these days.”

“Automobiles. I saw them last night when I chased him. I’d read of steam-powered cars, but I’m surprised they caught on. They always seemed so clumsy and slow.”

Sabine lifted a hand and scratched the bridge of her nose with her wrist, leaving a dusty white streak behind.

“Not anymore. I don’t think we’ve used steam in...well...almost a hundred years. Now race cars go two hundred miles an hour. My car doesn’t go that fast, but I can hit eighty in a pinch.”

“Eighty miles an hour? And it doesn’t hurt?”

“No, it doesn’t hurt.” She bit her cheek to keep from laughing. She didn’t want to hurt his feelings.

“I wonder if I could keep up with St. Ivraie in one of those. He was inhumanly fast the other night.”

That wiped the smile off her face and effectively killed any remaining wisps of sexual tension. The sunny kitchen felt cold.

Willem pored over a computer-printed map of Robichaud while Sabine baked. She removed the first batch of muffins from the pan and walked over with one in her hand to show him where the Landry house—home of seven generations of Landrys, each more conceited than the last—still stood. Willem grasped her wrist and brought it down for her to hold the warm treat while he took a bite.

Shudders wracked her system and she clawed for control of her mind. This reaction was foreign and unwelcome. No man had ever done this to her before and frankly, she was getting tired of melting down every time he touched her.

“You need to not do that anymore,” she said, pulling her hand away. She turned and stared unseeing at the mixing bowl on the counter.

Sabine heard his sigh behind her and knew his hands hovered near her shoulders. But he let his arms fall back and she felt the chill more keenly because of it.

“I should never have touched you the first time.”

She whirled on him. “But you did. Then you said you didn’t want me, but you keep touching me. You keep making me want to touch you. You’re going to have to make up your mind, Willem.” Sabine pressed her hands to temples throbbing as though a giant drum kept pace with her heartbeat.

“Are you all right, *chère*?” This time his big, rough hands did grasp her shoulders. She shivered.

“I’m fine. It’s just a headache. I get them when I get too worked up over something.” Sabine pushed her way out of his arms and opened

cupboards blindly, searching for a glass. She filled it from the tap, not caring when it sloshed onto her trembling hand. She gulped it down, frowning as the spike of pain in her head receded.

“Do you get worked up very often?” he asked. Willem had retreated back to the table and watched her as if a sudden move on his part might set her off again.

Sabine laughed, but it was a gulping sob of sound. “No, thank goodness. And I’m usually much better about keeping everything under control. Mama says I used to have the most horrible tantrums when I was a baby, but I guess I grew out of it.” She pressed the heel of her hand against her right eye. The throbbing backed off, but little white lights danced across her vision.

“Everyone else in my family is very...passionate about things. They get angry and yell, but it doesn’t matter because they all love each other.” Sabine checked the oven timer before she brought her refilled glass to the table and sat across from him.

“You really want to know why I wear these clothes? Because it hides the fact that I’m not like everyone else. I’m the only brunette in a nest of blondes. They’re all model slender and I’m definitely not. They fuss and yell and pitch all kinds of fits. If I get upset about something, I end up on my knees in pain. They’re all blonde and thin and full of life. But me? No such luck. So here I sit, alone with muffins, a dead man and a headache.”

“Sabine,” he said, resting his hand over hers. For once, the sizzle was mellow and comfortable. “I think we need to make some things clear. I think you look perfect. Your hair is beautiful. Your figure is... I don’t know how to describe it. I don’t have the right words. But if you could only see yourself, sitting here in the sunlight.” He smiled at her and she ducked her head, blushing.

“No, don’t,” he said, reaching out to capture her chin. “You don’t need to hide from me. I can’t guarantee this adventure won’t be fraught with things that give you headaches, but I can tell you I far prefer the peace of your home to whatever excitement you think others find in your family’s...exuberance.”

“Exuberance?” Sabine sniffled to hide the fact that inside, she was melting like ice cream in August. “Pretty big word for a dead guy.” She pulled herself together and smiled at him, knowing it was as weak as the thin autumn sun. “Hey, you know what they say—‘What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.’” Sabine waited a beat. “So what does that make you?”

Willem laughed and order was restored to the universe. He turned her hand over in his. “I would like to take you on a walk through town. That’s what we used to do, you know. When a gentleman had an understanding with a young lady, and if her parents allowed it, they would go on a little promenade through town. She put her hand on his arm, supposedly to help her keep her balance or so he could guide her through crowds, but really it was because they enjoyed being together.”

“Did you take Rose on the promenade?”

“Yes, I did. I was so proud. I was nothing. I had no family, no name, no reputation except as a hard worker. But I had prospects. My business was successful and beginning to show a nice profit. I had this home built. And the prettiest girl in town from one of its most respected families consented to be my bride. I had no idea it was that cold-blooded on her part.”

“I’m sorry, Willem.”

“It’s all right now, Sabine. I’m beginning to wonder what I saw in that scrawny little chicken woman anyway. She would have blown away in a strong wind.” Sabine accepted the roundabout compliment and laughed with him.

“Tell me about Robichaud back then,” she said.

The town was situated at the headwaters of the Atchafalaya River where it joined the Mississippi. He talked about the thriving river traffic and some of the interesting people who passed through. She was able to identify a few names which were still around and confirmed to him that the Robichaud branch of the Dufrés family was still inclined to big ears and big noses.

“It’s nice to see how some things stay the same,” he said.

The only reminder of the task to come was Willem whittling several straight pieces of sturdy fireplace kindling into pointed stakes. The

afternoon passed without either of them quite realizing it until she looked at her watch. According to the online almanac she had checked, the sun would set in one hour and forty-six minutes.

While Willem was in the bathroom, she called the local pizza place and ordered an extra large supreme with extra cheese. She was refilling his coffee when he came back into the kitchen.

“What’s the plan for tonight? Where do we go first?”

“I thought we resolved this issue this morning. You are not coming with me.”

“You’re right, we did resolve this earlier. I am coming with you. Remember? I can’t let you loose in this town to go vampire hunting alone. And there’s something more to this. I can’t explain it. I only know I can’t let you meet St. Ivraie on your own. Maybe it’s the blood connection you were talking about, but something tells me I have to be there.”

He stared into his cup as if the rising steam held all life’s answers. “I don’t like it.”

“I’m not too crazy about it myself. But I know I have to go with you.”

Sabine felt his acceptance, even though he never said a word. His breath stirred the steam, disrupting its ascent.

Watching Willem eat pizza tickled Sabine to no end. Eating with his fingers proved awkward and the hot tomato sauce singed him. When he pulled away the first gooey bite, the cheese strung out and she demonstrated the approved gobble-slurp method of sucking it in.

“Are all the vampire stories true?” she asked, reaching for her third piece.

“I don’t know. I’ve never heard many.”

“You know, stake through the heart, holy water, garlic.”

“If garlic works, then our breath ought to kill him before he gets within ten feet of us.”

He loaded the canvas bag she gave him with his wooden stakes and the largest butcher knife she had in her kitchen. Then he hauled the “Teachers are #1!” tote over his shoulder. Sabine fidgeted.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“You bet. Sure. No problem,” she said brightly. “Let’s go.”



They got out to the car and when they were inside, she turned to him.  
“Where exactly are we headed?”

“Back to the cemetery.”

## *Chapter Six*

It was cold. It was dark. It was completely empty. They walked around the deserted graveyard for nearly two hours and Sabine's patience stretched to a thread.

"Willem, he's not here." She stood between two crypts and breathed on her frozen hands.

"I know that."

"Why are we here, if he's not?"

"He has to come back sometime."

"So we're going to hang out here and freeze our butts off waiting for him to come back? Do you think this is where he sleeps?"

He didn't answer her.

She grunted, an impatient sound. "Look. It's early yet. Ten o'clock on a Saturday night in a small Southern town. I'll buy you a milkshake at the Sonic and we'll see what folks are talking about. If there's a vampire in town, someone is bound to be yakking about it. You know Cajuns. We couldn't keep our mouths shut if an alligator was clamped on it." She smiled encouragingly at him. "Anyway, this way you can tell me if our Boudreaux women have always had bad taste or if it's an acquired habit."

One side of his mouth kicked up slowly. "I suppose I should tell you about the hat Madame Gilbertine Boudreaux once wore to church. She had sent all the way to New York for these huge feathers, then she took them down to New Orleans to the most expensive milliner in the city. She was so proud of that hat it never occurred to her that it looked as if she had two enormous birds doing..." He gestured awkwardly with his hands, trying to find the words.

“Doing...” Sabine prodded. His cheeks flushed. *How cute is that?*

“What birds do in the spring,” he finished.

Realization dawned. “Oh. My. God! They were doing the dirty birdy on her head?”

Willem nodded. “In bright purple. The priest had to drink three cups of Communion wine to steady himself before he could administer the sacrament.”

Sabine was still cackling when they pulled into the Sonic drive-in. It was packed. The varsity football team had lost by a narrow margin to a neighboring high school and half the town gathered to rehash the game in gory detail. The students from the local community college were in their accustomed place, striving to look intellectual and detached from their former classmates.

Sabine was hailed as she and Willem approached the order window.

“Miss Harper, did you see the game?”

“No, I couldn’t make it tonight, Heather.”

The eager cheerleader looked Willem over like he was live bait in a tank full of snapping turtles. “Uh-huuuhh,” she drawled, then swayed up to stand directly in front of him, her Wonderbra-enhanced bosom nearly touching his chest. “Well, if you need a play-by-play, let me know.”

“Thank you, Heather,” Sabine said, smiling her toothiest smile and taking a firm grip of Willem’s hand. “But I don’t think he’s too interested in your game.”

Heather simpered at him, ignoring Sabine completely, as she walked off, her slender hips swinging for all she was worth. Willem watched her go, shock and amusement warring in his expression.

“Is that acceptable behavior in this time?”

She shushed him hurriedly. “No, it’s not really acceptable, and you can’t say things like ‘in this time’ where people can hear you. This is a small town. I doubt certain things have changed much.”

He nodded in understanding while she turned and ordered a chocolate shake and a peanut butter fudge shake from another of her school charges, who eyed her companion with a mixture of suspicion and approval.

It was the town's opinion that she had missed her opportunity with Lane Frederickson. Not, they added, that his wife wasn't a wonderful woman. It seemed obvious to them Sabine needed help. After being seen with Willem, she was going to be put through the wringer at church tomorrow. She would have to pull out her not-feeling-well excuse in the morning. She prepared herself for the consequences. If she skipped, her mother and aunt would descend to snoop in her business and check how thoroughly she dusted.

She shook off the depressing thought and decided to let tomorrow's misery take care of itself. Sabine guided Willem to an empty table and they slurped their drinks in silence.

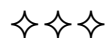
"What do we do now?" she asked when she was halfway through.

"I go back and check out the places I knew he was at last time."

"Those places probably aren't around anymore, Willem."

"I know, but Richard was always one for nostalgia. He's probably taking a tour of his old haunts." She groaned at the pun and he grinned at her. "After all, I don't suppose he's been back since I d—" She shushed him before he could finish the word. There was some not too subtle eavesdropping going on and she didn't think the grapevine would bear up under the weight of a reincarnated murder victim dating the school guidance counselor.

"Well," she said loudly with a bright smile pasted on. "Let's go take a little walk."



They roamed the deserted main street of Robichaud all alone. Willem pulled Sabine's hand through the crook of his arm and they strolled down the street, looking in shop windows while he kept an eye out for someone who didn't want to be seen.

"Sabine? Is that what I think it is?"

They were in front of Laci's Lacies and she turned to look at the window display. A shocking-pink corset barely covered the generous proportions of the mannequin. A strangled gasp escaped her lips and he didn't need a street lamp to know she was blushing.

Sabine charged ahead, pulling him away until they stood in front of the drug store. Willem looked at her and tried to visualize the bright

confection on her curves. He liked the clinging shirt she had worn last night and the soft bra underneath. Yes, he definitely preferred the simple undergarment to the layers of chemise and corset from his day. But he wouldn't mind seeing her in that pink thing. He was so busy imagining Sabine in her underclothes that he stumbled when she stopped short in the middle of the dark sidewalk.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"You don't recognize your old friend, Willem?" A melodic voice came from under the eaves of the corner drugstore.

"Richard." The name grated in Willem's throat. Richard's voice had always been one of his best lures to women.

"Isn't it nice for us all to be back together again? What do they call it now? Ah yes, old home week." The vampire stepped out into the glare of the streetlight. Willem swept Sabine behind him.

In a blink, St. Ivraie was gone. A whisper of wind and a sharp shove against his shoulder made him turn to face his attacker. The vampire now stood in front of the lingerie shop window, leaning nonchalantly against the doorframe.

"Have you been waiting here long?" Willem asked. Fury and fear for Sabine swamped his body, but he kept his tone even.

"No, no. I only arrived in town a few days ago. I had no idea you were coming back from your, er, holiday. Perhaps it was the presence of our lovely Rose."

Sabine squeaked behind him.

"What's wrong?" Where had the bastard gone now?

"He...he..."

"What happened, Sabine? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. He just..." Her voice lowered to a whisper. "He copped a feel."

"He what?"

She gave a disgusted sigh. "He grabbed my butt, okay? Geez."

Willem's fists clenched when he heard St. Ivraie chuckle. After last night, he ought to have anticipated the vampire's speed. And after the night of his death, he should have known better than to trust his enemy to leave Sabine out of the battle.

"You've put on some weight, dear Rose. The curves are very becoming."

Lust for revenge became black jealousy. Behind him, Sabine's fingers on his back sharpened to claws.

"You are seriously mistaken, mister. I am not Rose Chaumette. My name is Sabine Harper."

She pushed past the protective barrier of Willem's body and faced Richard St. Ivraie, who looked her over coldly.

"No?" St. Ivraie's perfect eyebrow arched. "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. You look like a rose." He sniffed deeply, inhaling the cool night air. "Smell like a rose."

"I don't know whether or not I look like her, but I definitely do *not* smell like a rose." Willem tried to pull her back behind him but she waved him off. "I smell like expensive Donna Karan perfume with undertones of vanilla, jasmine, and sandalwood. Vampires. Honestly. You wouldn't know Tea Rose from White Linen if it bit you on the nose."

The woman either had no fear or no sense. Since she was baiting a vampire, he opted for no sense. He hooked a hand into the waistband of her jeans and hauled her back as she approached St. Ivraie, wagging her finger like a school teacher.

"And furthermore, you need to update your severely Victorian attitude toward women. Nothing could offend me more than being talked around as if I weren't even here. If you have something to say, kindly address your remarks to me."

She stood, her back as straight as pride made it, and her eyes blazed green fire.

Willem forced out a laugh, counting discretion as the better part of valor. He only wanted Sabine out of harm's way.

"You know, Richard, our previous troubles over women might be over. For once, I seriously doubt she wants anything to do with you." He threw an arm around her and turned away from the vampire, who remained standing, speechless, under the lamp.

"We'll meet again, St. Ivraie," said Willem over his shoulder. "Next time I won't bring Sabine. That way you'll have a fair chance." His voice hardened to icy steel. "That's more than you ever gave me."

Sabine gave him his exit, walking next to him, giving off silent waves of support until they were back in her car. Then she rounded on him.

“What kind of caveman garbage was that? I am definitely coming with you next time you meet him.”

“You are not coming with me, Sabine. He’s dangerous. Far more than you know.”

“Speaking of knowing, you two seemed awfully friendly for mortal enemies. How long have y’all known each other, anyway?”

He hesitated, but Sabine kept her gaze pinned to his.

“We grew up together.”

## *Chapter Seven*

Sabine drove them home while he talked.

Willem's mother had come to Louisiana as a widow in service to a noble French family. On their way to the unknown country, much of the family succumbed to a sickness that ravaged the ship, leaving Richard St. Ivraie, the young scion of nobility, in the care of Madame Breaux and her son, Willem, who was the same age as the bereaved boy. By the time they arrived in New Orleans, Willem and Richard were fast friends. Even growing up in different circles did not impede their close relationship. When Willem left New Orleans to make his way upriver, Richard planned to follow. The St. Ivraies indulged him, certain he would return after his adventure, perhaps a changed, more mature young man.

The night before the duo left, they went on a final binge. Sometime during the wild evening, Willem lost track of his friend. He searched the city for weeks without success, but finally forged on with his plans. He arrived in Robichaud and began his rise to success. One night, nearly five years after he left New Orleans, Richard arrived on the doorstep of the home Willem had built for his bride. He had changed, but not in the way his family had hoped.

Sabine parked in the driveway, but didn't get out. Willem was in no hurry to re-enter the house that would become his prison again come daylight. "Let's not stay here, Sabine. I'm not ready to go back inside yet."

They drove to the bend of the Old River and found an almost dry spot to sit. He carried the blanket Sabine had in her car and pulled it around them both. There, he continued with his tale.



It seemed Richard had made some interesting friends his last night in New Orleans. Friends who opened the door to immortality and power at the cost of his soul. Willem could not refuse shelter to the friend he had given up for lost. Over the course of many evenings they spent together, Willem introduced Richard to the family into which he was to marry. And, naturally, to Rose.

"It's simple enough, I suppose. They fell in love. Or at least in lust. Rose, as you say, never truly wanted me. And Richard was always the one the ladies admired."

"Not all the ladies, Willem."

He held her tighter for a moment. "No. Not all the ladies."

"You told me yesterday he turned her. Does that mean she's a vampire, too?"

"Yes. I wonder where she is. I wonder why she isn't here with him."

She shuddered and inched closer. Suddenly the past seemed less important. "Is something wrong, Sabine?" he asked. Tendrils of her hair brushed against his arm and his muscles clenched in reaction.

"No, nothing's wrong. I'm just...restless, I guess."

"Restless. That's a good word for it."

"For what?" They had been looking out over the river, but now he turned to face her, only to find her already watching him.

"For this." He took her mouth swiftly, his lips hard and demanding, riding a wave of desire. She was soft, her body giving in to his, her mouth providing the haven he craved. He pulled her close, crushing her against him, desperate to feel the lushness of her body, to sear himself in her heat.

Not only her body, he realized as she exploded in his arms. He wanted her. *Sabine*. Revenge no longer mattered to him, only the woman he held.

The ground was cold beneath them and he realized before his brain shut down for good that they would never be able to consummate their desires out here on the muddy riverbank. But it didn't mean they couldn't indulge themselves in other ways.

He lifted her onto his lap so she straddled him. The position brought them into intimate, exquisite, excruciating contact. He moaned deep in

his throat when her melting heat pressed to the ache threatening to rip out the seam of his jeans. She settled herself even closer to him and he cursed the cold. Fumbling in the dark, under layers of clothing, was wreaking havoc with his finesse. And he desperately wanted to give this woman finesse.

The banks of the Raccourci Old River on a cold November night didn't top his list of likely places to seduce a woman. The way she responded to him, even her slightly untutored kisses, made him want to stroke her, hold her close and teach her everything he knew about pleasure.

His time was running out and his task was yet undone. But before he left, he wanted to give her everything he had. Even his heart.

The realization stopped him for a moment and Sabine wrapped her arms around him and trailed a string of hot kisses down his neck. Her tongue darted out and she licked, then sucked lightly on the muscle between his neck and shoulder. He hissed on an intake of startled breath. "Where did you learn to do that?" he asked.

She raised her head and her eyes were as hot and dark as a bayou night in summertime. "From you. You did that to me last night and it felt wonderful. I thought if I liked it, you might like it, too. Was I wrong?" Her lips were red, swollen, glistening with moisture. His mark on her.

A shudder ran through him. "Lord no, *chère*." He brought her mouth back to his and nibbled at the corner. "I don't think you could do anything wrong here."

She sighed and the sound was a hot whisper at his ear. He drew in a quick breath when she squirmed slightly. "I, um, I know I'm not acting like it, but I think you should know, in case I do anything stupid, that I'm not very good at this."

"At what?" he asked as he ran his hands over her thighs, and cruised back up to cup her bottom. She dug her fingernails into his shoulder when he began to knead and massage.

"At this...sort of thing," she said, her breath uneven as she responded to his caress.

He stopped. Everything. His mouth stopped nibbling, his hands stopped kneading. He leaned away from her. "You're a virgin."

“No,” she said quickly, before her eyes widened, then screwed closed. “No, I’m not. But it doesn’t mean I’m very...experienced.”

He bent and touched her forehead with his and heaved a very deep sigh. The kind of sigh that sounded a lot like nobody was going to get what they wanted tonight. She sighed, too.

“Oh...shoot.”

“Yeah.” He nodded.

They packed up and drove back home, careful not to touch each other. The house was chilly when they walked in. Sabine went to a small box on the wall and touched a button. A moment later, warm air gusted through the ceiling vents.

Willem rolled his shoulders, conscious of a sense of something lost. He couldn’t decide if it was something he had owned and lost, or whether he finally recognized an emptiness that had always been with him, but never noticed.

“Good night, Willem,” she said as they reached the end of the hall. Her door was to the right, his to the left. He heard the unshed tears in her voice and the sound punched him in the chest. He turned to stop her from retreating to her room. “Sabine, I’m sorry. This should never have happened. If I were any kind of gentleman, I never would have touched you.”

“No,” she said. “It’s not that. I’m...I’m glad you did. But we can’t...”

Willem flinched. He knew a doomed relationship when he saw one.

“You’re right. We can’t.” He wanted.

“We shouldn’t.” She desired.

“We won’t. But God, I wish...” He burned.

They kissed. A kiss they would carry in their dreams of unfulfilled yearning. A kiss that turned their flesh to burning cinders. A kiss involving not only lips and mouths, teeth and tongues, but a kiss that joined their hearts in aching desperation for a life which could not be...

Sabine tore her lips from his. “What am I? Some angst-ridden teenager gazing cow-eyed at a pop star poster?” She wrapped her fingers in the fabric of his shirt and pulled him closer, feminine power flowing through her. “I don’t think so. This isn’t the nineteenth century anymore.

I am a woman. If I want a man, there's nothing to stop me. And I want you."

Willem's brow furrowed. She knew he had no clue what she was talking about, but the desire she felt was mirrored in his hot gaze.

"Sabine, are you sure?"

"No, I'm not sure." She bit her lip and he raised his hand to her mouth, smoothing out the small hurt with his rough thumb. "But I know that no matter what happens tomorrow night, I refuse to live the rest of my life dreaming of what might have been. I have never thrown myself at a man, but I've never felt anything like this before. And I feel as though I know you so well." She backed into her darkened room, her fingers still curled in his shirt, dragging him with her.

From the moment she sat next to him on that cold riverbank, she'd been concentrating less on the amazing disappearing great-aunt and more on how to get closer to Willem without looking like a sex-crazed slut. Actually, since she met him, she had been thinking a lot about sex, but her general lack of experience placed her squarely in the non-slut category.

Willem closed the door behind them and she jumped at the sound. She might have impulsively started this seduction, but she had just reached the end of her experience in tempting a man. She had slept with a boyfriend in college, but found little satisfaction in it. Apparently, he hadn't found much either, because he dumped her soon after talking his way into her bed.

She swallowed and his lips twitched.

Okay. So it was a little funny.

"I, uh...don't know what to do next."

"You're doing fine. How about dragging me over to the bed?"

She glanced behind her. Her bed was a sturdy dark oak sleigh and the flannel-covered duvet was smooth and tidy. *Not for long*, and the fire in her rose up again. She threw her arms around his neck, pulling him down to her and kissing him hard. Sabine walked them backwards until the backs of her knees hit the bed and he fell on top of her.

They both blew out a laugh effervescent with anticipation.

"What do I do now?" she asked.

“You could keep kissing me. I’m sure we’ll get somewhere eventually.” But even as he spoke, he lowered his head to measure the length of her throat with his lips. She sighed and arched against him so the hardness of his body left an indelible impression against hers.

Conversation was curtailed as they found meaning in wordless breaths and moans. His shirt floated to the floor as the sun rose, sending out its petal-soft pink and lemon-yellow rays to warm the lovers.

They kneeled together to lift off Sabine’s bulky sweatshirt, leaving her in an ivory satin demi-bra and jeans. Willem ran his big hands down her shoulders, skimmed over her breasts and lifted them from beneath.

He smiled at her, then looked at the bounty he held and said, “Thank you, Lord.”

Sabine had to laugh. Her nervousness was gone. In its place was a delicious anticipation. She couldn’t remember the last time she had felt as though she had nothing to fear and nothing to hide.

He reached into the cups with his thumbs and pulled the fabric aside so she was fully exposed and lifted even higher. “Sabine, I dreamed of you. Since I first held you, I’ve wanted to see you. Wanted to hold you again and know the shape of you.”

She listened gravely, her gaze fixed to his. The words were important. She needed to believe that *she* was important.

His eyes dropped to her breasts. “This is amazing and wonderful.” Willem’s hands traveled back up to her face. He held her still and she saw his face clearly in the burgeoning sunlight. His thumbs swept over her lips, her chin, her cheeks. “But this is even better. To know your heart and mind is what makes the time I have more worthwhile than anything else.”

Tears started in her eyes at his words, but she blinked them away. The light burnished his hair to gleaming bronze and the sight of him glowing like a golden god distracted her enough to look for some levity. She cast him a glance under lowered eyelashes and said, “You’d better not be saying that just to get into my pants, mister.”

He smiled and Apollo’s gift brightened. “There’s nothing I want more than to get into your pants, *chère*, but I meant every word.”

She grinned. “What are you waiting for?”

## Chapter Eight

Willem gently tackled her, falling with her back onto the bed. The rest of their clothes were shed with sighs and smiles. She ran her fingers through the hair on his chest, lightly raking his flat nipples with her nails, and he caught his breath.

“My turn,” he said, as he warmed her with his hands, running them up and over her breasts, already rosy from the heat of his touch, and gently squeezed her nipples. Every time he did it, she felt an answering pull deep in her womb. He began to tug lightly and rhythmically on the tips of her breasts, kissing, mouthing and nipping the soft flesh around them while she rose higher and higher.

Sabine wound her fingers in his hair and pulled him to her, his body pressing down on hers, his hardness nudging her center. She couldn’t wait another moment. She hadn’t been aware of the incredible sensitivity of her breasts until this man brought her to life.

He kissed her as she imploded beneath him. She screamed his name into his mouth, half crying from the astounding freedom she felt in her fall back to earth. He stilled his hands on her breasts, just holding them, cupping them, while her heart beat its frenetic rhythm under his palm.

Sabine opened her eyes to see him watching her with something like awe on his face. She couldn’t decide whether or not to feel self-conscious about her uninhibited response. She couldn’t really decide anything at the moment. She couldn’t move, either.

“Sabine,” he said, “are you...my God...how are you feeling?”

She waited a moment for her eyes to refocus. “Me? I’m *fiiine*.” She grinned lazily. “How are you?”

He grinned back at her. "I'm fine, too. But I get the feeling we're going to be much, much better very soon."

Sensation returned to her limbs as he began to touch her again, this time leaving her breasts to play with other parts of her body. He brushed his work-scarred knuckles over her soft belly, gently laying his head against her. The heavy weight of his head soothed her and she ran her hands through his thick hair.

Willem turned her over to mold her shoulder blades and trace her spine with a sculptor's touch, dragging his rough fingertips over her back, trailing a wake of tingling flame. The dip at her waist was his next target. She stretched up as he traced it with his lips, then his tongue, the feel of the sinuous muscle dancing against her skin collapsed all thought. He turned her again as the curve of her hipbone drew his attention.

Sabine was as biddable and malleable as clay in his hands. She bent to his will as though she anticipated his desires. She stretched and curved to heighten not only her own response to his caresses, but to revisit them on him. She touched and stroked, her curiosity about his body driving her to brush her hands over his shoulders and arms, feeling the strength and the play of muscles as he led her where he wanted her.

Willem stroked his way down her legs, his hot palms massaging the muscles in her calves as she flexed and pointed her toes. She lay on her back and looked down her body at him. He knelt in front of her, holding her leg as he kissed his way back to her knee, and then, with a wicked grin, kept going.

His hot breath on her damp curls was enough to make her shiver. Willem's fingers slid up the joining of her thighs and her hips began to move.

"Willem, I can't take much more."

"I only want to be sure you're ready," he said with an all-too-innocent look.

She sat up, tangling her fingers in his chest hairs to make sure he sat up with her. "Trust me on this. I'm ready." She paused and was struck by the fine example of maleness in front of her. On the other hand, slowing down never hurt anybody.

“Of course,” she purred, “maybe you’re not ready.” She trailed her long fingers down his body, skimming over hard abs that got harder the further she went. “Breathe, sugar. This won’t hurt a bit.”

“Huh,” he answered on a strangled breath as she tipped him over and rose above him.

Sabine began an exploration of his body as leisurely and titillating as his had been. She skipped over the interesting parts, saving them for later. It was her turn to indulge in a little torture now.

His legs were strong, thickly muscled, and rough with a sprinkling of springy hair. As her fingers danced up the backs of his knees, he jerked.

“You’re not ticklish here, are you, Willem?”

“Ticklish? Never.” He cleared his throat.

“Mmm-hmm.”

This time, she grinned wickedly as she dragged her fingernails up his thighs, feeling the clench of his muscles. Their gazes locked and she reached for him. She hummed in appreciation as she took his shaft in both hands and slid smoothly to the rounded tip. She encircled his length with her fingers and glided back to cup his sac with one small hand.

“Sabine, I can’t take much more.” He hauled her up his body to stretch out on top of him. The meeting of breast to chest made her breathless.

“Seems to me we just had this conversation.”

“We did, but I mean it. Keep teasing me and the show will be over before it starts. Our first time may be too fast anyway, but I swear I’ll make it up to you.”

He turned them over so that his body pressed hers into the mattress. His hands ran down her body to cup her hips. Sabine parted her legs, eager for his invasion. His touch, however, was not what she expected. His fingers gently parted her wet folds, rubbing up and down her swollen lips, spreading moisture and leaving a tingling sensation in their wake. When his finger swept over her clitoris, she bucked against him and gasped his name. Still he explored her, his thumb rasping lightly against her most sensitive spot.



Willem's thighs tightened as he fought the urge to slam into her. Instead, he slid one finger deep inside her, readying her for his body. She was meltingly hot around him and wet with one orgasm already. He considered her responsiveness and weighed it against the tight grip of her muscles around his finger. He would have to be gentle or risk hurting her, he realized as he pushed a second finger into her, feeling her leap at the sensation.

Ready or not, he could wait no longer. He parted her thighs and sank into her. The ripple of muscles that tightened and released around him was nearly his undoing. He thrust forward in smooth strokes until their curls tangled together where their bodies met.

Sabine moaned and wrapped her arms around him. He returned the embrace. Cold had enveloped him since he left his grave and Sabine banished it. He wanted to wrap himself around her so they would always be warm. Right now he was so hot, though, he was sure the bed would catch fire.

He began to move inside her and she moaned again. This time he moaned right along with her. She was small and tight. He savored the sultry constriction but his release loomed. Too long. It had been too long and he couldn't hold back.

Sabine rode the wave he had created in her, his urgency for completion feeding her readiness to meet the glorious crest of climax with this man. She felt every inch of his wicked slide in and out of her. Every hitch of his breath in her ear triggered an answering gasp and when he slipped his hand down to her hip to change his angle of attack, the effect was electrifying. Suddenly everything was *more* everything. Every movement he made now seemed designed to pull her with him to the pinnacle of pleasure.

His hips moved faster, and Sabine watched his eyes glaze over as his body's impulses overrode his mind's desires. She wanted this as much for him as for herself. Wanted to feel him lose himself completely in her.

And he did. Sabine's body burst into light, his name lost in her scream. The last thing she felt was Willem buried deep inside her, his back taut as his release took him with her.

They collapsed in a sweaty tangle of arms and legs, and for a few minutes, the only sound in the bedroom was heavy breathing.

“Sabine?”

Silence.

“You all right?”

Still nothing.

He asked again, somewhat more urgently, his words still slurred.

Another beat of silence before she answered. “People often say there are no stupid questions. But *that* was a stupid question.”

He grinned and made to move off her, but she flopped her arms around him and held on. The heavy breathing replete with satisfaction soon became the even, synchronous sounds of sleep.

Sabine woke to the unusual sensation of male lips traveling around her ear. His tongue hit a pressure spot under her earlobe and she wriggled closer. Which was when she discovered she couldn’t get much closer. He slipped inside her, growing larger and harder by the moment. She closed her eyes and absorbed the sensations of his hot tongue licking her neck and his hands cupping her breasts. His back was smooth and hard, and she ran her hands from his shoulders to his tight butt. She smiled when he jumped and chuckled at her intimate grasp, rocking forward, sliding deeper into her.

“The clock says it’s after one in the afternoon.”

“Mm-hmm,” she answered.

“The sun doesn’t set for more than five hours.”

“That’s right. Are you going somewhere with this conversation?”

“No. I was wondering how many more times I can make you scream my name before we have to get up.”

“I love a challenge.”

Then there were no more words until they slipped over the edge of sanity again.

## *Chapter Nine*

Sabine fought every feminine, clinging instinct screaming through her body. She watched as Willem, fresh from a shower, buttoned the front of his jeans, then shrugged into his shirt. She wanted to attach herself to him like a leech and not let him out the door. She wanted to parade naked in front of him until he was so beside himself with lust he wouldn't dream of leaving the house. She even considered crying to see if that would stop him from going out to confront St. Ivraie.

But she sat on the edge of the bed, clutching the sheet to cover her rapidly cooling body.

"Sabine..."

"Ah-ah." She held up a hand to stop him. "You know, I don't think I want to hear anything negative right now. And you have a very 'no' sort of look on your face. Let's save it for later."

"You're assuming there is going to be a later."

"Well. That's depressing."

"I'm not coming back from this, Sabine. One way or the other, this is it."

Sabine stuck her hands under her bottom to keep herself from putting her fingers in her ears and humming to block out his voice. She took a few deep breaths to free the tightness in her chest. She rose, gathering the sheet around her.

"Do you regret what we did, Willem?"

He wrapped his arms around her and she buried her face in his chest, listening to his heart beat against her ear.

"Never, *chère*. Never. I don't know where I go from here, but if God is merciful, I will never forget you." He pulled back from their embrace to

look into her eyes. "My father was a soldier and he taught me one thing before he died. If duty is denied, if honor is ignored, then love has no foundation. I have to do this thing."

"So do I, Willem. I have my own honor to keep and nothing you say can keep me from going with you. Something is pulling at me. Maybe it's Rose."

"I hope not, Sabine."

"Whatever it is, I need to be with you tonight when you face him."

His expression was mulish.

"I don't like it."

"Life is full of things we don't like, big man."

She gripped his neck and pulled him to her for the soul-deep kiss she craved. It seemed he craved it, too, for he held her so close she felt as though they might melt together.

"Oh God, this hurts." She ripped herself away from him and wrapped her arms around her middle to contain the pain. She looked into his eyes and saw her own ache reflected there. They both had a job to do and her descent into hysteria wasn't helping. She sniffled and pulled herself upright.

"Pain fades, Willem. But I'll never forget you, either."

Sabine washed and dressed, then turned on some music and put together her trademark Creole shrimp casserole. While it baked, she sat on Willem's lap, running her hands through his hair, feeling the strands separate and part around her fingers like rough silk. When Louis Armstrong played "What a Wonderful World," she pulled him to his feet and they swayed together in the living room, her head on his shoulder, and tears in her eyes. They ate dinner by candlelight until the look on Willem's face made Sabine too breathless to eat.

He swallowed the last of his wine and rose from the table. "Sabine, come with me."

She shook her head, too sensitized by her own fantasy to move. The foreplay of the perfect evening overwhelmed her, and she didn't think she could take any more of him.

"Fine, then," he growled. "We do it here."

An amazed corner of her mind set itself apart to record the memory of what he did to her. How he pulled her out of her seat and yanked the sweater over her head. How her bra shredded in his hands and her jeans tangled at her feet. He knelt to pull them off and stared at the lace panel of her satin bikini panties. Sabine felt the fine tremble of his body as he leaned forward and pressed his lips to her mound. She whimpered at the heat of his breath, then cried aloud as he licked the fabric. The barrier allowed him to be more forceful than he might have been with only her delicate skin and she grasped the table behind her for support.

All long before she screamed her fulfillment to the heavens.



An indefinable difference hung in the air. As she and Willem walked from the car to the cemetery, Sabine sensed it. Clouds hid the moon and a storm threatened. The air was heavy and electric. Dampness clung to her hair and skin like a sheet of thin ice.

The raised graves with their guardian angels and towering monuments hovered, macabre in the darkness. She shivered.

“Are you all right, *chère*?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. Just cold.”

They walked in silence for a few more minutes and Sabine became more and more agitated. Something was wrong.

“Willem, tell me more about St. Ivraie.”

“What do you want to know?”

“He was your best friend, right? Had you ever had trouble over women before?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, had he ever stolen one of your girlfriends before or vice versa?”

Willem stopped near the Gadrey family mausoleum. “No. I don’t know how gentlemen conduct themselves in this time, but he never would have done that.” His voice hardened. “Neither would I.”

“I’m not trying to offend you, but something doesn’t feel right with this. Where is she? What happened to her? And where’s St. Ivraie?”

"I don't know the answers to these questions, Sabine. Why is this bothering you right now? You could have asked these questions before."

"I know, I know. It's just..." She trailed off and peered into the darkness. "Where is Rose Chaumette?"

"She's dead."

St. Ivraie's melodic voice settled around them. "And you shouldn't be here, Miss Harper."

"Leave her out of this, Richard. Your quarrel is with me."

"I've no quarrel with you, my friend."

"Well, I've one with you." Willem removed the bag from his shoulder and tightened his hand around the stake he carried.

"You're not going to use that on me, are you?"

"Yes, I am. Much like Rose used one on me. You stabbed me in the back, too, Richard, when you took her."

"You should be grateful, Willem. She would have killed you one way or another."

"I don't believe you."

"Believe what you will. That faithless bitch would have turned on you sooner or later. She almost said no when I offered her the Gift, but not out of any love she bore for you. She wanted to marry you first so she would have clear title to your belongings when she killed you. But her greed for power and lust for blood overcame her."

As he spoke, mist began to rise from the ground near Willem's ruined grave. It curled malevolently around their ankles, snaking its tendrils up to touch their skin. Willem shifted away from its icy chill, and it drifted towards Sabine.

"Well, then, perhaps I should be grateful to you for turning her and helping her murder me." His head pounded. Somehow, he couldn't quite summon the rage he had counted on. Richard's words should have stoked his desire for revenge, but they sounded too much like the truth.

"I didn't know any of this until later. Too much later to help any of us," said Richard. "I've waited for this day for many years."

"No more than I have." *End it now*, he wanted to cry out. *Die, so that I can have my revenge, my reward, my rest.*

“No. I suppose not. But when you finally end my cursed existence, I want you to know the truth. I would have saved you if I could.”

“But you can’t, Richard. And now you’ll both die.”

The voice came from Sabine, but it was not hers. It sounded lighter, with a pronounced sweetness. She swayed toward them, her hips swiveling seductively as she scooped up the bag of sharpened stakes. The men turned to watch her advance, and she was close when the clouds drifted away from the face of the moon.

“Sabine?” Willem stared intently at her.

“It’s not Sabine,” said Richard. “Look at her eyes.”

“Rose,” they said simultaneously.

She smiled—precious, demure...and deadly. “It’s nice to see you both again. Well, not really. You should have stayed dead, Willem. I liked you better that way.”

“Sorry to disoblige you.”

“Now I’ll have to kill you again. I got blood all over my dress that time. It’s a good thing this girl is already wearing rags.”

“That girl is your blood kin, Rose. You can’t hurt her.”

“Why not, Willem? I stabbed my beloved fiancé in the back and seduced his best friend into turning me into a blood-drinking goddess of the night. I don’t see why I can’t consume some creature who looks worse than a drowned rat.”

“She’s done you no harm, Rose. Come after me.”

“Oh, I will, dear. I will.” Willem and Richard were moving apart, getting on both sides of her as she spoke. It was an old tactic that had worked for them many times when they got into boyish scrapes back in New Orleans. But neither counted on her preternatural speed. Before either of them could even blink, she threw a stake with pinpoint accuracy at Richard. Richard lunged to the side, and Willem saw the spike graze him as he fell to the ground.

Willem tackled Rose with the stake in his hand, poised to plunge it into her heart when he heard Sabine’s voice whisper his name.

“Willem?”

“Sabine? Are you in there?” Her eyes bled between blazing darkness and shining emerald, but the fury won out and she said, “Of course,

she's in here. And she'll die, too, if you kill me." She threw him off and he reeled back into a stone monument.

"Tsk, tsk" she taunted. "What a dilemma."

"Let her go, Rose." Evil poured off the woman like the fog enveloping her. Evil he should have recognized all those years ago and that now threatened to consume the only purely good thing he had ever known. He should have told Sabine he loved her tonight. Now he prayed for the chance.

Willem circled his enemy, keeping his eyes on hers, prepared to defend himself. Ready to follow her into death again if Rose won.

"No. Aside from the most atrocious fashion sense, I like this body. After you and Richard are out of my way, I think I'll keep her. Her soul will shrivel and die, but at least I'll be happy. And that's all that matters, right?"



Sabine saw nothing but the fog. She knew her body moved, but without her control. The only thing she sensed was the stultifying weight of sheer malevolence. The horror of her situation washed over her. Nothing she did seemed to make a difference and her powerlessness added to her fear.

She tried to take deep, calming breaths, but even that ability was not hers. Her breathing was controlled by someone who seemed to be amused by her efforts to regain her senses.

At first that cool amusement fed her panic. What kind of monster would find her terror entertaining? She had never sensed this depth of inhumanity from Willem, or even from St. Ivraie, though his very existence as a vampire chilled her heart.

She thought of Willem facing his old friend without her. She had insisted on coming along, but now she was not only completely helpless, but may even constitute a danger to him. The movements of her body shocked her as she felt herself throw something very hard, but couldn't see the target. Had she thrown something at Willem? Was he hurt?

There was no time to think more because her world tilted suddenly as if she was knocked over. Her head hit the ground and although she felt



no pain, the fog cleared momentarily, and she caught a glimpse of her beloved.

“Willem?” He looked furious and his arm was drawn back as if to hit her. That was all she saw, though, before she was ruthlessly shoved back under the mist. The abruptness of the push angered her as much as someone cutting her off in traffic. How rude!

*I am supposed to be the level-headed one. I will not flake out. Think what would happen if Lily was in this situation. Bless her heart, she'd probably have peed her pants by now.* The image gave her strength. Not to be mean to her cousin, but she refused to soil herself.

The first thing she concentrated on was her breathing. Not to regain overt control of it, but to match her thought respirations to the physical ones, which were calm and measured. She had to be careful not to attract the notice of her own personal body snatcher. *When did my life turn into a cheesy horror film?*

She could not sense whoever had overtaken her, but the cadence of the being's thoughts felt familiar to her. She considered this familiarity as she accustomed herself to the new breathing rhythm. As she concentrated on this simple task, she expanded her senses to take in the actions of her puppet body. The movements and gestures did not strike her as unusually expansive or harsh and it puzzled her. She began to hear snatches of words coming out of her own mouth.

The accent was hers! This person was from Robichaud as surely as she was. The light tone of the voice convinced her that her captor was a woman. If Sabine could have moved her hand, she would have smacked her own head in exasperated realization.

Rose Chaumette had stolen her body. *Bitch.*

## Chapter Ten

Sabine's anger at being shoved aside was the catalyst that burned through her fear. She had spent her life being so useful and sweet and accommodating that she had actually made a career out of anger-avoidance techniques. Well, no more.

Her voice tore out of her soul. "That's it! Leave me alone and get your hands off my man."

"Well, well. *The kitten has claws*," the voice in her head purred after a moment of shocked silence. "*Don't you want to give your Auntie Rose a hug?*" A vicious image accompanied the thought, and Sabine felt herself in a vise grip so tight her head constricted under the pressure. As her hearing faded in the face of a painful cacophony, one voice pierced the noise.

"Sabine, *chère*, be strong. I will come for you."

Willem. She forced her lungs to expand, forced her spirit, her mind and her heart to push against the evil surrounding her. Nothing happened.

Rose laughed and squeezed harder. "*You're weak, child. As weak as all the Chaumettes. You're no match against me.*"

"*We're not weak, Rose. We lived and loved for more than a hundred years after you left. I'd never even heard of you. So does that make you strong? Or just forgotten?*" Sabine controlled her fury, focused it against Rose and the grave-like stench of the mist.

The ghost shrieked out her rage, spending her strength on anger. She didn't realize that as she vented her fury in screams, Sabine regained more of herself and used it. Pushing, shoving, pressing back, turning Rose's weakness into her strength.

*"If there's one thing you ought to know about Chaumettes, it's that if you scratch one, you scratch us all. You should have known better than to pick on family."*

The pressure faded. Infinitesimally at first, but she found more and more space to breathe. She took heart as Rose's furious wails began to recede.

*"You can't do this to me!"*

*"Watch me, Rose. You stabbed Willem in the back once and you'd do it again if I let you. Go back to whatever hell you came out of."*

Sabine pushed one more time and the fog began to lift. She saw the outline of her beloved's face and she smiled weakly.

No stars were out, but the feeble yellow streetlight illuminated the area around the crypt. A swirl of ash surrounded them, a cloud of vile sound and dense black evil. The ash settled back around the grave for a moment, heavy and dull before a gust of wind swept through the cemetery, shrieking around the monuments and over the headstones. It carried the dust and scattered it on its way across the river.

Which left only one other sound in the graveyard. A moan from Richard St. Ivraie. The vampire whom Willem had come to kill.

Her lover straddled her body, his arm raised, a stake in his hand. Sabine sucked in a breath and choked on it, blinking furiously as words and air caught in her throat.

*"It's me," she finally managed. "Sabine."*

His eyes narrowed, but he hesitated. *"Prove it."*

*"Prove it? You arrogant Victorian Neanderthal."* She knew she was mixing her metaphors, but she was too mad to care. *"Get off me, you big jerk. See if I ever bake for you again."*

*"Sweet, merciful God."* Willem dropped the stake and yanked her into a crushing squeeze. *"I thought she had killed you."*

Sabine lay in Willem's arms and the numbness began to leave her limbs, leaving tingling pain in its wake. She didn't care. She was just happy to be alive and with Willem.

Richard moaned again. Willem glanced toward the sound, then back at the woman in his embrace.

*"Go. See if you can help him. He helped you when he didn't need to."*

He nodded and set her gently aside.

"Richard?" he asked as he walked cautiously around the corner of the crypt.

"Willem, old friend," said the vampire. "It looks like I really did it this time." The stake Rose had thrown at him had not grazed him as Willem had previously thought. It was sticking obscenely out of the center of his chest.

"Richard!" he cried. "God, I'm sorry."

"For what? You didn't throw this wretched stake. Where's Rose?" His arm twitched as he tried to move.

"She's gone. Sabine beat her and she faded to ashes. The wind has taken her now."

Sabine crawled to Willem's side and caught her breath when she saw Richard's condition.

*"Bon soir, belle."*

*"Bon soir,"* she answered. "Oh Willem, can't we help him?"

Richard shook his head. "Why would you even try?"

"You didn't kill me. And I don't believe you had anything to do with Rose murdering me."

"Quite a change of heart for such a stubborn man. What makes you think I'm so damned innocent?"

"I never said you were innocent." They grinned at each other for a moment before Richard had to catch his breath.

"What happened, Richard? Where did she come from?" asked Willem.

The vampire's breath hitched for a moment and his voice was weak when he spoke. "I had nothing to do with Rose's murderous mind. But I did give her the Gift, and the power to hurt you. I know you were trying to kill me, but I was trying to save you. I was too late. You thought she was asking your forgiveness, but it was me." He shifted again to glance at the sky.

"She was only young with the power and no match for me when I caught her. I kept her a prisoner in the crawl space under your house until the day of your burial. That night, right before dawn, she paid for her crime with her life. I tied her to the top of your crypt to greet the sun."

Sabine shuddered at the cold recital of an execution.

"I never dreamed she would come back."

"What of you, Richard? Why did you come back?"

"I've been back every year for one hundred twenty years. I kept vigil over your grave as penance for my sins. My lust for a woman led me to betray my truest friend. I'm sorry, Willem. I've waited a long time to say that."

Sabine saw the details of his beautiful face more clearly now. Shadows under his cheekbones appeared in sharp relief and she grasped Willem's arm.

"The sun, Willem. It's rising. We've got to get him out of here."

Willem bent and lifted his friend, whispering apologies for the pain he caused.

"Over there—the Chaumette crypt. It will at least keep him until tonight," said Sabine.

Willem carried Richard to the door of the crypt. He laid him gently at the opening so he could bypass the lock. He hefted the stone slab against the side of the grave and dragged his friend in just as Richard's clothes started to smoke.

"Will you be all right here?" he asked, his breathing rough.

"I'll be fine. Her aim was off. I'll heal. What about you?"

"Me?" Willem was surprised. "I, ahhh, I'll be..."

"Willem?" Sabine cried out as he slumped against the wall. "Richard, what's happening?"

"I'm not sure. You have to get him away from here."

"I'm fine," Willem gasped.

Sabine ignored him. "You'll be all right?" she asked the vampire as she dragged Willem's arm over her shoulders.

"Yes, now go!" Richard crawled behind the sarcophagus of her ancestors, out of the sun's reach.

Sabine stepped out into the dawn with Willem weighing heavy against her even as he tried to keep up. They made it to the car and she lifted his legs into the passenger compartment before she sped back to the house.

"You're losing your rosy glow, Willem. Come on, stay with me," she begged as she half dragged him onto the front porch.

They fell through the front door together and she landed on top of him. His face was chalky white with a blue tinge to his lips.

“Oh no, baby. Please don’t leave me. I love you, Willem. Please, please stay with me.”

“I don’t think I can, *chère*.” The endearment, so familiar, so cherished, broke her heart.

“You have to stay. You did everything the Fates wanted. You avenged yourself in the time they gave you. What more do they want?”

“I don’t know. You know how they are. They take great joy in being enigmatic.”

“Big word, big man,” she teased with tears running down her cheeks.

“I love you, Sabine Harper. Never forget that. I will love you until the end of time. And somehow, some way, I will find you again.” With a final burst of strength, he wrapped an arm around her, drawing her close to him. And with his last breath, he kissed her.

“Nooooo!”

## *Chapter Eleven*

The night sky was perfect. Crisp and cold enough to see her warm breath, Sabine leaned back against the stone crypt, barely weathered now since its repair. “It’s beautiful tonight, *chère*. I wish I knew the names of the stars so I could tell you which ones were out tonight.”

“He could tell you. He was always more interested in astronomy than I.”

Sabine turned and smiled at the familiar voice.

“How are you, Richard? What are you doing here? Your penance is over. The debt paid.”

“I don’t come for penance, *belle*. I come for friendship. For gratitude. For you.”

“Thank you.” They sat in silence against Willem’s grave.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“I’m fine. Completely healed, thanks to you.”

After Willem died, Sabine spent the day on the floor in his cold embrace, alternately sleeping and crying over his body. Then she did two things. The first was to call Lily. Between them, they were able to return him to his own grave. They covered him with the broken stones. Sabine sent Lily back home before she returned to the Chaumette crypt.

Richard had survived the night, but was extremely weak. She drove to Natchez, Mississippi, and through a combination of charm she hadn’t known she possessed, as well as some outright lying, for which she fervently begged forgiveness, she appropriated several pints of blood from the local blood bank.

Richard recovered quickly after that and was able to return to his dark life within a few nights. He visited frequently to check on her, but

never stayed long. It was unwise for him to linger in a small town. It soon became obvious very quickly when a number of women gossiped about having the same erotic dream. He never drank enough to harm them, but it didn't do to stick around, all the same. He stayed strictly away from anyone even vaguely related to the Chaumette family.

"I miss him," she said after a while.

"I know. So do I. What will you be doing?"

"What I always do. I come here and talk to him. And wonder if I've gone completely off my rocker. I used to want a nice, normal, steady guy. What do I get? A corpse."

They chuckled.

"Do you think you'll ever move on?"

"I don't know. Where am I going to find a nineteenth-century mason who'll laugh at my jokes?"

"How about right here?"

Sabine shrieked and Richard had an arm around Willem's throat, prepared to strike before she yelled out, "No, wait!"

Her eyes were glued to Willem's face. "This is not possible."

"You fell in love with a man who rose from the dead and now you're talking to a vampire. What's that you say about impossible?"

Richard's arm jerked away from his friend's neck. "Willem?"

Willem rubbed his throat gingerly. "I see you're taking care of my girl, Richard. Is something wrong? You look white as a ghost."

Sabine groaned. Her feet were still rooted to the spot, but she smiled. "That was terrible. Anyway, you're the ghost."

"No, Sabine. I'm not a ghost. I'm not dead." He walked forward slowly, as if still unsure of his welcome. He stopped an arm's length away from her. And waited.

He didn't wait long, though. Sabine launched herself at him and he caught her up in his arms, swinging her around. Their mouths came together in a desperate kiss. A kiss that released the grief, the fear and the pain of the past year. A kiss that contained joy, hope and giddy laughter in celebration of their future.

"What happened?" Sabine shrieked when the kiss ended. "How are you here?"



“How long have I been gone?”

“A year tonight,” Sabine answered.

Willem shook his head. “The Fates like drama. They allowed me to avenge myself, but it bothered them that I had still been cheated of my time on earth. So they sent me back.” He pulled Sabine close and kissed her again.

Richard cleared his throat loudly. “So, do I have to keep coming back to this cemetery whenever I want to see you?”

“Oh no. Not until I’m done with this mortal life. I’ll live out the rest of my days here with Sabine. My love, my life, my...wife?”

She leaned away from him slightly, her legs still wrapped around his hips, his arms still supporting her weight. “Your wife?”

“Please, *chère*. It’ll be a long, but lonely life without you.”

“Gee. I don’t know. I mean, I had plans. I was going to spend my days mourning you and my nights sitting out here by your grave in the freezing cold. What will I do with my time if I marry you?” She grinned, her eyes dancing in the clear moonlight.

No further words seemed necessary as she locked her lips to his, hungry for the taste of him, for the invasion of his tongue and the feel of his rising desire under her hips.

“Yes. Well,” said Richard. “I’ll be going now. I’ll, ahem, see you next time I stop in. Right.”

The Fates were funny creatures. He had met them only once, on the night he accepted immortality. He hadn’t dared go near them since his first doomed foray into love. It might be worth his while to pay the old hags a visit soon.

He looked back at the entwined couple kissing under the stars. He smiled, his fangs aching with the chill of the night. He settled in for a long trip.

## *Sela Carsen*

To learn more about Sela Carsen, please visit <http://www.selacarsen.com> or <http://selacarsen.blogspot.com>. You can join her newsletter, too, by clicking on <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/selacarsen/>. Send an email to Sela at [selacarsen@hotmail.com](mailto:selacarsen@hotmail.com).

*When the strange antique dealer bestows Ella Mansfield with a weird necklace, proclaiming it magic, Ella refuses to believe. Why would she have a use for such a thing?*

## Believe the Magic

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*Available Now in Print from Samhain Publishing*

But she finds herself the target of some pretty odd characters, including the sexy but enigmatic Quentin, who becomes her guardian, her guide and her lover. Gradually she learns her necklace holds two of the ten original gems stolen from the fairy king - gems that control all the magic in the world. Ella realizes the need to believe, but even more her need to search deep within her heart to figure out who to trust, especially when those closest to her seemed to be following their own agendas.

With bad guys just a step behind them, Ella and Quentin use the magic to jump through time and space while bluffing their way out of questionable situations - in search of a plan. That comes to a screeching halt when Ella finds herself face to face with the man she's been trying to avoid.

Ella's an unlikely hero, learning as she goes - but the ultimate lesson involves a sacrifice she never expected to face, and one that all the magic in the world cannot undo.

*Enjoy this Excerpt from Believe the Magic:*

"Ella, you have to trust me. Please. Sometimes you won't be able to question me, or see the why behind what I say. Just trust me, okay?"

"I don't get it, Quen. I just don't get this at all."

"You don't have to. Just promise me you'll behave."

"You're treating me like a twelve-year-old."

His face was suddenly close, too close. "I wouldn't do this if you were twelve." His warm lips met mine, pressing, kneading, coaxing them apart. I leaned into him, letting his tongue graze past my teeth and inject a new kind of heat into my body.

I felt much colder when he stepped back. But at least it seemed what happened this morning, or whenever it was, hadn't been a fluke.

"No. It wasn't a fluke. Don't even think it."

The words worked like fuel on the fire that had started somewhere in my chest. I didn't analyze it, just reveled in it. It got me the last leg of the journey without another peep about the temperature or aches in my bones.

Camp was a deserted building just as cold as the barren fields outside it. Thank God the wind didn't slice through the walls. It tried, howling through all the invisible crevices. Did I mention it was dark? Black as pitch inside.

"I just bet there's no electricity here is there, brain child?" I wasn't sure where Quentin was in the room, but he was undoubtedly in hearing range.

"Nope. I'm trying to find matches."

Matches? Wasn't this a man who could do magic? Couldn't he make fire?

"Found 'em!" he cried triumphantly. Guess he wasn't listening to me.

I listened for the scrape of the match and the flare of light. Quentin had found an oil lamp.

The inside of the building came to life in a flicker of orange. It was divided in half, one part a cold, empty laboratory area, the other a less than cozy living area. At least there was a fireplace.

"You are going to light a fire, right?"

"Of course." He strode toward the wood piled beside it. I was way confused. Why wasn't he using magic to get it done faster? With little thought I lifted a log and set it on the half charred pieces that had been left in the fireplace. Quentin sat back on his heels, but didn't turn around.

Something was definitely going on. My gems, now a fixture around my neck, throbbed with the use of power. Other than the little push in the snow, I hadn't used them much.

Was he waiting to see if I could start it? Could I? If I could, did I want him to know? He didn't answer. I had to guess he wasn't reading my mind.

I had done it before, hadn't I? Breathed fire. Well, that's not exactly the effect I needed now, unless I wanted to be the human torch. I thought it best I keep that little trick a secret.

I crossed my fingers and reached. Deep, deep down into the energy that was bundled in my cramped toes, aching calves, and stiff fingers. I drew in breath after breath and willed it to a central spot in my chest. It was time.

I pointed my finger at the center of the log. With knowledge that must have been the most primitive, because *I* certainly don't know how I did it, I transferred the power to my shaking fist.

I didn't trust myself. "Quentin, you wanna move?"

No comment, no glance in my direction, but he got up and stood against the adjoining wall.

"All right." I took a deep breath. "Here goes."

I swear it was the rise and fall of my chest and the shivers that still pulsed through my body that caused me to miss. And the recoil. I could blame the recoil.

The fireball bounced off the brick wall and landed just about where Quentin had been. Of course.

He jumped over and stomped out the red embers on the carpet. I expected something along the lines of "Nicely done, Ella." In pure sarcasm, of course. But he backed up against the wall again.

Concentrate, I told myself. I found the strength easier this time, still smoldering. I stoked it up and let it roll down my arm, puddling like lava

in my fist.

I pointed my finger as if it were a long range rifle. I stepped forward, bent my knees and braced myself. Ready. *It's now or never.* Aim. *Fingers still crossed.* Fire.

I ducked behind the couch when the log exploded into splinters. *Well, I guess we have kindling wood now.*

The oil lamp was on the ground, a figure curled next to it. Had I hit him? Had those flying pieces flown into him like a hundred tiny wooden stakes?

He didn't move when I stood over him. I nudged him with my foot. "Quentin?" I was scared he wouldn't answer.

"Are we dead yet?"

"No. But it's cold and if we don't get the fire lit, we might have the option of freezing to death."

"I thought you were trying to blow this place up."

I shrugged. Sorry wasn't really an option, was it? I was too exhilarated with the power I had found to feel very remorseful. "No...I just um, atomized the log. Shall I put another one—"

"No," he cut in, waving his hands, and the light, above his head. "I'll do it already. The old fashioned way."

He doubted me, did he? I snapped around and tossed another piece of split wood where the other one had sat. For good measure I commanded all the tiny pieces to pile themselves around it. To my surprise, that all worked without a glitch.

I was physically exhausted. It had been a long day. Great sex, two travels and a trek through the tundra had drained me. The two previous fireballs hadn't helped. But I was closer. I might be able to make this one happen.

There wasn't much fire left in me. I let it swirl around while I chewed on the idea of Quentin thinking I couldn't do it. Wow. That helped.

I concentrated on the small slivers that surrounded the log. They would light easily. They only need a gentle touch. I squinted in the pale light and ran my fingers over the picture of the hearth I had in my head. Spark, I commanded. The light of a match.

The heat burned my fingertips. I held steady despite the pain. I

envisioned the flames catching, growing. The heat was beautiful. The sun on my face.

"Shit, Ella. Holy Shit!" Quentin tackled me, grabbed me under one arm and dragged me outside.

"Quentin, the fire, I lit the fire. Why—"

He grabbed my wrist and shoved my hand deep in the snow.

I wanted to howl from the agony of it. "Damn it. That...it effing hurts!" I shouted.

Laughter bubbled up out of Quentin.

"It's not freaking funny," I tried to slap at him with my uninjured hand, but he scooted out of the way.

"Effing? Effing? Ella, if you're gonna say it, go for the gusto."

Oh, I was saying it all right, over and over. Mentally. I couldn't push it past my lips.

"You a coward? Think your Sunday school teacher is going to hear you? There's nothing but a few Eskimos for hundreds of miles and you can't bring yourself to say a simple word?"

"It doesn't matter what I say, Quentin. It's not going to take the pain away."

I thought he was going to fall back in the snow he was laughing so hard. And if he did, I just might feel enough compassion to bury him up to his chin and let him worry about frostbite in his delicate areas. I wanted to simply sit with my hand buried deep in the snow and writhe with the pain. I could almost envision the tips of those digits tearing open and peeling like a boiled tomato. I bet that's what they looked like too.

*How does a lonely tree sprite want to find her man?  
Flaming hot!*

## Tree Sprite

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*Available for download now at Samhain Publishing.*

First of the Wizard Kin series.

Daniel has left his destroyed mountain home and is in search of a new place to live. He comes across a pretty glade with a single short, round tree occupying it and takes his rest underneath.

Oleafia is a tree sprite, shunned by the surrounding forest sprites, and finding a sleeping man, proceeds to fall out of her tree and onto him. Literally.

Both lonely, they are each what the other needs in their lives. Though the fairy tale world they live in is a harsh one, and they are separate species, it matters little to them. What matters is that they complete each other.

Daniel enthusiastically teaches the lovely, full-figured sprite all about sex and love, and Oleafia is a more than willing student from the moment she sees his huge branch.

Through opposition from other sprites and a spelled glade, will they be able to form an unbreakable bond? Or will they continue on their lonely ways?



*Enjoy this excerpt from Tree Sprite:*

Daniel felt movement underneath him. Carefully, he moved off his woman. Lying on his side, he left his arm wrapped loosely around her, keeping her close. He was nearly asleep when she moved again. Prying his eyes open, he watched as her hand rose and she skimmed it across her body.

Curious, he lifted his head and gazed down at her. "What are you doing, Oleafia?"

She cleared her throat and turned her head toward him. "I'm checking to make sure I have not turned to coal or ash."

He could not stop the laugh rising from his soul. She was beautiful in her honesty. After having dealt with dishonest elves, destructive giants and greedy humans, not to mention the other creatures and beings of this world, this one tree sprite was a fresh breeze cleansing the dusty corners of his being.

"Well, I don't know. Let me check." He started at her thigh, running his hand across the front of her leg and the curve of her hip. With the tips of his fingers brushing against the kinky emerald bush covering her mons, he cupped the slight bulge of her tummy. "This doesn't feel like coal. It's soft and smells sweet." Leaning over her body, he placed gentle kisses along her abdomen and the juncture where her thighs met her body.

"That's my bird's nest. Daniel, what are you—?"

"Wait, what do we have here?" Skimming his hands over her ribs, he nudged the undersides of her breasts with his thumbs. "Plump and ripe. No ash here."

"Oh, that's my mounds."

She moaned when he drug his tongue along the crease he made from pressing her breasts together. He couldn't help the smile that built up and crossed his face. As he continued to run his lips and tongue across and around her breasts, he considered how beautiful she was to him. His people were attracted to sparkling effervescence and Oleafia shone brighter than a finely cut gem. Her eyes glittered at him, her smile all but

blinded him, and her inquisitiveness touched his heart. Feeling the need to show her how happy she made him just by being herself, he rained kisses and nips along her upper torso. Laving the tight nubbins and the curve of her breasts, he pressed his lower body down on hers to keep her from squirming. She tasted wonderful, but he didn't linger. The uncontrolled movements her body made brought his cock excruciatingly sweet torment. He had to keep her still or he would go off before she was insane with pleasure.

Lucky for him, his people had high sexual urges and a short recovery time. This little tree sprite seemed as starved for love and touch as he felt. Ridding them both of the worst of the intense needs was his main goal. Mentally, he chuckled. They may be able to have a prolonged conversation if he succeeded in his endeavors. He would love to get to know Oleafia. What she felt and how she thought, then sharing his own would be nice. That in itself was strange. He had never wanted to know someone as much as he wanted to understand his little tree sprite. Prior to his mountain home exploding, he'd been considered a loner and a recluse. Oleafia was starting to change him.

But first...

First, he was going to make his little tree sprite need him as much as he was beginning to need her.

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