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Out of the Shadows

an Anthology of Novellas

by

Shara Jones,
Sheila Holloway,
and Laura Hamby

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Out of the Shadows

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The Haunting of Sarah Dyson

By Shara Jones

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To Laura. You make this writing gig FUN. To Sheila, for giving me my chance and for being willing to take another.

To my Mom. To Jason, Ray, Jr and Lindsey. I hope I make you as proud as you make me.

To my husband, Ray, who thinks every book should have a Harley in it.

About Shara Jones

Shara has been scribbling stories since taking Creative Writing in the 4th grade. She has been published with several short stories in national magazines and is currently finishing her first novel.

She is a member of the national organization, Romance Writers of America and belongs to her local chapter, Northwest Houston Romance Writers of America.

Shara lives just north of Houston with her husband, daughter and a black Toy Poodle who doesn't realize he is a d-o-g.

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CHAPTER ONE

“I have just the man for you, Sarah. He’s dead.”

Sarah Dyson grinned. “Perfect, just the way I like them. You know me so well.” Taking her proffered mug of steaming, fragrant coffee between her hands, Sarah looked expectantly at the older woman seated behind the aged and scarred desk. Glynda Davies, Director of the Drayton Falls Historical Society, returned a mischievous grin of her own. Short, steel-gray hair framed the woman’s lined face. Her bright red turtle-necked sweater seemed to be the only bit of relieving color in the dusty old office. Utilitarian putty colored metal filing cabinets stood sentry-like against the chipped and darkened once white wall paint. Pitted and aged brown bookshelves, which lined the various wall spaces, were covered in piles of old yellowing papers. Sarah glanced at her own clothes that tended towards earth tones to compliment her rusty auburn hair and pale complexion and felt she probably blended with the woodwork too.

Sarah absorbed the sense of familiarity from the room. Her frequent stints as a contract researcher for the society had brought her to this particular guest chair many times over the past several years. Her pulse quickened as always when on the verge of receiving a new subject to research.

“So who is my dead man?” She leaned forward, placed her mug on the edge of the desk while she opened her ever-present leather-bound notebook.

“First things first. Let me tell you why this particular subject is so important.”

“Aren’t all our research projects important?”

“This one even more so. At least, I’m hoping it turns out to be so.”

Sarah settled back into her chair. She let her notepad rest on her lap. “Well by the way you’re fidgeting in that chair, I’d say this must be a really interesting one. I’m all ears.”

“Good. With all the hoopla over the town’s one-hundred year founding celebration in full swing, it occurred to the Society’s Board that now would be the perfect time to begin a fund raising push for a new museum.” Glynda spread her hands to illustrate her point. In addition to the aged and weathered office furniture, boxes and boxes of historical records and books were lined and stacked against the peeling and cracked plaster walls. Storage space that had long ago been at a premium, no longer existed.

“And you think our dead man will somehow help with fund raising?” Sarah tried to keep the skepticism from sounding in her voice. She shifted in her chair, trying to maintain a neutral expression.

“Who doesn’t love a ghost? I want you to write the article to end all articles, Sarah. I want you to write about The River Man.”

Sarah’s mind blanked; she stared at Glynda for a long minute. Finally, she took a deep breath and gave a small smile.

“A ghost? Who exactly is The River Man?”

“Sarah! I can’t believe you haven’t run across references or at least heard the old stories about The

River Man.” Glynda sat back abruptly in her chair and pursed her lips. Her short-nailed fingertips drummed on her desk blotter.

Sarah shook her head. An auburn curl danced from its tucked in place behind her ear to whisper across her cheekbone. Sarah pushed the curl from her face and tried not to wilt under Glynda’s disbelieving stare. “Glynda, you’re beginning to freak me out. Tell me already.”

“The River Man is reported to have been a Revenue Cutter agent. It’s presumed his job was to police the river for any illicit dealings.” Glynda’s voice took on the cadence of a professor delivering a lecture. Sarah immediately began jotting notes as the woman spoke. “There was a fair bit of speculation as to who he might have been, but no one ever stepped up to claim knowledge of him. At the time when the town was just forming, it was rumored that an Artemis Townsend Wynstead met under cover of darkness and the heavy river mists to deal in questionable trading practices. On the night in question while the transaction was underway, the story goes that the River Man attempted to break-up the deal. A gunshot rang out and ear witnesses reported a loud splashing and the River Man was never seen again.”

Sarah sat back as Glynda’s recitation dwindled to an end.

“So what’s the mystery? Either Mr. Wynstead or his contact killed the lawman. Why weren’t they arrested and the mystery solved?” Sarah felt a twinge of disappointment settle in her chest. There didn’t seem to be much to the mystery.

“That’s just it. The mystery is why there wasn’t an investigation; seems that no branch of any legal department stepped forward to claim the missing and presumed dead lawman. Without evidence of a body, no charges were filed.”

“You mean that no one saw anything?”

“Only ear witnesses. The fog was so thick and they were transacting their business in the middle of the river, so jurisdiction was impossible to determine. Which, as you know, is why so many business deals took place in the middle of the river. Neither State on either side of the riverbank could positively determine who had legal jurisdiction to prosecute.”

“So, the matter was just swept away, so to speak?”

“You could say that, though Artemis Wynstead and family had to leave town, the suspicion of guilt proved to be too much. Benson Boating also lost on the deal as they were the transport for Artemis that night and were also under a cloud of suspicion, but nothing could ever be proved. Their business suffered until they closed the doors.”

“It sounds as if you already know all you need to about the subject.” Sarah began to close her notebook.

“No, I don’t. I, and the Society, want you to research and discover who the River Man was and what exactly happened all those years ago.”

Sarah stared at the Director, flabbergasted. “How on earth can I discover that after all these years? You said yourself that no one ever stepped up to claim the River Man.”

“Interview the people, Sarah. And here are at least a hundred years of records, notes and letters.” Glynda swept her hand indicating the boxes Sarah had earlier noted. “We’ve been collecting family records dating back since the town’s founding. Surely in all of this, you’ll find what you need. And, to sweeten the deal, it seems as if the new antiquities dealer in town just might be related to the mysterious Mr. Artemis Townsend Wynstead.”

“I still don’t see how this is going to build a new museum.”

“Well, since the River Man is back, we present the information to the Mayor and city council. We’ll be able to boast of a real, live ghost. I’m sure your research will give us the facts we need to flesh out the old rumors. We can capitalize on the mystery and our resident ghost.”

“He’s back? A real, live ghost?” Sarah felt her lips twitch although a mantle of concern settled on her shoulders. This assignment seemed so counter to the usually serious approach the society used to handle research. Something felt contrived in all of this.

“Yes, a caped figure has recently been seen by the river when the mists are heavy.” Glynda’s voice dropped conspiratorially.

A small laugh escaped before Sarah could rein it in. By the look on Glynda’s face, Sarah knew the older woman was serious.

Straightening in her chair, Sarah cleared her throat and pasted a serious expression on her face. "And couldn't this be just anybody?"

"No. Witnesses say he just melts into the mists and searches don't reveal a thing. It's him."

"I see." But, in reality, she didn't.

However, an hour later found her back at her house, unloading stack after stack of old records, books and notes, along with a pounding headache and more than a twinge of misgiving.

Who didn't love a ghost? Not Sarah Elaine Dyson, most assuredly.

* * * *

The crisp crackle of autumn leaves underfoot gave Sarah a satisfying inner glow. She tugged her wrap more closely around her and slowed her pace a measure to enjoy the evening walk. Faint hints of wood smoke wafted from brick chimneys in the residential neighborhood and she thought she could also detect the acrid scent of freshly burnt leaves.

She loved the fall season. It spoke to her of ancient rites and observances of the old ways, the turning of the cycle of life to the quiet time. A time for reflection and restoration. She was especially drawn to the season since tonight was also her birthday.

A barely perceptible mist writhed in the air and clung to her skin. She shivered at the slight dampness, but her pace never quickened. She flicked a wayward curl behind her shoulder and shook her head to resettle her cloud of hair. A soft sheen of dampness had settled there.

She wasn't in a hurry for the walk to end or for the evening's festivities to begin. Her mind still tangled with the River Man mystery. It had all the earmarks of an impossible assignment and the taint of capitalistic motivations. She'd never in her life researched for the reason she'd been handed yesterday afternoon--to actually raise speculation in order to generate hype to pluck funds from the public. It felt dirty to her.

The mist continued to rise, rolling in less gently now and giving a slight isolating and sinister air to her walk.

She acknowledged the eerie feeling with a small smile for her silliness. Nothing exciting ever happened in Drayton Falls, Texas. River Man ghost, or not. She passed under the spreading branches of an old oak tree and noted the full moon that was visible from between the bare tree branches.

Perfect.

Her best friend Trista would be ecstatic to discover that she had a full gibbous moon for her Halloween party. Knowing Trista's slightly odd tendencies, she probably already knew the current moon phase.

She glanced skyward and felt her scalp tingle in almost a prescience.

Trista and her husband Bryan had promised that this evening would be something special for her, something that would appeal to her on many different levels.

She'd just laughed at her friends, thinking that they were way too caught up in the Halloween spirit as it were.

Her heart leapt as a caped figure loomed out of the mist, too far away for her to make out the details, while still being close enough to cause her pulse to race. He seemed to be almost waiting. For her? The corners of her lips quirked up in response to that notion. Apparently, she too was caught up in the eerie evening as well. The rumors of the River Man flicked in her brain, but she dismissed the notion quickly. A party-goer. Nothing more.

Just as a grin began on her face it faded as the shrouded figure seemed stare at her before disappearing into the fog with a swirl of his cloak. She knew the mystery person was male by the breadth of his shoulders and the powerful strides that carried him away from her direction.

She felt a lingering sensual tug on her senses; almost as if her haunting stranger had been waiting for her; teasing and inflaming her senses.

"Get you, Dyson!" she hooted aloud. "You really need to go bob for apples and soak your head."

Nevertheless, she pulled the warm wool more closely around her shoulders and scanned the area thoroughly as she made her way closer to Trista's house.

She neared the house and heard the music wafting into the night long before she could see the amber light glowing from the front porch. Costumed couples talked and laughed in scattered groups on the

lawn and on the wide porch area.

She didn't see a mysterious man in a cape anywhere.

"Sarah! What took you so long? You just live down the block." Trista Martin reached out and wrapped crimson nails around Sarah's wrist, tugging her inside the house packed with partygoers.

"There's someone we want you to meet."

Sarah groaned. "Trista, you promised."

"I know, but this is someone special. Just you wait and see."

Weren't all of Trista's well-meaning prospects "special"? Doctors, lawyers and the proverbial Indian chief, but none even remotely raised her blood pressure or made her heart race. Although, while odd, she had to admit the astrologer had been on the interesting side.

Focusing back on her best friend's conversation, she clued in to at least part of it.

"We have the same birthday?" She had to admit that did pique her interest some, but her mind still lingered on the mystery man she'd encountered earlier. Sarah watched Trista's beaded Cleopatra-wigged form wiggle through the crowd to flag someone down. She set her drink down and prepared to meet yet another of Trista's well meant, but perfectly unacceptable, fix-up men.

"Well, so you're the woman that is trying to horn in on my birthday?"

Sarah stood rooted to the spot. She had sensed "his" presence even before she heard his words. She knew who stood there before she even turned around. She felt her pulse leap wildly and her lips parted as her breath came in shallow measure.

She felt him standing so closely, yet not touching. It felt as if an invisible bond surrounded them.

She vaguely heard Trista making the introductions.

Robert Townsend. The name tickled a vague memory.

She turned around slowly and met his eyes, which twinkled with humor and glowed with something more indefinable. He gave her a lazy smile while trying to adopt a stern look. "I guess you'll want to share my birthday cake too."

"Well, I'm a greedy girl, but I'll tell you what. You keep the birthday cake for yourself and I'll just make do with the gifts. Fair compromise, don't you think?" Sarah gave him her best innocent look, batting eyelashes and all.

Her reward was a deep, rumbling laugh. With a silent gesture, he invited her to dance. A slow, sensual melody filled the room and couples began filling the space cleared for dancing.

He flicked back his cape, held out his hand in a silent invitation, and Sarah drifted into his embrace, immediately falling into perfect rhythm. His warm breath lightly fanned her hair and their thighs gently brushed. They didn't speak by mutual agreement, choosing instead to let the soft music drift around them.

When the song ended, they linked hands and snagged two glasses of wine on their journey to the outside and fresh air.

The evening was a pleasant phase of discovery; a shared interest in historical movies; a similar dislike of double cheese pizza, but anchovies were highly acceptable; and a love of leisurely spent weekend mornings listening to soft jazz while sipping fragrant coffee.

Too soon, the evening ended and the inevitable uncertainties rose in Sarah's mind; will he want to see me again? Will he ask for my phone number and never call? Do I really want him to call?

To the last question, she knew she could answer with a resounding 'yes'.

"So, do I have to follow you home and transcribe your phone number from your very telephone, or will you give in easily." He asked with an exaggerated waggle of his brow like a silent screen villain.

Laughing, Sarah replied, "Heaven forbid! I'm a modern woman. I plan to give you the wrong phone number and make you wonder if it was really a mistake on my part or a deliberate brush-off. Very trick or treatish, huh?"

His grin widened and he leaned in conspiratorially, whispering in his best Bela Lugosi imitation, "Then I will have to suck your blood to make you my bride. Now would you consider that a trick or a treat?" He slid his large hand gently around her neck, brushing his thumb lightly across the tenderest part of her throat, just under her ear.

Blushing, Sarah laughed and extricated herself to search for paper and pen to give the requested

phone number. If he saw her hand shaking as she wrote, he didn't give any indication for which she was glad.

Sarah gathered her cloak to cover her Mistress of the Dark costume, and said her goodbyes to Trista and Bryan and headed outside to begin the walk home. Robert had left just minutes before she made her goodbyes to her hosts. She felt a tingle of disappointment at not seeing him one last time, but she shrugged. He had a long drive home.

Rising up from the shadows, a caped silhouette suddenly startled her and she gave a little yelp.

"Whoa, there! It's just me," Robert said as he rose to his feet and stepped from the shadows into the soft glow of the porch light.

"Oh, you startled me! Why are you sitting here? I thought you were on your way home." Her heart was still racing from the fright. She patently ignored the voice in her head screaming, "*The River Man!*"

"I didn't want you to walk home by yourself. It's nearly Halloween after all--the witching hour is upon us." He looked a little self-conscious and uncertain of his reception.

"I think I'm pretty safe from any witches, especially in this costume," she joked. "I appreciate your concern, but didn't you say you had a long drive across town?"

"A few minutes won't make that much of a difference. I wanted to see you safely home."

"It's okay, really. I just live down the block." Sarah pointed in the general direction and smiled shyly.

Her heart skipped a small beat at his look of genuine regret that the evening was coming to an end.

Sarah suddenly realized that while they stood talking by the front porch of Trista's house, the earlier misty, white fog had thickened, giving the night an even spookier, eerie feeling.

"I'll go then, Goodnight, Sarah."

"I'd better go too. Goodnight, Robert," she said over her shoulder as she willed herself to turn for home. "I had a really nice-*Robert?* Where are you?" Her question hung in the air, and the only answer was silence.

Gooseflesh crept up her arms as she searched the deserted street for any sign of him. Scanning, she saw no one else on the street, and listening, she didn't hear even a car engine to break the silence.

"Weird! Where did he go so fast? Like a ghost!" A shiver shook her frame. Bundling into her woolen cloak a little more deeply, she turned quickly towards home and resisted the urge to cover her head and run. "I don't even believe in ghosts," she muttered. "At least, I didn't."

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CHAPTER TWO

Sarah stood outside The Grotto Grill, watching the faces of the passersby and catching snippets of random conversations, which made her smile. She'd arranged with Robert earlier in the day to meet for dinner. He'd called this a belated birthday celebration so how could she refuse? She felt a nervous jump inside anytime she spied a tall, well-built, dark-haired man come into view only to be disappointed. In the single day since Trista's party he'd been on her mind more than she wanted to acknowledge. A rarity for her, having little inclination or even luck, when it came to dealing with men.

A gentle puff of air brushed her cheek and before she could turn her head, she sensed a presence standing beside her. Swiveling her head, shock held her still as she registered the fact that she stood alone.

A frown creased her forehead as she pondered the peculiar sensation.

"Hi! Have you been waiting long?" Robert stood just inches from her other shoulder as if he had been standing there all along. A tiny ripple of some indiscernible feeling raced along Sarah's nerve endings.

"Where did you come from? And how do you move so fast?" she asked, laughing a little nervously. "One minute here, the next minute vanished, or vice versa tonight."

"He walks as silent as the grave," he intoned in a sepulchral voice. Laughing at what must have been a startled look on her face, he reached out for her hand.

"See? Not a ghost. Flesh and blood."

Her fingers twitched in his at the word, *blood*.

"Come on. Let's go in, I'm starved."

The warmth of his hand in hers sent a comforting frisson throughout her body and her tensed muscles began to relax. Sarah shrugged off her earlier misgivings as a lesson in the ridiculous, relaxed and began to enjoy the evening.

"So, what do you do Sarah? I can't quite picture you at work." Robert leaned back and took a small sip from his dark, red wine. A small strand of near black hair fell across his forehead in marked contrast to his fair skin. A faint drift of his aftershave wafted to her side of the table. She tried to be discreet as she inhaled his signature fragrance.

Mesmerized, Sarah tried to remember just what she did for a living.

"Sarah?"

She shook herself from her reverie. "Oh, normally I teach history at Drayton Falls Community College." No wonder she couldn't recall her occupation; it sounded dull to most people. But the study of history wasn't dull, not to her. She loved it. The modern world spun too fast for her; she preferred the ancient and merely old to most things new.

"Why normally?"

"I received a grant for my historical research so I've taken a leave of absence from the college."

Robert slid closer in his chair. He studied her more closely, unnerving her under his scrutiny.

"What? Do I have something on my face?" Sarah laughed shortly, trying to resist the urge to squirm under his questioning gaze.

"Nothing but fresh-faced beauty," he replied with a wicked smile.

It should have made her scoff, such a tired, worn line, but coming from Robert, she believed his words and, believed that he also believed his words.

And she smiled.

"History? Now, that is amazing."

His eyes twinkled and a slow grin spread across his face. She felt a bit off-kilter as if she were missing a piece of a puzzle.

“Why is that amazing, Robert?” Her voice sounded distant to her ears. Thirsty, she reached for her glass of red wine. She stared into the deep, ruby liquid for a few seconds before lifting the glass to her lips. The full-bodied wine produced an instant warming sensation in her stomach and she relaxed.

“Tell me more, Sarah.” The room noises in the restaurant faded into the background. His rich, warm voice wreathed around her, lulling her. Hypnotizing her. Coaxing her.

“I-I’m also a member of the Drayton Falls Historical Society. I’m writing an article for the Drayton Falls Region Historical Journal.”

“What about, Sarah? What are you writing about?”

His voice, did it sound deeper? More compelling? Sometime earlier, he’d captured her hand in his without her realizing. He gently stroked her pulse point that thrummed wildly under his caress.

Her thought processes seemed muddled. She glanced down. She’d emptied her glass. When did she drink it? She ran her tongue over her dry lips. His eyes followed the movement and he tipped his wineglass, offering her a taste of the potent wine.

Her lips barely grazed the rim of the glass when a loud metallic clang rang out across the restaurant making her jump and breaking the spell. A tickle of wine spilled on the white tablecloth and splashed small droplets on the sleeve of her blouse.

“Oh,” she breathed, startled and a bit confused. She glanced across at Robert, but he was gone. Frowning, she turned her head to see him standing beside her chair, motioning for a waiter and requesting club soda for the stained blouse. When had he moved?

“Robert?” She questioned, but wasn’t really sure what she was asking, or what she expected him to answer.

“I’m sorry. I’ve ruined your blouse.” Robert’s brow furrowed a bit in concern. “While we’re waiting for the club soda, you can finish telling me what you’re writing for the Society.”

“Writing? I’m writing an article on the River Man.” She smiled, pleased that her voice sounded more normal and assured.

She pushed her refilled wine glass away. She didn’t drink much and usually that was a glass of light dinner wine. Robert had chosen a full-bodied red wine, a more potent one than her system could handle.

“The River Man? Is that like a formal title for this person?” Robert leaned back again, with a water glass in his hand. His half-full wine glass stood untouched.

“Yes and I hardly know much more than that. I’ve just received the assignment so I’m only in the beginning stages. But I thought I’d focus on him and two men in particular, one of whom is probably a distant relative of my family, and the other might be the one that killed the River Man, if the rumors are correct. It’s hard to tell what really happened since it all took place in the middle of the river under cover of darkness and fog.” Sarah smiled shyly, trying to not let her zest for her work scare Robert, who probably didn’t appreciate history with her same enthusiasm.

“And who are these people? Their names, I mean?”

“Maxwell Dyson and Artemis Townsend Wynstead. How funny you have the same name.”

“Not funny, all things being what they are.”

“All things being what?” Sarah leaned forward, fascinated and more than a little curious. She sensed this might lead her a bit further in solving the mystery surrounding Artemis Wynstead and the River Man.

“Do you know the purpose for meeting in the middle of the river?” he parried.

“Yes, they were reputed to have met under cover of night to transact secretive business in the middle of the river. It seems that legal jurisdiction is more difficult to determine when conducted in the exact center of the river which divides two States.”

“Ah, here’s to clever businessmen and tenacious researchers,” he said raising his water glass in a small mock salute.

Sarah felt a coolness drop over the subject.

“I’m sorry. I forget that not everyone is interested in history and things from the past.”

“On the contrary, Sarah. I’m very interested in those things too. Didn’t I tell you what I do?”

She shook her head, a tentative smile strained across her face. She felt tense for some reason she couldn’t define.

"I'm an antiques dealer. It's the family business. How fortuitous for me that you're researching this particular person. I'd like to clear the family name."

Her breath slowly left her lungs. The family business? "Then you're related to the Artemis Wynstead? Your name is Townsend and not Wynstead?"

"My grandfather dropped the Wynstead and took Townsend as the family surname. In light of the rumors and unpleasantness, it seemed prudent."

"Clear the family name? What makes you so sure of his innocence?" Her face felt flushed in light of her question, but she had to ask.

"I'm sure. I'm also expectant that your research will bear that out."

"And if it doesn't?" She locked eyes with him and held her breath. Sarah watched him sit back in his chair; a thoughtful frown pulled his dark brows together as he looked at her in consideration.

"I believe that it will."

She slumped a bit into her chair when she saw his quick smile and spark of earnest confidence.

She took in his broad-shoulders and well-formed arms. His physique, while not bulky, spoke to being well-muscled and athletic. He didn't strike her as what she normally would picture an antique dealer looking like.

"You sell antiques?"

"I sell antiques. Oddities, rarities and yes, the occasional bits of furniture." A broad white smile split his face, his eyes crinkling in the corners with humor. "It's not without its dangers."

"You make it sound more Indiana Jonesish than learned professional."

His genuine, deep laughter surprised her and warmed her at the same time. She laughed too, though she wasn't sure why. It just felt like a relief to do so.

"Wouldn't that be something," he grinned and gave her a wicked wink.

"Yes, wouldn't it?" Sarah suddenly felt the urge for that wine.

"Robert? Does my research bother you? I mean, considering it's your great-grandfather after all and the facts might not help in clearing the family name. It might be quite the opposite, in fact."

He frowned and remained silent before tilting his head and draining the last of his wine. She watched his throat muscles as he swallowed.

"My grandfather felt it best to distance our family from the rumors of possible unsavory or unethical dealings. You can understand that as the business continues in my family, some feel that dredging up the old stories might not be in our best interests."

Sarah shivered and felt her insides contract. What were the odds that the most compatible person she'd ever met would be affected by her research? "Robert, I-"

He placed a warm hand over hers. "Some of the family members might object, but I myself don't. If I can help, let me know. I'd like to clear the family name, even if most people in town don't realize the connection."

"Robert. Did you know who I was when you met me at the party? I mean, did you know then about my research assignment?"

"No, Sarah I honestly didn't. This is one of the more amazing coincidences that tend to happen in my life."

Sarah held his gaze searching for the truth. Satisfied, they began to discuss other subjects until the wait staff began piling chairs onto tabletops and dimming the lights.

Leaving the restaurant only minutes before the proprietors locked the door, Robert escorted Sarah towards her car. She'd parked next to the city's memorial park and looking across the rolling expanse of lush, green park lawn, she could see the rising of a light evening mist.

The moon, visible just over the treetops held onto it much of its fullness, though the waning process had already begun. Fine fingers of cloud cover crawled over the face of the moon. Somewhere, she heard the eerie cry of a bat.

"Tomorrow is Halloween."

Sarah glanced over at the man walking by her side. She smiled. "Yes. I can't wait. I like it when it falls on a weekend."

"I presume you already have your pumpkins carved?" Robert's voice held a note of mock concern.

She wrinkled her nose. "No. No pumpkins."

She looked back to see Robert standing still, frozen in place. She turned back in alarm. "What? What's wrong?"

"Woman! You mean to tell me you have no pumpkins? How can that be?"

Sarah laughed at the comical expression on his face.

Reaching his side, she looped her arm through his and pulled him back into step beside her.

"If it means so much to you, I'll buy pumpkins."

"And carve them?"

She glanced under her lashes at his face. Her lips twitched. "If it means so much to you, I'll cut a few holes in them and light a candle, okay?"

His face scrunched in disgust. "Cut a few holes? Sarah Dyson, that is disgraceful. We can't have that." He shook his head, his brow furrowed with a mock frown.

"We can't?" Her voice dropped into a soft, teasing tone.

"No. I'll tell you what. You provide us some sustenance and I'll provide the pumpkins and the skills to carve the best Halloween pumpkins in town."

"Oh, my. The best pumpkins in town? Well, I can hardly say no to that, can I?"

Robert dropped a soft, brushing kiss across her lips. "I'm hoping that you won't."

Sarah melted against him under the frosted light of the moon. "Then I won't say it." She tilted up her face and he obliged her with a soul-unsettling kiss as the haze swirled around them. She felt as if she were being drawn deeper into the mists; she could feel the beating of Robert's heart echoing hers. Time stood still.

Slowly they moved apart. Linking hands, they moved closer to her car, neither saying a word. She felt in perfect harmony with Robert and the world.

"I'll see you tomorrow." Robert held her close and whispered against her hair.

"What time? Will you be coming early?" Sarah stood in the circle of his embrace feeling protected and cared for. Strange sensations for someone she'd just met, and yet it seemed timeless.

"Yes. I'll be coming early because I have a meeting with a client tomorrow evening. Is four o'clock too early?"

A sense of sharp disappointment washed over her. She'd hoped. "Four will be fine."

He must have sense something. "I scheduled the meeting for that time so I could be back to see the trick or treaters. Do you mind if I come back then?"

Sarah tried to keep the big smile on the inside, but it escaped in the form of a giggle. "I'd love for you to come back. The children are so cute. It would be a shame not to see their appreciation for your carving talents for yourself."

"Then, it's a date." Robert snaffled the car keys from her hand and opened her car door. "Drive safely and have sweet dreams."

She eased inside and fitted the keys in the ignition. "I enjoyed the evening... Robert?"

Only the whispering wind in the trees answered her.

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CHAPTER THREE

Sarah drove along the eerily quiet streets toward home. The evening had been so pleasant, but in some ways, odd and unsettling. The dinner conversation had taken on a surreal otherworldly feeling.

She lightly brushed her fingertips across her lips and wondered now if she'd only imagined speaking the words to him. Only the background noise had pulled her back into the moment.

I'm being silly. I just need to remind myself that it was Robert for goodness sake! Not a ghost, spook or even a specter!

Just Robert, a man that I could envision falling in love with. Growing so much closer until we were we were finishing each other's sentences and knew each others likes and pet peeves as well as our own.

If there was any fly in the ointment, any hesitancy on my part, it could safely be put down to Robert's strange way of suddenly appearing or disappearing like a wraith.

The waterway bridge loomed into view and almost without volition, Sarah pulled into the gravel parking lot that fronted the river.

Her hands rested across the top of the steering wheel as she let her gaze wander across the black ribbon of deep water that flowed powerfully between the banks. A fog rolled over the top of the water giving it a near mystical look.

She pondered Robert's revelation. The coincidence of meeting a relative of her current research subject amazed her. She would need to be very thorough in her research. She mentally crossed her fingers that her research wouldn't reveal anything that might damage Robert and his family's business or, more importantly, his reputation.

She breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't openly objected.

Letting her mind drift, she recalled the old rumors. Tonight would a perfect night for such a clandestine rendezvous; a full moon to see by and a thick all-encompassing shroud of fog to obscure identities beyond a short sight distance, she thought to herself.

A shiver shook her. She needed to be home. The night was slipping into morning and she had a lot of research to do tomorrow.

A movement caught her attention out of the corner of her eye. Someone, too far away for her to make out any details past the fact that it was a large male, stood just on the rise of the riverbank, staring. The hazy figure stared straight at her for a long minute before disappearing into the swirling, white cloud.

Her heart thudded in her chest and the hair rose on the back of her neck.

Robert?

* * * *

Sarah woke early the next morning, tired from tossing and turning.

Her mind mulled over the idea that Robert had stood watching her before disappearing into the fog bank.

"Why am I so sure that was Robert?" she asked in frustration. She got no response; there was only the dancing of dust motes illuminated in a slanting morning sunbeam.

With a growl of irritation, she flung back the covers and padded softly into the shower.

Sarah stood at the kitchen counter half an hour later with a steaming mug of coffee in hand as she planned out the day.

"First, organizing and then research."

She felt a little jump of excitement at beginning a new project. Especially one that involved an interesting relative directly related to the man she was currently dating, and her own distant relative.

Add that to the birthday she and Robert shared, and it began to feel as if her relationship with Robert were fated.

She smiled at her whimsy. Fated. Did she really believe that?

In no hurry, she moved into the front room of her house that she'd dubbed the library. The room fronted by two large French windows and having a second wide window on the side wall, let in plenty of sunlight. When the windows were open, a nice breeze cooled the room. Her computer desk placement afforded a view of her lush lawn and landscaping. Scenic and tranquil, the multitudes of wind and water chimes tucked among her plants soothed her soul. The chimes located on the wraparound front porch area also acted like an early warning device as the slightest brush against them made a tinkling symphony. Lulled, she turned her attention to the newest stack of dusty books delivered to her from the Historical Society.

She occupied the next several hours organizing, sorting and labeling the piles of books, records and assorted information received from the Historical Society. Mindful of their value she took great care with the records.

A quick lunch and she settled in with her first chosen book.

Carefully flipping through it, she scanned for the names that held the most interest for her, pausing occasionally to jot down pertinent information.

Three hours later, she closed the third book, leaned back in her desk chair and stretched. As usual, she'd lost track of time.

Pulling her legal pad full of scribbled notes closer, she curled her feet into her chair and studied her entries more carefully.

There were reams of scattered information on Maxwell Dyson; his family history, his business dealings and his death. Most of his business concerns dealt with acting as a clearinghouse for local merchants. He arranged shipment of their merchandise upriver to various ports. By the looks of things, he had prospered and been respected in the community. She needed to research further into the genealogy and see how she might be related, but the one nagging point seemed to be Artemis T. Wynstead and the dealings Maxwell had with him.

She had yet to run across anything to connect Maxwell Dyson with him. As robust and complete as Maxwell's records seemed to be, Artemis' were the complete opposite.

Gnawing thoughtfully on her lower lip, she reached absently for her mug of coffee and grimaced at the coldness of the contents.

"There can be few things as bad as cold coffee," she muttered. *She really needed to get a cat if she were going to continue talking to herself*, she thought.

Tossing her pen atop her yellow notepad, she stood and headed for the kitchen. With any luck, the automatic coffeemaker still warmed the pot. Glancing at her watch she registered she had just under an hour before she needed to worry about her early dinner date with Robert.

Peering out the kitchen window, sipping her freshly poured coffee, she registered the cool air wafting over her bare feet. There was a strong breeze coming in from the opened front windows today; so strong in fact, the lack of wind chime music surprised her.

"That's actually very odd."

She headed into the library to investigate. Her hot coffee sloshed over the rim and scalded her hand with her abrupt stop.

Her light, gauzy sheers, which should have been blowing in towards the center of the room from the stiff breeze, were actually fluttering on the outside of the house as if the wind had blown them the opposite direction.

Impossible.

She moved further into the room and noticed her legal pad now lying face down on the wooden oak flooring, nearly in the middle of the room. She felt a tingle run up her spine.

This was all wrong.

Strands of hair waved back from her face. She could only stare at the white sheers fanning in the outside air like a white flag announcing surrender.

The eerie silence bore in on her. Why weren't the chimes ringing?

Gliding silently forward, she slowly bent down to retrieve her note pad. Could it have blown off the desk? She hefted it in her hand without looking at it, measuring the weight. It didn't seem likely. She couldn't take her eyes from the window.

A cat, maybe?

She reached the window and drew in a deep breath. Unnerved, she leaned out to survey the porch. And noticed her assorted wind chimes neatly draped over the white front porch railing.

No cat had done that.

Drawing her head back into the room, she glanced down at the notepad and froze.

All of her notes had been forcibly ripped out.

Definitely, not a cat.

A hard, racking shiver shook her body. Someone had come into her home while she stood only two rooms away, stolen her notes and crept away. Or had they? She glanced at the out-turned curtains. That must have been how the curtains got out there. The burglar had dragged them out in his trail as he fled.

A creak caused her to spin around towards the library door.

The coffee cup crashed to the floor as her screams echoed off the walls, reverberating as her knees buckled and her world went dark.

* * * *

“Sarah. Sarah, open your eyes.”

Groggily, Sarah tried to force her eyelids open. Suddenly, the morning events slammed into her waking conscience sending her bolt upright.

“A man! A man broke into my house. I saw him standing in the doorway.” Sarah fisted handfuls of Robert’s shirt and frantically pulled him closer.

“Sarah, you saw me standing in the doorway. I let myself in the backdoor with the pumpkins. I put them down and went to look for you. When I entered the room you started screaming and I guess you fainted.”

“Robert, someone broke it. They stole my notes. Why? Why would they steal my history notes?”

“Sarah, honey. Just rest a minute and let’s see if we can sort this out.” Robert lifted her from the floor where she’d crumpled and cradled her in his arms. Easily carrying her as if she were the merest lightweight, he moved to the small sofa and gently settled her onto his lap.

She protested a bit, but soon calmed. His strong arms felt secure. His heartbeat thrummed against her body, soothing her and reassuring her that she was safe with him.

He gently swayed his knees, effectively rocking her, and giving her time to assimilate things quietly.

“What I don’t understand is why? Why would someone come into my house to take research notes?” Sarah buried her face in his shoulder, her mind whirling. “Why not the books? I can just research my notes again.”

She sat up and stared at him.

“What?”

“You!”

“Now, Sarah, you don’t think that I stole your notes--.”

She shook her head impatiently, “No! But the timing. You had to have seen something...”

“No, I didn’t see a thing. I drove up and got the pumpkins from the backseat floorboards and let myself into the kitchen and came to look for you.”

“I was only in the kitchen for a minute and walked back in here and saw things were different. You came in after that. The timing was too close for you to not see someone on the porch removing the wind chimes or crawling out of the window.” She pounded a fist on her leg in frustration.

“No, I didn’t. I’m so sorry that I didn’t. And for the record, I don’t give a damn about your notes.”

Sarah frowned at his remark.

“I only care about you, Sarah. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

Sarah sank back against him, her lips parted slightly in surprise. Did he feel the connection between them too?

Robert took advantage of her stillness and cupped her face with his hand. Looking deeply into her eyes, he pulled her soul upward and kissed her until she couldn’t remember her name; until she couldn’t remember where she ended and he began.

When the kiss ended, she still sat on his lap, her head resting against his shoulder. He gently began to sway his knees to the rhythm of his tuneless humming.

“Robert?”

“Yes, hon?”

“Do you believe in ghosts?”

PAGEBREAK

CHAPTER FOUR

“Oh, Sarah, honey. This has shaken you up more than I figured. Did you hit your head when you fainted?” Robert slid his hands through her hair, feeling for an injury.

“No, no, Robert. I’m fine. Just - just tell me. Do you?”

“Sarah?” He questioned. Concern etched his face for a minute before his chocolaty-warm laugh settled between them like an invisible divider.

Sarah struggled to rise, but he gently held her in place.

“No, I like you here just fine.” He grinned wickedly and gave her rounded fanny a tender pat. “I know the lure that historical stories and items can pose.” He held up a hand asking for her patience. “The tendency to romanticize things, but to answer your question, no; I don’t believe in ghosts.”

Sarah signed and sank back against him. She didn’t really either. Did she?

“Then how does this make sense?” she mumbled, more to herself than to Robert.

“How would a ghost make any sense?”

“Well, I don’t know, but something happened here today and I don’t understand it. I don’t understand anything anymore. Even you--,” she broke off.

“Even me, what?”

“Nothing. Forget it.”

“Sarah, don’t play that game.” Robert tilted her face until he could clearly see her eyes. She felt a tug on her senses.

“How do you do it, Robert?” she whispered, her eyes roving over his face, her hand raised to touch his cheek.

Robert leaned closer, “How do I do what?”

“Suddenly appear. Silently. I turn around and there you are,” her voice sounded strained to her ears.

“I walk quietly. I always have. That doesn’t make me a ghost.”

She felt a furious blush rise against her skin. She knew she sounded like a hysterical female. He was no spirit; she could feel his heartbeat under the palm of her hand. She could feel the heat of his body enveloping her as she sat perched on his lap. No specter was he.

“I’m being silly as you say. Romanticizing this whole thing. Must be my close proximity to you,” she said lightly, struggling to her feet. “But I still don’t have a plausible explanation for what happened here today. And I need one, Robert. I need it.”

“Someone came through your window and took your notes. It’s Halloween. A teenage prank is most likely.”

Sarah listened, but didn’t lend much credence to his explanation. “I suppose. But that doesn’t explain the mystery man who’s been literally popping up from nowhere.”

Robert’s swaying stilled. “Mystery man? You have a stalker?”

“No, just--. Robert you weren’t out by the river last night after we parted, were you?”

“I went home. I thought you did too.”

“I just took a little drive.” She shook her head. “I’m fine, really. Just a bit keyed up. It was kind of spooky.”

Robert stayed silent for a long minute before giving her a light squeeze of comfort. “Listen, if you’re feeling better, those pumpkins won’t carve themselves. How about we order some Chinese food in and get to carving. I have to leave by six to make my meeting, but then I should be right back.”

“Dinner! Oh, Robert, I completely forgot. I’d planned to start dinner and then I discovered the break-in. How did you know I didn’t have dinner ready?”

“I came through the kitchen. Go. Phone. I’ll carve.”

Sarah smiled her thanks and scooted for the phone. She placed the order and wandered into the

kitchen to watch Robert carving the pumpkins.

"These pumpkins have already been hollowed." Sarah leaned closer to peer inside.

Robert grinned wickedly. "I paid one of my neighbor's kids to hollow them out once I cut the top. That part of carving is just gross."

Sarah laughed at his look of disgust. "That's cheating."

"I think it was a dazzling stroke of genius on my part. Leaves more time for carving my works of art."

She snorted and flipped the pages of the fancy carving designs and touched the tiny carving tools he'd brought along.

"These are dazzling. Not exactly the triangles and circles I cut into pumpkins in my day."

"Nothing wrong with a classically carved pumpkin, but this is much more fun. There."

She leaned down for a closer look. Slowly she straightened and gave him a sarcastic look. "A ghost flying from a house?"

Robert gave her an innocent look. "What? I'd already chosen the design before I got here."

She narrowed her gaze into a mock frown. "I've got my eye on you, Mister."

"Here's some money. Go pay the man," he grinned.

Sarah's brow crinkled in confusion. She opened her mouth only to hear the doorbell ring.

Glancing over her shoulder as she left the kitchen, she heard Robert laughing softly.

An hour later, Sarah and Robert sat on her sofa, admiring the freshly carved pumpkins. In addition to the ghost house, there was a vampire profile and an adorable kitten face. Robert protested the kitty; he'd wanted a howling werewolf. Sarah's tea lights were already set inside, waiting for the twilight to fall and the trick-or-treaters to arrive.

"Do you mind me spending time here, Sarah?" he asked as they sat nibbling the remainder of the Chinese take-out. "We've only just met two days ago."

"Wee-ell, you do eat more than your share of the moo goo gai pan and take up a lot of space on the couch...," she teased, laughing as he tried to look sheepish and failed utterly.

She actually loved the fact that Robert wanted to spend so much time with her. The inner glow he lit inside her with his thoughtfulness and attentiveness made Sarah realize how quiet her house and even her life without him seemed. She liked him taking up space.

Robert lifted his arm from the back of the sofa cushion where it rested behind her head. Rising, he held out his hand for her empty plate.

Smiling up at him, she saw a slight frown furrowing his brow.

"I suppose its time for you to leave."

"Yes. I have to meet my client, but I'll be back to hand out candy with you, if you're sure you don't mind."

"I'm positive," she called after his retreating back.

Uncurling her legs, she stood and stretched slightly.

Suddenly she froze in place.

"Oh, no!"

On her hands and knees, she peered under the sofa and coffee table, searching for the shoes she'd kicked off earlier. Spying the toe of her shoe just showing from under the sofa, she extended her hand to grab it.

"Lose something?"

Sarah jumped, cracking her head on the corner of the coffee table. She felt her teeth clack together and saw stars momentarily. "Ooh."

"Oh, Sarah! Are you alright?"

"I'm going to put a bell around your neck," she muttered. Robert put his hands under her arms and hauled her gently to her feet. She swayed unsteadily until he pushed her back onto the sofa.

"I'm so sorry. Would you like some ice for your head? And what were you doing down there?"

"Looking for my shoes. I forgot to buy candy. Can you believe that?"

"Oh, you're going to be in big trouble." Robert grinned impudently. "I'd offer to pick some up on my way back, but I don't think I'll get finished in time."

“No, I’ll go, but thanks for offering. I’ll just get my shoes and walk you out.” She pointedly pushed the offending table further away and gingerly extracted her shoe. Her head swam a bit and she knew she’d have a lump by morning.

“I’m parked out back.” Robert held open the back door for her to pass. Turning back to lock the door, he seemed to be fiddling with the knob. “Sarah, did you know this lock isn’t really securing here?”

“I do know. In this humid weather the wooden doorframe swells and the lock doesn’t settle in very well.” Sarah peered over his shoulder.

“We need to get this fixed. The door could easily be pushed open.” He dropped his voice so that it wouldn’t carry.

“I’ll ask Mr. Benson to come take a look.”

“Mr. Benson?”

“He is the general handyman and gardener who works for the Historical Society. A member of his family has actually worked for the Society since the mid 1800’s.” Sarah stepped down from the back porch stairs, swinging her handbag lightly. A bit of awkwardness settled over her. She wasn’t sure if Robert expected a kiss good-bye or whether a casual wave was more to the moment. Robert soon settled the question.

Sliding his hands around her waist, he tugged her closer. The look in his dark, smoky eyes drew her in deeper. She sighed softly just as his firm lips settled over hers; her hands crept around his shoulders, her fingers lightly pressing against his back. She felt as if they were melding together, turning into molten liquid and smoke. Still, he pressed his kiss. Searing her. Claiming her. She didn’t resist.

Slowly, reluctantly the kiss ended. He gently rested his chin against her hair. Taking a deeply inhaled breath, he suddenly dropped a quick kiss on her forehead and stepped back.

“Are you sure you’re coming back tonight? That felt an awful lot like a long separation kiss.” Sarah resisted the urge to touch her lips with her fingertips.

“Honey, did you think that was a kiss?” Robert’s deep, rumbling laugh wrapped around her like a silken cord.

She stared at him, her lips slightly parted and her breath came in short pants. Her head nodded of its own volition.

“That,” he said silkily, “was only the prelude to a kiss.”

Sarah’s knees were still weak long after he sped away from her driveway.

Heaving a sigh, she moved towards her own car. The day was waning quickly and dusk was falling. Hearing a muffled snap of a twig somewhere behind her, she swiveled in the direction of the noise. Stepping closer, she crouched down, peering into the heavily shadowed underbrush that divided her backyard from the alleyway. Moving slowly she called softly, “Sparkles? Is that you?”

A thunderous crashing together of metal trashcans from the opposite side of her house startled a yelp from her.

“That didn’t sound like Sparkles.” She breathed. Her heart pounded in her chest. Suddenly a blur of her neighbor’s orange and white tomcat streaked into view from the direction of the noise and shot past her.

“Well, what do you know? It was Sparkles.” She laughed aloud nervously. “What a day this has been. I’m so keyed up.”

Shaking her head, she jumped into her car and headed off for the local market hoping that the candy supply hadn’t dwindled down to nothing. Hungry little ghosties and goblins queued up at her door expecting, but not receiving, treats was unacceptable.

Ten minutes later she entered the store in hot pursuit of whatever remained of the candy. Rounding the candy section aisle, she smiled in greeting to Glynda Davies, currently loading bags of trick-or-treat loot into her shopping cart.

Repositioning her plastic carrying basket, Sarah patted the older woman’s arm as she passed by. “You too, Glynda?”

“How are you, Sarah? And yes, me too. Since Bonnie and Mark moved out of the house, Melvin and I tend to forget about these things. Another joy of the Empty Nest Syndrome.”

Sarah grimaced in mock horror. “I don’t have anything to blame my last minuteness on. I just got

busy and forgot.”

“Busy on that new article? How’s that going? I meant to tell you that I found another book you might be able to use. More of the rumors surrounding the mysterious River Man.”

“Ah, wonderful. I can use all the information that I can get.”

Sarah’s smile was only a bit less bright than normal. She hesitated to mention the incident from this afternoon. She’d decided that Robert was right. It had to be some neighborhood kids pulling a prank.

“Well, I left that book on the corner of my desk in case you’d be interested. You have the key. Just let yourself in and lock up behind you. Thank goodness the office is closed on Mondays.” Glynda hesitated over adding another bag of assorted chocolates to her cart. With a shrug and sheepish grin she tossed them in. “For Melvin.”

Sarah smiled innocently. “For Melvin,” she agreed solemnly.

“I’ll see you on Tuesday, Sarah. Why hello Mr. Benson. I didn’t see you standing there. You walk as silent as a ghost.”

Sarah felt a shiver slither down her spine. Turning quickly, she noted Mr. Benson standing several yards away, quietly as if waiting for the ladies’ notice.

“Hello, Mr. Benson. Shopping too?” Sarah had the feeling that Mr. Benson was there for another purpose. She felt slightly unnerved though she had no reason to feel that way.

He stood, battered brown hat crushed between his enormous hands, regarding her. He slowly shook his head.

“Well, I’d better get this loot home. Bye, Sarah. Mr. Benson.” Glynda patted Sarah’s arm as she wheeled by.

Sarah faced the man, holding her basket with both hands in front of her. She denied to herself that it was in protection.

“Were you looking for me, Mr. Benson?”

“Wondering if you need any handywork done around the house. I’ve got a bit of extry time on the weekends.” His gravelly voice rasped as if he rarely used it. His dusty, worn clothes hung on him like a scarecrow and his level, somber gaze unsettled her today.

She mentally chastised herself. Robert was right; she was looking for things that just weren’t there.

“As a matter of fact, Mr. Benson, I do have a small job that I’d like done.”

Did she imagine that expression of satisfaction on his face, or was it the shadows cast by the fluorescent lighting? Either way, Sarah wanted to drape garlic around her shoulders. Just in case.

PAGEBREAK

Sarah pulled her car into the driveway to the back of the house. Snatching up the bags of goodies for the trick-or-treaters she headed inside, noting the back door latch seemed different.

She looked more closely and noticed that the entire lock appeared to have been repositioned to line up correctly and bolt home. She stood stock still.

Robert? No.

Mr. Benson.

That was it, she reasoned. He must have stopped by after he cornered her in the store.

Stepping inside and closing the back door firmly behind her, she rummaged under in the cabinet for a large bowl for the treats. Very soon the kids would be out and about, and she needed to hurry.

The pumpkins, placed well away from flapping costumes, glowed brightly on the porch railings. She plugged in the orange and black jack-o-lantern string of lights that outlined her front windows and

surveyed the effect from her living room window.

She was all set, safe and secure.

Sinking onto the sofa, she closed her eyes for a minute.

She felt a soft whisper of a touch across her lips and cheeks. Almost like the softest of kisses.

Her eyes flew open. She looked around wildly, expecting to see Robert close by.

"The doors are all locked, you doofus. He can't get in unless you let him in," she muttered, sitting up straighter on the sofa and pulling a light afghan across her lap.

A knock sounded on her back door. Her stomach clenched for a minute.

"Stop it, Sarah!" She mentally scolded herself for being so jumpy.

Glancing through the backdoor curtains, she was relieved to see Robert standing there.

"Trick-or-Treat! Have I missed anything?"

"Not yet. You're my first trick-or-treater too, by the way. Now what would you like," she teased.

Robert leaned forward and settled his warm, firm lips over hers, a gentle, but not too demanding, seductive kiss.

The chiming of the doorbell shattered the moment. Drawing back, she sighed and hurried off to greet her first goblins of the evening.

Robert stayed behind in the kitchen, searching through her cabinets and fridge.

"Trick or Tweak!"

Sarah grinned down at the tiny, golden princess holding open her equally tiny loot bag. Dropping in a few pieces of age appropriate candy, she was rewarded with a gap-toothed smile before the little princess hiked up her skirt and scuttled off.

"Robert," she called over her shoulder, only to find him standing just inches from her side. "I'm going to get that bell tomorrow."

"Look, here come some more kids." Robert handed her the full candy bowl, smiling in delight as the kids and their parents' oohed and aahed over the decorations and the glowing pumpkins.

"Look at the precious kitty-cat pumpkin," one mother sighed.

Sarah caught Robert's look of manly disgust at the comments.

Shutting the door on a momentary lull in costumed kids, Robert handed her a fresh glass of bubbling cola and pointed towards the backdoor.

"I see the lock is already fixed. That was certainly quick."

"Yes, I actually ran into Mr. Benson in the grocery store after you left. Seems he is looking for extra work and I asked him to take a look at the lock." Sarah kicked off her shoes and curled up on the sofa next to Robert.

"Funny, though because I don't know how he would have had the time to get it fixed before I got home," she mused, idly tracing a random pattern on Robert's leg with her fingernail.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I ran into him in the store and as soon as we talked, he left. I couldn't have been more than five minutes behind him." She frowned deeply. This was disturbing now that she looked at the situation more clearly. There surely hadn't been enough time for him to do the job before she got home.

"That is odd," Robert began just as the doorbell chimed and the next wave of candy-seeking hoards arrived.

There seemed to be a steady stream of kids over the next couple of hours. Sarah soon tired of jumping up with each ring of the doorbell, so she and Robert moved out onto the front porch swing.

Chatting between visitors, they continued to discover mutual likes and dislikes. Sarah felt in such harmony with a man she'd only known a few days. Not many men would be willing to spend a quiet evening at a woman's house, catering to groups of noisy children.

Robert, for his part, pretend jousted with a young knight; lavished praise on a charming half-dozen "princesses" and cowered in mock fear from a few Draculas, Frankensteins and one axe-murderer.

Finally, around eight-thirty, the crowds began to thin as parents began gathering their ghouls homeward.

Sarah and Robert finally moved back inside.

"Well, I suppose it's just about over." Robert eased his bulk back on the sofa, stretching his arms

across the back of the cushions.

"I think so except for a last straggler or two. Thank you for the pumpkins, Robert. They were a big hit." She plumped down beside him and had just begun to curl her legs under her when they heard a strange thudding noise at her front door and a quick, jabbing ring of the doorbell.

"Oh, no. That sounded odd. Do you suppose I just got dealt a trick?" Sarah unfolded her legs, dreading the thought of having to wash away splattered egg from her door or even worse, the ole flaming paper bag trick.

"I'll get it this time, just in case." Robert moved quickly to the door, just in case he needed to identify any culprits.

He stood at the open doorway for a long minute.

Sarah called out to him, as he was just out of vision range. "Robert? What is it? Eggs? Toilet paper?"

She heard the door close and heard him shoot the bolt home.

"Robert? What was it? Too horrible to mention?" she grimaced in mock fear.

"Notes. It was notes."

"Notes? What kind of notes?"

"Your notes, Sarah." He held out the torn and crumpled pages. "Pinned to your front door. With this." Robert held up a large, lethal-looking knife.

* * * *

"Just sip it slowly, Sarah," Robert cautioned handing over a steaming cup of tea.

Sarah sat huddled with the afghan draped over her shoulders with the cup cradled and untouched in her hands. "I don't understand. Why take the notes only to give them back hours later?"

"I told you Sarah, it is just a Halloween prank. It was meant to scare you and that it did." Robert eased down beside her on the sofa and placed a gentle arm around her. She leaned her head on his shoulder and mulled over his words.

"This had been the most eventful weekend in my life," she sighed. "I'm ready for it to be over."

"Really? I'm sorry to hear that."

Sarah heard the teasing note in his voice and gave him a wan smile. "You know I didn't mean that to include you, but you must admit this has been a trying day for me."

"I know it has, but I wish you wouldn't let this get to you so badly that you're suspecting spooks and specters in every corner."

"Robert," she admonished, hurt evident in the tone of her voice. She tried to pull away from him, but he held her firmly.

"I know it's been a tough day. But until we have reason to believe otherwise, let's just put the day's events down to Halloween pranks and odd timing on the part of the handyman, alright?"

"I suppose. I know you're right," she admitted grudgingly.

"Now, tell me what you have planned for the week," he said, skillfully changing the subject.

Sarah recognized his tactic, but didn't demure. Sipping her cooling tea, she obliged him with an answer.

"Well, I ran into Glynda Davis at the store this evening as well. She mentioned that she's found another book with a bit more detail on the River Man."

"The River Man? Ah, yes. I remember, the man whom our illustrious relatives reportedly met for illicit purposes, under cover of fog and darkness."

Sarah cut her eyes at his facetious tone of voice.

"Yes, that would be the gentleman described as the River Man."

"I see. Go on, please."

"Fine, Mr. Smarty-pants, I will. The Historical Society building is closed tomorrow but I will use my key to get the book from her office. I'll come back and spend the majority of my week right here and in the library, researching."

"Will you have time in your schedule to take pity on a poor bachelor man and meet him for lunch or dinner? Or both?"

Sarah laughed at the hopeful look in his eyes. Apparently, she was a sucker for a handsome man

with wickedly dancing eyes and a smooth, deep voice.

She heaved a heavy sigh of martyr proportions. "I suppose."

Her mouth opened in surprised when he suddenly plucked the mug from her hand and proceeded to tickle her until she begged for mercy.

"Robert!" she cried out in laughing protest.

He pulled her up against him, for a long, hard kiss before planting one loud, smacking kiss in the middle of her forehead.

"I have to go. I'll call you tomorrow. Maybe we can meet for lunch since you'll be out?"

She dropped her gaze to the floor, letting a sly smile slide across her face. "Maybe."

Robert curled his fingers into the tickle position, just as she slithered from his grasp, laughing. Settling her rump cautiously on the arm of the sofa, she grinned. "Yes, lunch it is. Shall I phone you or shall we just plan to meet?"

"Why don't I meet you at the Historical Society just before noon?"

Mentally calculating her time, she nodded. "Perfect."

Moving together towards her back door, Robert's arm loosely slung around her shoulders, Sarah could only marvel at her sense of completeness she felt in Robert's company. It was nice.

"It *is* nice isn't?" Robert said, with his lips against her hair.

"Do you mean lunch tomorrow?" Sarah craned her neck to look into his eyes.

"No, how perfectly we fit." He swooped down and placed a soft, lingering kiss on her lips. "Don't see me out. Stay inside and lock the door. It's getting chilly out and a mist is settling in."

Sarah stood with her back to the door, a soft smile lingering on her lips, before her glanced settled on the carving tools.

Wrenching the door open, she dashed outside with the tiny tools in hand only to stand in her empty driveway.

Once again, Robert had simply vanished.

PAGEBREAK

CHAPTER SIX

The door to the Historical Society swung open. Sarah didn't bother switching on any lights since the bright sunshine filtered in through the windowpanes and provided ample lighting.

Glancing down at her watch, she noted she had twenty minutes before Robert's arrival. Plenty of time to sit and read a bit and make a few notes in the interim. She moved into Glynda's office in search of the book only to pull up short when she realized the volume wasn't there.

"I know Glynda said the book would be here. I know I'm not losing it."

Well, you are talking to yourself.

"Darn it." She chewed her bottom lip uncertainly. She didn't want to go poking around in Glynda's office, but she didn't want to leave without that book either. With a sigh, she moved around the desk and

began gingerly exploring the assorted piles neatly arranged on the desktop.

Her attention caught as a noise in the anteroom filtered into her hearing. Pausing, she strained to identify the sound. A long minute passed and she heard nothing in the silence. With a shrug, she continued searching.

Moving back around to the front of the desk, with her back to the door, she noticed a box of books just visible from under the desk. The titles weren't discernible from her angle, so she stooped to get a better look. She stilled in place.

Had she just seen a shadow skitter across the floor?

Her heart pounded and she wished she wasn't in the building in the semi-darkness alone.

Well, if that was a person's shadow, then you aren't in the building alone, she reasoned. Not exactly a comforting thought.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" She didn't expect an answer; she was obviously letting her experiences from yesterday color her outlook today.

A heavy, scraping footstep sounded from somewhere in the building, freezing her into place.

Her throat closed. She was too scared to scream. She'd just done the most stupid move known in scary moviedom. She willed herself to breathe quietly. Always a dead giveaway in the horror films, she silently cautioned.

Still crouched on the floor with her back to the office door, she willed herself to turn around quickly and leave the building. She hadn't heard any other sounds, but she didn't plan to invite any either.

Taking a deep breath, she sprang up from the floor, turned, and belted out an ear-shattering scream.

Right into Robert's face.

"Sarah, are you insane, woman?" Robert grasped her upper arms and held her still at an arm's length. "What happened?"

"What are you doing here, Robert? Was that you in the back? I heard heavy footsteps but no one answered when I called." Sarah locked her hands on his forearms as she gasped her reply.

"I just walked in. You're running a bit late, so I thought I'd come in a roust you. I thought you might be reading and lost track of time."

"That's just it. I can't read because the book I came to get is gone. Do you think someone took it, Robert?" she dropped her voice to a lower pitch and glanced around Robert as if searching for someone.

"No, Sarah, I don't. I think if you call the Director, she'll tell where she left it. It must have been a miscommunication. That's all."

Sarah jumped when the back door slammed shut.

"Stay here, Sarah. Don't move and I mean it," Robert commanded before he sprinted towards the back door.

Sarah dashed towards the office window to see if she could see anyone running past. She'd been right. Someone had been in the building with her. Goosebumps crept up her arms.

She whirled around when she heard footsteps approaching the office where she waited. She snatched up a heavy paperweight and hid it behind her back.

"Put it down, Sarah. It's just me," Robert's voice drifted to her from the anteroom long before she could see him.

She dropped the paperweight guiltily back onto Glynda's desk as if it were hot. "How did you know I ..."

"Is this your book, Sarah?" Robert interrupted her, holding up a slim volume for her inspection. His lips were set into a firm line and a slight frown furrowed his brow.

Stepping forward, she took the book and flipped carefully through a few pages. "Yes, I believe it is. This has several mentions of the River Man."

Robert regarded her silently for a few minutes.

"Robert did you see who took the book?"

"What makes you think someone took it Sarah? Someone might have dropped it," he reasoned.

"Glynda told me specifically that she left it on the corner of her desk. And why was someone in here skulking around? Why didn't they answer me?" Sarah slapped the book against her leg in frustration.

"I don't know that someone was skulking. Maybe they didn't hear you call out. I didn't see anyone

outside.”

“Why didn’t you see someone out there, Robert? Did they run away? If there wasn’t anything suspicious going on, why didn’t you see someone casually walking away?”

Robert grimaced and pulled her into his arms. Rocking her back and forth, he rested his chin on her head. “I don’t know, Sarah. But there just isn’t anything yet that says we have a problem.” He stepped back a pace and planted a soft warm kiss on her lips. She slowly melted against him, letting her fears and anxieties seep away. A small niggling doubt still existed, but she let it die away.

“Let me lock up and we’ll get some lunch. Do you still have time?” Sarah glanced around Glynda’s office to ensure everything was back in its correct place. Slipping the recovered book into her purse, she waited as Robert rechecked the back door lock.

“Let’s go, I’m starved.” Robert placed a large, comforting hand on the small of her back to usher her outside. She blinked a few times trying to adjust to the bright sunshine after being in the dim interior of the Historical building. Her focus adjusted in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of what looked like someone watching her and Robert from the shadows of the next building.

She opened her mouth to protest, when Robert propelled her forward.

Just keep it to yourself for now, Sarah before Robert decides you’re a drama queen of phenomenal proportions.

She snapped her lips together in a parody of a smile, which must have passed muster. Robert grinned down at her in return.

“How about some Mexican food--hot enough to chase anyway the scariest of bogeymen, and guaranteed to keep you up half the night?”

“Ooo, how can a girl resist that?” Sarah smiled gamely, but her mind was whirling.

Why was Glynda Davies watching her from the shadows?

* * * *

Robert had been right about one thing. The Mexican food was hot - plenty hot. And if the case of indigestion she currently had was an indication, she wouldn’t be nodding off this afternoon or into the small hours of the night, either.

As if that was a problem. She couldn’t let go of the fact that Glynda had been standing in the shadows watching her. Why? It made no sense.

Unless she just happened to be passing by and noticed activity at the closed building and wanted to ensure that all was well. That had to be it. Still, Sarah worried about who might have been inside with her and how the book wound up outside.

Shaking it off, she decided to lose herself in her favorite pastime -- research.

By four in the afternoon, she felt a chill skitter down her spine. It seemed that in 1905, a rash of mid-river hijackings had been reported by several prominent businessmen. It was during this time the River Man made his appearance. He’d been seen talking with Maxwell Dyson in particular.

The rumors and innuendo regarding secretive and reportedly nefarious dealing between Artemis T. Wynstead and a mystery contact were frequently alluded to, if not openly commented on by several of the prominent businessmen of that era.

Records confirmed that Mr. Wynstead often met in the dark of the night, under cover of the frequent mists common on the dark, murky river. The identity of the River Man was still unknown but it was generally agreed that he was a lawman. The general consensus held that Benson Boating provided transportation for Mr. Wynstead’s suspected less-than-legal dealing of “antiquities”.

The family business, Robert had said.

The ringing telephone jarred Sarah from her deep thoughts.

“Sarah, this is Robert. I’m afraid I’m going to break our dinner date tonight.”

“Is everything alright?” Sarah felt almost a sense of relief. In light of the day’s revelations, she felt she needed some time to think.

“Everything is fine, but I need to meet a client upriver tonight. I’ll be back tomorrow. Will you be alright?”

“Upriver? You’re taking the trip by boat?”

“Yeah, Mr. Benson’s nephew’s boat service. It’s the family business. They’ve recently started

operating it again after almost a hundred years. A little known fact, I think.”

“I’ve actually been researching a bit about Benson Boating but I never connected it with Mr. Benson. And yes, to answer your earlier question, I’ll be fine, Robert. I’m sure that you’re right and yesterday’s happenings weren’t anything more than a prank and a case of over-active imagination.” She mentally crossed her fingers behind her back.

“I’ll call you when I get back. Take care, Sarah.”

She wished him a safe trip before hanging up.

Gathering up her notes and her purse, she headed towards her car. She decided to stop by Chessman’s Restaurant for dinner before continuing her research at the Historical Museum. Chessman’s famous *Champagne Shrimp Pasta* called to her. A glass of Riesling might not go amiss either, considering the rash of odd events she experienced over the weekend. A bit of calm in her suddenly unstable world.

PAGEBREAK

At this early hour, getting a table didn't pose much of a problem. She soon settled into place at a table by the windows. Perfectly situated, she people-watched as she sipped the light, refreshing wine. Her left hand lightly rested atop her black leather portfolio, which shielded her carefully researched River Man notes. Her other hand curled gently around her wineglass stem.

Her dinner arrived, just as she returned from a trip to the ladies room. She slid her portfolio aside to enjoy her dinner.

Glancing out the window, she noted the daylight already dimming and the glow of the waning half gibbous moon barely visible behind the thickening cloud cover.

She recognized the signs of a misty evening on the rise.

Less than an hour later, she stepped from the restaurant and into the predicted mists. She gripped her portfolio tighter and headed towards her car. With the shrinking moon's light veiled by the thick clouds, she questioned her plan to visit the Historical Museum this evening.

She knew her reasoning sounded silly, but she still debated with herself, regardless, on the wisdom of her plan.

You're being ridiculous, Dyson. Didn't you spend several nights alone last month in that supposed haunted house?

She continued to silently chide herself as she walked across the street to her car. The mists surrounded her, causing her to shiver slightly in the damp, river air.

She turned her head in time to see a man standing opposite her in the entrance of an alleyway between two buildings. She strained to see his face.

Robert?

It couldn't be. It looked to be the same man she'd seen last week by the river. Staring at her, just as he seemed to be doing now. He simply slipped away in a swirl of misty fog and archaic black cape.

"Wait!" Sarah called after him, aware that several curious heads turned in her direction. By the time she reached the darkened corner, there was nothing to be seen.

Who is he? Why is he trying to frighten her?

As she walked back to her car, a wind gust sprang up sending a handbill billowing against her leg. Snagging the paper absently before it became litter in the street, she got into her car and tossed the paper into the passenger seat.

Could it be Robert trying to scare me? Why?

To stop potentially damaging research that might impact his family and his business, she thought acidly.

Stopping at a traffic signal, Sarah glanced down at the writing on the forgotten handbill.

"JOIN US ON A HAUNTED HISTORICAL TOUR IN THE DOWNTOWN THEATER DISTRICT. Sponsored by the Drayton Falls Historical Society. For reservations call -"

A car horn sounded behind her, bringing her back to reality. She stuffed the paper into her portfolio blindly while keeping her eyes on the road.

Since when had the city been sponsoring haunted tours?

* * * *

Sarah pulled into her driveway and cut the engine. Gathering up her purse and leather folder, she stepped from her car and pointed the keyless remote at the car door. The beep that let her know the doors were locked reverberated loudly in the damp stillness of the night.

She spun on her heel only to pull up short, her breath squeezed from her lungs.

"Evenin', Miss Dyson."

“Mr. Benson! You startled me.” Sarah gripped her folder more tightly to her chest, her scalp tingling in reaction to her fright. “Is there something you needed?”

The man shuffled slowly around in a half-step to point a knarled finger at her back door. “Fixed the lock.”

She drew a deep breath. He had a reason to be here. “Yes, yes. You did and thank you. How much do I owe you?”

Sarah moved to the hood of her car, settling her purse on the fender to dig for her wallet.

“H’aint Friday yet. Paid on Fridays, mostly. Jes’ checkin’ you’n happy with muh work.”

“Yes, I’m happy,” Sarah said, looking down to shove her wallet back into her cavernous bag. “Thank- ”

“-you.”

She spoke to empty air, watching Mr. Benson’s ambling form reach the end of her driveway and move out of her line of vision.

Scooping up her belongings, she nearly crashed through her back door in her haste to get inside and feel the safety of her home.

She settled in at her kitchen table with a steaming, hot cup of tea. The fragrance of the black and orange pekoe blended nicely with the dash of hazelnut creamer. She savored the aroma as she took a tentative sip. The warmth slipping down her throat acted as a panacea to her shattered nerves.

Pulling her portfolio closer, she decided to review her notes. She flipped the folder open and saw the discarded haunted tour flyer. Reading it more carefully, her mouth hung open when she noted a reference about the tour stop to see the ghostly River Man.

She felt a blaze of anger rush up the back of her neck and flush her cheeks. Glynda and the Historical Society had already rushed ahead in their fund raising campaign without waiting to see what her research even revealed. Were they somehow responsible for the strange man that she kept running into? Had they set her up?

She rubbed her forehead. Something didn’t add up here. Setting aside the flyer, her eyes fell on her notes in her folder.

She sucked in a deep gasping breath of air.

STOP DIGGING INTO THE PAST. THIS IS YOUR LAST WARNING!

The River Man

Her hands shook as she stared at the blood red writing slashed across the body of her research notes and signed by someone purporting to be the River Man.

Somebody was definitely trying to scare her. And it was working.

* * * *

Sarah dragged listlessly into the kitchen the next morning. Her eyes felt scratchy as if gravel were embedded in the lens surface. She hadn’t slept a wink.

Pouring a cup of automatically brewed coffee, she picked up the leather notebook and padded to the library. She settled in at her desk and stared unseeing out the front window. The soft, melodic tinkle of her wind chimes momentarily caught her attention only to recall the earlier break-in.

Someone intended to scare her; this fact had been made abundantly clear. The questions still of remained why and who.

Booting up her computer, Sarah sipped her cup of caffeinated heaven and pondered on the facts she knew.

Tapping quickly on the keyboard, she entered into a document, all of the incidents that occurred since she received the River Man assignment.

Twenty minutes later, she sat back and surveyed her freshly typed notes.

And the weighted evidence that only person had a motive to stop her research.

Robert Townsend.

She jumped when the phone beside her jangled, splitting the still air with its shrill ring.

“Sarah, I thought maybe we could meet for lunch today. How does your schedule look?” Robert’s chocolate warm voice filtered through the phone lines causing her pulse to race.

“I-I’m sorry, Robert, but my schedule is full today,” she prevaricated. She needed time to think. She needed time to finish some additional research.

“Then let’s meet for dinner this evening. You won’t believe this, but I actually scored a bit of information about your River Man assignment. I hear Chessman’s by the river has a great seafood special tonight. Why don’t we meet there?”

“I can’t. I’m really busy. I’m glad you made it back safely but I have to go now. Talk to you soon.” Sarah hung up, her heart pounding in her chest. She felt suckered punched. She knew from the beginning that Robert seemed too good to be true. His quirky little ways that startled her and intrigued her- she knew now were just a ruse to keep her off-balanced and unaware of his real motives.

The question is how did Robert know about the research project? He had to have known before the costume party. It had been him lurking in the shadowy mists that evening. It had been him by the river the next night and last night between the buildings as well. The pieces all fit.

Robert planned to scare her out of rehashing his family’s suspicious dealings in the antiques market. It would throw the spotlight on his suspicious dealings.

Sarah saved the document and reached for her stack of notes. Shoving them neatly into the portfolio, she grabbed her purse and keys and headed off to find the answers.

* * * *

Sarah snapped on the overhead lights and took a quick tour of the museum building, not wanting a repeat of the missing book incident.

Settling in at the reception area desk with a particularly heavy volume, Sarah ran a fingertip down the index.

Barton.

Belton.

Benson. The complete family history of the Benson family, including the Benson Boating branch. She felt there had to be some tie-in with the strange happenings that surrounded her lately.

An hour later, Sarah began to see threads of the old mystery pulling together.

Her ancestor, Maxwell Dyson procured shipping arrangements for the local merchants via land or water. His shipper of choice was none other than Benson Boating. Records indicated he used Benson more than any other shipper. The only other source of water transportation was supplied by a single boat for special assignments or in times of higher demand than Benson Boating could meet.

A frequent customer of Maxwell Dyson was none other than Artemis Wynstead. Maxwell’s otherwise meticulous record-keeping faltered in the recording of transactions between Dyson and Mr. Wynstead.

Curious.

As closely as Sarah could figure, her great-great Uncle Maxwell Dyson made shipping arrangements for Artemis Wynstead in a different manner than his other customers.

Sarah thought she knew the reason, her ancestor had known and had aided in Robert’s ancestors questionable and most likely, illegal dealings. Dyson arranged for the single boat to ferry Wynstead to the middle of the river to meet with his contact. A person whose real identity had never been known, nor was likely to ever be known.

Robert must be carrying on the family tradition of dealing in questionable or stolen antiques and using the River Man legend as his cover.

But why would he draw attention to the River Man and thereby to himself?

Sarah snapped the heavy book closed. Ridiculous. She couldn’t-*wouldn’t* believe it of Robert.

The only other person or people that the River Man legend would benefit were the Historical Society. It would raise interest in their haunted tours, which would generate income towards building a new museum, which is obviously why Glynda Davies presented Sarah with the assignment.

Sarah only wished she’d been told the true purpose. She might have been a bit more prepared when confronted by all the strange occurrences. So, might this be an elaborate scheme by the Historical Society rather than Robert? Were these incidents staged to frighten her? Not enough to turn her from the

project, but just enough to generate buzz and a healthy measure of interest in the town.

Crossing her arms on the scarred, wooden tabletop, she rested her chin thoughtfully on her folded hands.

Her thinking had become muddled and confused.

Her eyelids began to close; sleepiness began to overtake her tired mind. She thought she'd just close her eyes for a minute.

Jerking awake, she felt a spurt of anger. Someone was using her and her research for their own purposes and that just made her mad.

Maybe it was time for a confrontation.

Glynda first. Then Robert.

PAGEBREAK

Sarah drove towards the river searching for Glynda's house. Once again the river haze rose in thick swirls obscuring her view. Undaunted, she determined to get to the bottom of things. She felt like a pawn in someone's secret game and it didn't set well with her.

Her eyes involuntarily scanned the closest riverbank in either direction expecting to see the River Man or at least, the person pretending to be the River Man.

Suddenly she jammed on her brakes causing her car to hydroplane on the slick street before she guided it to an abrupt halt. She'd caught a glimpse of a man running into the fog.

Sarah wrenched open the car door and stepped out hurriedly, trying to keep him in her sight.

Her heart pounded in rhythm with her running feet. Her footsteps echoed dully on the pavement; her clothes felt sodden from the heavy fog. She raced on.

Sarah slowed her pace fractionally when her quarry half-turned and looked in her direction. The man's face contorted as if in sheer terror just as she sensed a presence at her back. Goose bumps rose on her skin and she quickened her run. Her forward motion suddenly halted and the air left her lungs when an outstretched arm jerked her into an alleyway between two buildings.

Pressed against the cold, rough surface of the brick building, the reckless impulsiveness struck like a sledgehammer and tears spurted down her cheeks. The assailant's hand held against her mouth relaxed fractionally and she briefly thought of defensive measures.

"Now, stay still Miz Sarah." Mr. Benson's gruff and raspy voice grated in her ear. "Hush, now. Let's hope they catch the man."

She tried to focus. Confusion held her thought processes hostage. She heard a soft moaning and realized the sound was coming from her.

Mr. Benson loosed his hold on her marginally and slid his hand between the back of her head and the brick to provide a cushion.

"What were you thinking, Miz Sarah? My heart almost stopped when you barreled off in pursuit."

Sarah registered the gruffness in his voice and a slight cracking in the timbre. The scent of dried leaves and wood smoke rose from his dusty clothes. The aroma comforted her, rather than repelled.

She looked at him, wide-eyed and questioning. He removed his muffling hand from her mouth and stepped back a few paces. She slumped against the cold wall in confusion.

"I don't understand, Mr. Benson. I don't understand any of this." Sarah instinctively kept her voice low. Her fear began to recede and she felt drained. Her legs trembled and threatened to buckle under.

"Here. Sit down." Mr. Benson pulled a wooden crate towards her and gently guided her to it. The streetlight cast a bit of light on his profile revealing a stoical expression.

"Will you tell me what's going on? Why are you here?"

"Well, I 'spect that man of yours will be wantin' to tell the tale. And he'll know it best. Let's just say though, that Glynda got more than she bargained for. Ole Benson thought he just might be needed tonight."

"Then it was Glynda! But it can't be Glynda alone. I've seen a man."

A shadow flitted across the alleyway entrance behind Mr. Benson's back. Slowly the shadow took shape filled the space.

"Mr. Benson! Behind you!"

He turned and Sarah ducked low behind him. She saw his alert stance relax and he slowly walked towards the shadowy figure.

"Stay there a minute Miz Sarah and let me see what's going on."

Sarah's legs were too weak to move and she gladly kept her rickety seat on the crate. Shivers coursed through her as the magnitude of her stupidity hit her.

She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees and her face between her hands.

Footsteps and voices snapped her back to attention. She rose to her feet as a small band of people filled the alleyway entrance. One broad-shouldered figure headed straight towards her and Sarah bolted into his waiting arms.

"I'm so sorry, Robert. I-I thought you tried to scare me into stopping my research," she mumbled into his shirtfront. His arms tightened protectively around her.

"It's okay, I know. Things have been happening all around you and I should have told you. I never figured that you would get so involved."

"Involved in what? Can you tell me now?"

"Let me take you home. Come on, hon."

Sarah moved slowly down the alleyway, Robert's strong arms held her securely as if she were precious and fragile. Her attention fastened on a man held handcuffed between two burly policemen. As she drew closer, she noticed he wore a black cape and what appeared to be white make-up, giving him a ghoulish quality in the dark night.

"Who?-,

"Ronnie Benson, alias the River Man."

Sarah half-twisted to get a better look at the man who'd been stalking her for the past few days. He seemed near hysteria, gesturing and glancing over his shoulder still in obvious terror.

She blinked in confusion at seeing the street crowded with police cars and familiar faces.

"Sarah! Honey, I'm so sorry. I had no idea. Are you alright?" Glynda pressed her hand against Sarah's arm.

Sarah stopped and looked at the older woman. "I can't believe you wanted a new museum so badly that you'd go to these lengths."

"You don't understand, Sarah. It wasn't supposed to be like this. I had no idea he'd take it this far. They are talking about arresting me, Sarah!" Glynda wrung her hands and shot furtive looks between Sarah and the police officers.

Sarah listened to the older woman bluster and watched her dab her eyes. Glynda's pleas for understanding seemed genuine, but Sarah couldn't wrap her brain around the situation right now. She had too many unanswered questions. "Call Melvin, Glynda and get a lawyer." Sarah felt a wave of sympathy for the woman. She felt Robert gently nudge her into motion only to be stopped again.

"Left yer car a-runnin'. Took the keys for yer." Mr. Benson shuffled forward with his familiar brown hat pulled low over his eyes to drop the keys in Robert's outstretched hand.

"Let's get you home and I'll explain everything."

* * * *

"Several things were happening at once. First, Glynda gave you the assignment to hype the Society's fund raising as you suspected, but what you didn't know is that she'd also hired her nephew, Ronnie to portray the River Man." Robert handed her a fresh mug of hot tea, spiced with cinnamon and flavored with a splash vanilla creamer. He ran his hand over her hair protectively before settling on the sofa beside her.

"Her nephew? I had no idea of her relationship with the Bensons." Sarah sipped the hot brew carefully, trying to absorb the evening's events. "So how did you get involved and when?"

"I got involved before I even moved here. I'd heard the stories of my great-grandfather's suspecting shady dealings and his suspicion of murder accusations, but something just didn't ring true. I came here to nose around. I've been working with the River Authority and when I heard about the River Man resurfacing, all the old paperwork of my great-grandfather began to ring true.

The historian in her began to salivate over a stash of documents she'd love to get her hands on. Pushing that aside, she turned her attention back to Robert.

"And what did the paperwork reveal?"

"He maintained his innocence and his records prove him out. He'd been receiving threats for a while about an intended big heist and that he'd be set-up to look like he was the thief. He called in a member of the river authority and began meeting under cover of the mists to cover his trail but all that did was increase the already running rampant suspicions against him."

“Yes, well sorry, but not a wise move on his part.”

“I know, sadly, although he had a brilliant eye for antiquities, he didn’t have the brilliance for subterfuge. Anyway, on the night in question as he was meeting his contact, another boat appeared beside his. He maintains that the second boat was actually a hijacker who was in league with the captain of Benson Boating. His account states that the hijacker is the one that actually shot the river authority officer.”

“But why didn’t he go to the police and report what happened?”

“The Benson Boating captain and the accomplice in the other boat threatened him and intended to continue on their scheme when no body ever surfaced. They denied the entire thing ever happened.”

“Scheme? I’m not following.”

“They planned to have Artemis set up client meetings to be held in the middle of the river and they would be “hijacked” and robbed by the third man.”

“But town sentiment and suspicions turned against them, sending Artemis and his family fleeing and Benson Boating closed for business,” Sarah finished for him.

“Exactly. When Glynda decided to revive the old River Man story, Ronnie Benson decided to re-enact the same scheme, figuring the technology is better these days and he’d get away with it this time.”

“So what happened when I blundered in?”

Robert grimaced and pulled her against him, resting his lips softly against her hair. “Ah, Sarah. You scared years off my life with your stunt. Don’t you watch thrillers?”

“Yes, I know. I recognize my stupidity as a movie classic.” She thumped him playfully in the ribs, for which he rewarded her with his sultry deep chuckle. She snuggled in more closely. “Go on.”

“It was a sting operation and everything was set, but our fake River Man came running from the wrong direction like the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels. So he basically threw himself into the waiting arms of the River Authority officers, babbling something about a ghost. Very anti-climatic and poetic justice, if you ask me.”

“How bizarre, but what was everyone else doing there?”

“Glynda claims she heard shouts and screams and came running. And Mr. Benson showed up because he has appointed himself your bodyguard. He found out that Ronnie and Glynda had concocted their scheme and decided you needed protecting.”

“After my less than stellar blundering, I can see why he thought I needed protecting.”

“What were you doing there, by the way?”

Sarah told him about her research and even her wrongful conclusions she’d drawn about him. “I’m so sorry, Robert. If you hate me, I’d understand. In my heart I knew better, but my brain looked at the information and I drew the wrong and hurtful conclusions.” She dropped her eyes and felt a sweep of guilty color paint her cheekbones.

He tilted her face up towards his. She looked deep into his eyes and smiled mistily. All she could see in there amounted to a great deal of genuine and deep caring and no censure for her actions. He followed with a kiss that burned away all the unpleasantness of the past week and replaced it with a promise of something more. Sarah clung to him for a minute more before she reluctantly let him go.

“What do you think will happen to Glynda?”

“Probably not much. Her worst crime was in setting up the stunt, but there was never any intent on her part to do anything criminal. She just wanted to raise the mystery to justify the new museum.”

“And in the process, drag your family’s name back through the mud by rehashing those old rumors. And, using me to do it.” Sarah squeezed Robert’s arm. “I’m so sorry for my part in this.”

“You didn’t have a part except as an unwitting victim in a bad scheme.”

Sarah smiled gratefully and resettled against his side.

“And Ronnie Benson? What will happen to him?”

“He’ll go to jail for this since his intent was attempted robbery. Of course, after he undergoes mental testing.”

“What? How would you know that?”

“I’d say the way he was babbling about a ghost is a surefire indicator for the need for some mental counseling.”

Sarah playfully poked him in the ribs.

“So, this will clear your family’s name and remove the tarnish from your reputation. I suppose you’ll be leaving now?” She wished her voice didn’t sound so small and wavering.

“Leaving? I suppose so.”

Sarah bit her bottom lip and tried to keep the tears from disgracing her. He’d made her no promises.

“I do need to take a shower and it’s getting late, so I’ll let you get some rest and we’ll get a start after we have breakfast. We’ll need to write the research article to exonerate my great-grandfather. Who knows? The reputation we save might be our children’s.”

Sarah stared at him in confusion, her mind too sluggish to follow other than the fact that he wanted to have breakfast with her.

“Our children’s? I don’t understand. You have something in there about Maxwell Dyson too that affects my family?” Sarah rose as Robert stood, preparatory to leaving.

He tugged her into his arms, kissing her until they were both breathless. Pulling her along with him to the front door, he paused and planted a small, guileless kiss on her nose. “No, silly. I meant *our* children. Someday.”

Sarah stood staring out the door, long minutes after he drove away.

Oh.

* * * *

One year later.....

“Wh-who’s there?” Sarah Dyson shivered as her words echoed eerily down the upstairs hallway, only to fade off into a deadened silence.

“Robert?” she called softly, dread caused her voice to quiver, and fear robbed it of its volume.

“Robert, are you there?”

Sarah had forgotten to tell him she rescheduled her out of town day trip to her mother’s. She prayed the noises were him, here to return some heavy boxes of Historical Society files, though why he’d do that ten o’clock at night made no sense.

Her sock clad feet made a soft shushing sound on the polished wood flooring as she slowly crept toward the stairway banister. Peering over the railing, she could feel her heart racing, while her rational mind tried to account for the strange noise she’d heard emanating from the direction of her kitchen.

She paused, her breath held as she strained to hear any other noises, when the board under her feet suddenly creaked.

A sharp, echoing clatter sounded from the kitchen, followed by another heavy mantle of silence.

Her heart nearly stopped. She couldn’t deny the noises she’d just heard. She mentally grappled with the reality of having an intruder in her house. Gut-wrenching terror washed over her. She stood paralyzed. What to do? Stay? Run? Hide?

As she debated defensive maneuvers, she sensed that she was alone. A breeze whispered across her bare toes as if it had wafted in from out of doors. Where had the intruder gone? Was he gone for good?

Crouching down beside the head of the stairway, she listened and waited. Long minutes ticked by before she could breathe naturally and convince her body to abandon its ‘fight or flight’ attitude.

So what had just happened?

“Well, I’ll be damned if I just sit up here and wait any longer to be a victim!” she muttered, still frightened but now, irritated as well.

She inched her way down the stairs, the urge - no, the *need*, to find some sort of weapon to protect herself was overwhelming. Of course, since she needed something, there was not even a lousy umbrella to be had.

Frustrated, but determined, she crept closer towards the darkened kitchen. Her ears tuned into the familiar sounds and noises that were part and parcel of all old houses.

Sarah slowly pushed open the kitchen door just enough to get a glimpse inside the room, beginning to feel a little silly and overcautious. The moon suddenly appeared from behind a cloud and its illuminating glow cast a soft light in the kitchen and the hair on the back of her neck rose.

The silhouette of a person’s head came into view, visible from behind her kitchen’s center work island.

She screamed loud enough to bring the house down and raced from the kitchen.

"Sarah. Sarah, it's me, Robert. Honey, what are you doing home? You were supposed to be at your mother's house." Robert grasped her arms to keep her from running from the house.

"Robert! What happened? Who's in there?" she cried, trying to break free from his hold, the need to flee still strong.

"Sssh, honey. I dropped a pumpkin. That's all." He stood cradling me in his arms, smoothing my hair back from my brow.

"A pumpkin? I saw someone in there. I saw the head rising above the counter," she frantically whispered.

"You didn't. I promise."

Sarah felt his calmness and let his soothing words flow around her.

"Why are you here this late at night? Sarah leaned against him, and tried to make sense of it all.

"I've been working on your birthday surprise and since I didn't think you'd be here tonight, I thought I would get a jump on it." Robert grinned sheepishly, scanning her face for signs of calm.

"You must have been working on it for awhile. I should've known when I saw you disappear downtown in that alley last week, shades of the River Man fiasco. Oh, I know. The haunted tour. You're taking me on the haunted tour for my birthday, right?"

"No. I wasn't downtown last week. And I'd forgotten about the haunted tour, but if you want to go, I'll sure take you," he offered with no hint of deception coloring his words.

"But, I saw you. I called you but you ran away." Her voice faltered even as the words left her mouth.

"Does that sound right to you, Sarah? That I'd run from you? Are you still thinking about ghosts?" Robert pushed open the kitchen door and snapped on the overhead lighting.

As the light illuminated the corners of the kitchen, she could now see that the 'head' was actually a pumpkin on the counter, and on the floor, a broken pumpkin as Robert had said.

"Since you interrupted my surprise, you might as well help me carve the pumpkins for Halloween." Robert busied himself putting the finishing cut on the pumpkin lid. Peering inside, he asked me, "Are you squeamish?"

"Squeamish? Oh. I guess you want me to put my hand in there and scoop out the strings and seeds?"

"Yep. If you don't mind, and I'll clean up this mess on the floor."

It felt a little anti-climatic and incongruous to be standing in her kitchen in cotton pajamas and white socks preparing to carve a pumpkin after the shock and scare she'd just gone through. Maybe this was Robert's way of trying to diffuse the situation.

Sarah prepared to reach in and begin the dirty work of cleaning out the pumpkin, when she realized she'd forgotten to get a scoop.

"Here it is." Robert's voice was just behind her. Jumping, she turned to see him standing with the utensil in his hand.

"How'd you--? How do you do that? You make my crazy with your stealth. You're more silent than a cat."

"Just scoop."

Sarah noted he laughed as he always did when she mentioned his eerie habit.

"Alright," she said over her shoulder, when her hand inside the pumpkin encountered something unexpected. "What the--!"

She slowly extracted the squared object she'd found in the bottom of the jack-o-lantern. A small smile pulled the corners of her lips upward and her heart began beating so loudly, she thought Robert would be able to hear it.

She flipped the box lid open to reveal the most beautiful ring that lay nestled inside.

Sarah whirled around to search for Robert. As usual, she felt just a faint brush of air on her cheek. She smiled and quickly turned the other way. "Robert?"

"Yes, Sarah. Are you surprised? Will you marry me?" he breathed beside her ear, leaving a soft whisper of a kiss where his words fell.

She still didn't know how Robert managed to appear and disappear like a wraith, but it only added

to the enduring fascination and mystery that is love. Haziness overtook her as it always did when Robert held her in his arms.

The town still talked about last years' haunting of Sarah Dyson. She was still haunted. Haunted by her love for the man she held in her arms.

Outside in the shadows, a figure dressed in rusty brown clothes watched the young couple through the windows. He tugged his hat lower over his eyes, smiled, and turned to shuffle away. Melting into the haze, his figure shimmered for a minute before it faded away.

The neighbor's cat wailed softly and dashed to the spot only to find a small pile of swirling, autumn leaves dancing in the mists and somewhere, the eerie cry of a bat sounded in the night.

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A Nice Cup of Tea

by

Sheila Holloway

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To my little girl, who giggled in all the right places when I read her this story.

About Sheila

Sheila has been writing for fifteen years. She began seeking publication in 1999.

She lives in the Arkansas Delta with her wonderfully supportive husband and beautiful little girl.

Currently, Sheila labors as an editor and administrator for By Grace Publishing and home schools her daughter. The Holloway family belongs to the Church of Christ.

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CHAPTER ONE

August heat baked the lawn of my new Eastern Mississippi home as I unloaded boxes. At ten in the morning the mercury had already hit eighty-five, and I wanted to work fast before the day became unbearably hot.

"Ms. Rayburn, are you sure you want to live here during the renovation?" Samuel Hope, or Sam as he insisted I call him, had already tried to talk me out of staying in the home. I'd hired him to renovate just after the deal closed, and he'd been making noises about me getting an apartment since. I guessed this was a last ditch effort, and the reason he was here today.

"Sam, my name is Katherine, call me that. As to my living arrangements, I plan to stay in my house. I'll be working alongside you and your crew. I'll be fine."

He heaved a sigh before grabbing a box. His demeanor screamed, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

With Sam helping, it didn't take long to get my few belongings into the rambling, run-down Victorian house. I planned to sparsely furnish the place until all of the repairs had been made.

"So, how bad is the mold in the downstairs bathroom?" I asked, partially to make conversation. The house had been our only common ground, so it felt like a safe topic.

"Bad. Very bad. We'll have to take out the walls, the ceiling and the floor."

"Sounds like a whole new bathroom is in order."

"But at least you'll have that claw-foot tub. It's in great shape," Sam said with enthusiasm. When he talked about the renovation, his usual businesslike attitude melted. What was left was an almost boyish excitement that lit up his blue eyes.

"What about the upstairs bathroom? We won't be building me an outhouse, will we?"

"Upstairs just has some water damage. It's usable, but still needs work," he replied with a chuckle.

We stepped out to the front porch. Air conditioning would be installed in a few weeks, and the temperature indoors felt ten degrees warmer than outdoors. Sam took off his red ball cap and wiped his forehead. His sandy-blond hair was flat against his head except where it had curled over the edges of the cap. Hat hair.

I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the sitting room window. I was one to judge bad hair. My strawberry blond curls had turned to snarls. Even though it was held up with a clip, enough hair had escaped to make me look like Medusa. I tried to smooth it back then shrugged when I realized it was hopeless.

"I could use a tall glass of ice cold lemonade," I said, shifting into idle chit-chat mode. It was a first for us.

"Can you imagine how many pitchers of lemonade were served right here?"

"No, no I can't. One-hundred and five years is a long life for a house. I wonder how many families have lived here."

"Um, just three. The Carters built it for their brood of six, then the Henrys raised a family, and after that the Bradleys. They just had one child who never married," he answered matter-of-factly.

"Berniece." *The woman I bought the house from.*

Sam nodded. Local history was a part of his job as a renovation expert and builder. Of course he knew who owned the house last.

"So what do you have planned for the landscaping?" he asked as he surveyed the brown grass and dust that was the lawn.

"I thought about some grass seed and shrubbery. I'm not a big gardener."

"I could help. You know there used to be a flower garden over there," he said, pointing to the north side of the house. "There's a picture of it in my file. It's from the Carter family photos. There was even one of those reflecting balls in it."

"Oh, I used to love those. My grandmother had one on a pedestal. My cousins and I used to stare at ourselves in it."

"I loved those things too. The lady next door had one when I was a kid. It was like having a private fun house mirror."

"So, what would you think if I made some lemonade, and we took a step back in time?"

"I'd wonder where the lemons came from."

"Don't. Thinking about it might spoil the illusion," I retorted on my way in to mix up the powdered diet lemonade he'd helped unpack just forty-five minutes before.

* * * *

The first evening in my new house was peaceful, although warm. This would be my home and office as a freelance writer for many years to come, I mused as I walked around for the millionth time.

The radio played quietly in what had been the sitting room in days gone by. I sank into the couch and closed my eyes.

I could see the room as it would be. The natural hardwood floor gleamed with fresh wax. Rugs were positioned in the hall and in the middle of the room. A soft glow from the dining room chandelier gave the place a secure feeling. Rose-patterned wallpaper hung on the walls where I knew paint peeled now.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" a little girl's voice whispered.

I jumped, and blinked my eyes several times as I got my bearings. Goose pimples ran up my arms and a chill tickled down my spine.

Little girl laughter, though so quiet it was nearly imperceptible, bounced through the air.

There was nothing there. Just me and the radio. I'd done an article on hauntings a few months earlier, and I had to admit, I was thinking about the possibility of my new house having at least one good ghost. My imagination was supplying me with one, I told myself before I treaded up the creaky stairs to go to bed.

An airy giggle followed me up the steps before I broke into a run.

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CHAPTER TWO

Sunday morning started off hot. I didn't need a degree in meteorology to predict that.

The morning was also starting rather early. My night before had been almost sleepless. I kept opening one eye to see if I was alone in the room. In the light of day, I felt like a fool. I headed downstairs for a much needed cup of coffee.

While the coffee maker steamed and gurgled, I planned my clothing for the day. My gauzy skirt, white blouse and sandals should be cool enough. Panty hose were on the "no" list. At least the church I'd found before moving in had air conditioning.

* * * *

Singing resonated through the small auditorium as the service came to an end. We finished the last of the chorus, and a man near the front began leading the closing prayer in a steady, familiar voice. Sam?

As the new face in the crowd, I wasn't surprised to be greeted by many of the members of the congregation. I knew I would wind up spending some time learning about the people that would make up my new church family. What I didn't count on was that one of them would be Samuel Hope.

"What a pleasant surprise, Katherine," he announced as he shook my hand.

"For me too. This was the last place I would have expected you to be," I answered, then realized I had put my foot squarely in my mouth.

Sam just laughed and offered me his elbow. "May I escort you to lunch, ma'am?"

"Certainly." I smiled at him sheepishly before taking his arm.

An elderly woman gave me a wink before we made it out the door. If my verbal gaffe hadn't made me blush, the knowing twinkle in the woman's eye did.

* * * *

The afternoon was getting late, and Sam and I were still talking. The front porch was the perfect, shady place to spend an afternoon drinking iced tea. If your house was 101 degrees, that is.

"So, I guess we'll start the work tomorrow." I have a knack for stating the obvious.

"Yes, I plan to start with that moldy bathroom. It's the worst place in the whole house. Electricians will be in once we get some of the walls down. Then after the rewiring, you can have your heat pump put in."

"Just in time for fall," I said with a laugh.

"Would you prefer the dead of winter?"

"Don't even joke about that. I got so hot last night I think I might have been imagining things. I can only guess how cold this place would be in the winter. How did they live before heating and air?"

"Fans and fires, I suppose. It's a shame the old units from the seventies don't work. They'd be some relief," he said around the ice cube he'd begun crunching. So who was stating the obvious now?

* * * *

Later in the week, Sam and I sat in the kitchen examining color samples and old photos.

"My best guess would be ivory, don't you think?" I was puzzling over a photo of my kitchen from 1915.

"Ivory would be good, but it's not the original color," Sam replied.

"Then what do you think?"

Peach. The kitchen is a peach, a voice seemed to whisper in my ear.

"I have an idea, but let me chip down to the original. I'm pretty sure it's there."

"Let me guess one more time ... peach."

Sam flashed me a grin, and turned to peel away layer after layer of paint and wallpaper.

"There it is -- a peach with a hint of orange and gold. How'd you guess?"

"I don't know," I answered, a bit surprised myself. "How did you know it wasn't ivory?"

"I've got an inside source," he said with a wink. That gesture and the twinkle in his eye reminded me of the older woman at church. My face suddenly warmed. I knew a blush blazed across my cheeks.

"Do you need more water?"

"No. I'm fine."

"Katherine, you look flushed. Let's step outside and get some air."

That little girl giggle from the other night came from some distant place, yet felt as if it originated right beside me. A shiver skittered down my arms.

"I think some air would do me good," I finally choked out.

Sam led me out to the front porch. I felt so silly. The heat was playing tricks on me again. No, the heat wasn't doing anything. It was my mind.

A soft breeze blew. What a relief. We had put fans up all over the house to circulate the air, but it just felt like they blew heat, as if we'd placed multiple hair dryers throughout the house.

The workmen who dismantled my bathroom had a shop fan blowing into that room to dry it up as well. The stench of rotting wood and mold filled the house. It made my head ache just being there, but I wouldn't admit that to Sam for anything. The smell and the pounding in my head only added to the misery of the temperature, though.

"You know, you could always rent an apartment," Sam said from beside me. His voice made me jump with a start. That giggle was still on my mind.

"And we've talked about this. I want to stay in my house."

"It's a health hazard. Once it's finished, you can stay in it the rest of your life. Raise a family here if you want, but right now it would be best to stay elsewhere."

"I'm fine. Honestly, I really wasn't even all that hot." *I was just embarrassed.*

"You are more stubborn than a mule *or* my grandmother, and no one has ever earned *that* distinction in my book."

I couldn't help it -- I laughed until tears rolled down my cheeks. The impatience in his voice and the look on his face brought to mind a parent or teacher put out with a five year old.

When I could finally stop my laughing fit, I did my best to look him in the eye. "I'm a grown woman. I promise, if I feel living in this house is compromising my health, I'll take an apartment," I said with as much dignity as I could muster after getting the giggles.

Even Sam was having a hard time keeping a straight face. I wasn't sure if he was laughing with me or at me. Maybe both.

"Let's go in and get a drink before we match up the color for the kitchen," he said, still looking like a parent.

* * * *

With the windows all open and the fans blowing full blast, the sitting room had finally reached a comfortable temperature. My mantle clock read 11:45 p.m. Most of the lights in the house were off, and the glow of the street light outside cast shadows on the porch.

My laptop screen sat empty in front of me. I should have been writing a story about renovating old homes. It proved more difficult than I'd assumed it would. After all, I was in the middle of the ultimate research opportunity.

I moved the laptop to a side table and went to the kitchen to refill my glass. Earlier, I'd made more of the instant, sugar-free lemonade that Sam found so offensive.

Just the thought of his lips puckered up in disgust brought a smile to mine. I'd never tell him but he was kind of cute when he was grossed out.

I giggled to myself, then stopped dead silent. Someone had joined in.

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CHAPTER THREE

I stood in my brightly-lit kitchen, looking for shadows. The only sounds in the house were the radio playing in the sitting room and the fans blowing in every available space.

Something upstairs sounded like it hit the floor. Startled, I dropped my empty glass. Ignoring the broken shards, I ran to the staircase and mounted the steps before I even knew where I was headed. There was another thump coming from the other side of the attic door.

I raced to the smaller set of stairs leading to the attic. An old flashlight hung by the entrance. After grabbing it, I flung the door open. Hinged windows bumped against the wall as a wind driving in from the north sent blessed cool air into the usually stuffy attic.

Through the window, I could see lightning flash in the distance. A storm was moving in, and fast. Thunder boomed moments later.

I crossed the attic, careful not to trip on anything. The flashlight's beam created a yellow pool to guide my feet.

Before buying the house, I had been given a brief tour of the attic. Some of the trunks and toys stored up here had been left by the original owners.

I decided, as I secured the windows, that I would return to the attic soon to sift through the items I'd inherited. Tonight, however, had already turned into tomorrow. My mantle clock was chiming midnight. The dignified gongs floated up the stairs and reminded me I still needed to get some sleep. There was also a broken glass to sweep up in the kitchen. At least I knew it was only the wind that had me so frightened. At least that's what I had decided to tell myself at midnight in what was supposed to be an empty house.

* * * *

Last night's storm had cleaned the air outside. It didn't feel as if I was breathing dust when I stepped onto the porch with my coffee.

My eyes were puffy from lack of sleep, though. I had spent the night sorting through what I thought I'd heard and what it could actually have been. I was alone in the house last night. I knew that. Yet, I knew someone was laughing with me in the kitchen.

Could I really have a ghost? More than likely, I had heard an echo of my own laughter, and I was making myself crazy with speculation.

Sam pulled up in his old work truck. The driver's side door creaked open, and he climbed out holding a bag from the local doughnut shop. We'd settled into this routine -- he brought breakfast, I supplied the coffee.

"Good morning. They had the chocolate glazed kind today. I got you an extra one."

"Are you trying to woo me, sir?" I used my best Southern Belle impression, batting my eyelashes and all.

"And just what if I am?"

I had never been left speechless in my entire life. I guess there is a first time for everything.

"What?" he asked, as if what he'd just said was to be expected, and I was gaping like an idiot. I might have actually *been* gaping, but I felt justified.

"What do you mean 'what'? Give me my doughnuts."

He chuckled as he charged in to pour himself some coffee and divvy up the doughnuts.

We had a deal. As long as he was working on my house, he could make himself at home. Sam took down the mug he always used, and poured himself a steaming cup of coffee. I peeked into the white sack and pulled out a messy chocolate-covered doughnut.

My phone rang. Sam automatically handed me a napkin. His answer to my earlier question echoed in my mind. *And just what if he is trying to woo me?*

"Hello?"

My editor at *Ladies' Day* greeted me, "Katherine, it's Glenna. What's your schedule like?"

"Well, it's pretty open. I've got one project, but plenty of time."

"I need a good Valentine's Day story ... "

* * * *

I spent most of my day at a chocolate factory. I decided it was serendipity. I'd started the day with chocolate, and it only got better. When I got home, Sam and his workers were gone for the day. I poked my head into the downstairs bathroom and was thrilled to see a floor, ceiling and walls.

As I passed through the dining room, I discovered a bouquet of pink carnations. I love pink carnations.

A note sat beside the vase. In a neat, masculine script Sam informed me a plumber would be in tomorrow and the electrician was expected in about a week. I knew I would have to stay in a hotel while the electrician worked, but it would only be for a short while.

For the second time that day, the phone rang. I whisked it off the cradle and answered it.

"Katherine! You're home."

"Hi, Sam. I just made it in. Thank you for the flowers. They're my favorite."

"Something told me you'd like them."

Just like something told me my kitchen should be peach?

"And I'm thrilled with the bathroom. The house is really shaping up."

"Would you like to ... oh, celebrate your bathroom?"

I laughed at the invitation, then replied, "I'd love to. What did you have in mind?"

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CHAPTER FOUR

Sam and I sat at the dining room table sipping tea. Cartons from the Chinese restaurant littered the small space. We'd decided to forego plates and just share the cardboard containers. My carnations had been moved to make room for our mess.

Sam unwrapped his fortune cookie, and snapped it in two. Crumbs scattered as he pulled out the white slip of paper.

"You have found what you have searched for," he read from the fortune. He looked at me as if there was something else he wanted to say, but kept it to himself.

It was my turn to open up one of the golden cookies. I pulled apart the plastic, and broke the boomerang shaped cookie into more than a dozen pieces. My fortune fell out in front of me.

I read it to myself and sat staring at it in disbelief.

"Well ... " Sam urged impatiently as he stared at me.

"There will always be someone to share in your laughter," I read aloud for him. It sounded better out loud than it did in my head.

"That's a good one," Sam replied, then paused as if he were weighing out something of importance. "Would you like to go for a walk? It's not like you have a bunch of dishes left from dinner."

"And if I did, I know who would be helping with them," I teased playfully. "But since we don't have dishes, I'd love to go for a walk."

Sam stood and helped me out of my chair like he'd stepped out of an old Fred Astaire movie. He took my hand, lacing our fingers before he led me out and down the porch steps. It was very intimate, but oh, so right.

"Shall we take a stroll around the grounds?" he asked. I thought he must still be in Fred Astaire mode.

"Why, I'd be delighted to," I answered, hoping I was doing a good Ginger Rogers.

Humor sparkled in his eyes as he looked at me and smiled. We were playing the same game. His pleasure was obvious.

The air was still and heavy with humidity. As we rounded the corner of the house, I could have sworn the reflecting ball he'd told me about was there, surrounded by flowers and statuary. I blinked, and all that was there was my own sickly grass and dirt.

It didn't take long before we had company buzzing around our ears, landing on our arms and my uncovered legs. We'd forgotten one thing they never show in those old black and white movies -- mosquitoes.

I let go of Sam's hand to swat several of the little blood suckers on my left calf. My denim shorts came down to my knees, but the insects were even flying up them.

"Maybe this wasn't the best idea," Sam said as he slapped at one on the side of his face.

"Well, don't beat yourself up over it. Let's just get back in."

We jogged back around to the front of the house and trotted up the porch steps. We snickered at ourselves as we reached the doorway. A slight breeze picked up then, and I know I heard a childish giggle just as we slammed the front door.

"How many pints did they get from you?" Sam asked me with a serious look. "You're as white as a ghost."

"I think I'm just exhausted." *He didn't hear it. It was just your imagination again.*

The mantle clock began to announce the time. Midnight.

"I didn't realize it was so late. I'm sorry. I'll go home and let you get some sleep."

"That's probably the best thing right now. I'll just clean off the table and hit the hay," I replied with a yawn.

"I'll help with the table, and take the trash on my way out."

He followed me into the dining room, and began closing half full containers and separating them from the refuse. I continued into the kitchen and got my trash can. A chill took me by surprise before I got halfway out. I felt as if someone was in there with me, but Sam was still hard at work in the next room.

I hurried to join him. I could say one thing for the man, he was efficient. All of the trash was scooped into the can, the bag pulled and tied off in record time, and the leftovers were stored.

I walked him to the door, my eyes beginning to water from lack of sleep.

"So, I guess this is good-night," he said with my trash bag clutched in his hand.

"No, actually it's good morning."

"Semantics."

He dropped the bag on the floor in front of the door, and pulled me closer. As he wrapped his arms around me in a warm embrace, his breath caressed my ear. Once more I felt chills, but these were delightful.

His lips grazed my cheek, then found my mouth. A slow, sweet kiss made my head spin. The clock sounded the half-hour, and made us both jump with a start. I'd forgotten there was anything in the world but Sam, and his gentle kiss.

"May I pick you up for church on Sunday?" His question jerked me back to reality more fully than the clock.

"Of course, but won't that make people ... talk?"

"They can talk all they want. It's church. What can they say?"

"I'll see you Sunday morning."

* * * *

I slept most of Saturday. I very rarely do that, but I guess with all the sleep I'd missed, I needed to.

When I did get up and start moving around, my head felt stuffed with cotton. Sleeping late in a hot room always left me feeling more exhausted than not sleeping at all.

I didn't expect Sam, and I didn't have any work that needed my immediate attention, so I decided to poke around in the attic.

The promise of old trunks and the secrets they must hide beckoned me to climb the narrow stairs into the dusty attic room.

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CHAPTER FIVE

I sat on the floor on one of my rattier towels. An old camel-back trunk, its lid open wide, shared its contents. Yellowed newspapers were stacked up on one side. I carefully lifted them out, one by one. Age had made them brittle. Scraps of brown and yellow newsprint covered the floor and scattered each time I moved a newspaper.

Reading the headlines was like stepping into a time machine. *Alton B. Parker to Run on Democratic Ticket, Baltimore Ablaze, Hurricane Kills 114, Ireland's Crown Jewels Disappear*; the disasters, and events continued on and on. My breath caught in fascination when I uncovered *Titanic Sinks*. Gingerly lifting two or three papers at a time, I stacked them back in the trunk. I didn't think anything could top that 1912 headline. Besides, I didn't want to damage any of the flimsy treasures.

I pulled out a box of photos and begun sifting through them. They were obviously left behind by the first family, the Carters.

Sam had said there were six children in the family. The photo I held in my hand must have been of one of the younger boys. He was an adorable little imp, about two or three years old, in a sailor suit. His smile was full of mischief and life. The setting was definitely my front porch.

I turned the faded print over to read *Samuel Carter, June 1920* in bold cursive writing. Of course, with that twinkle in his eye, he'd have to be a Sam.

The next snapshot was of the same boy, a woman, and a baby. I studied the woman. She had such a peaceful expression. Her blond hair was pulled up. Apparently the bob hadn't made its way to this part of Mississippi yet, or she wasn't a slave to trends. The words on the reverse side were in the same looping handwriting as the last photo.

"Cora Carter, Samuel Carter, and baby Emma Laura Carter, June 1920," I read aloud. "Hmmm ... Emma Laura. You were a cutie."

My scalp tingled and my whole body chilled as the chiming laughter rang around the attic, then abruptly stopped.

I dropped the picture back in the box and left the attic for some fresh air. *You've been cooped up too long, Katherine. You need to get out.*

* * * *

Darkness. A bit of light leaked in from under my bedroom blinds. It must be the street light. I looked at the clock. 2:30 a.m. I'd gone to bed early, feeling rather run down. I felt wide awake now.

I sat up and glanced around the shadowy room. Just me and my meager furnishings. Not sure where I was going or why at this hour, I stood and slipped into my robe. As I left my bedroom, I realized I was on my way to the attic. I'd left before exploring nearly enough last time. I took the flashlight in with me and sat it up on its end like a lamp. My towel was still where I'd left it, along with the old photos. I picked up where I'd left off. There were four Carter boys and two Carter girls. The girls were separated by a number of years. I wished whoever labeled the pictures had written ages on the backs with the years, but I guessed they knew the birth dates and therefore could tell the ages.

I watched the family grow up as I worked my way through the box. Emma Laura became quite a lovely young lady by 1930, the date on the last photo of her. Samuel was a dashing young man in that year too.

In 1931, their sister, Elizabeth Anne Carter, was married. This seemed to be the end of the Carters in this house. I wondered why they'd moved. Had something happened to shatter the happiness they so obviously shared here? Maybe I could ask Sam.

I was suddenly drained of energy again. My head began to throb as well. Aspirin and milk were what I needed now. Milk would coat my dry, itchy throat. The stuffy attic seemed to have sucked the moisture out of me.

While I was sipping my milk in the kitchen, I couldn't help but wonder what had become of Emma Laura. Did she sit in this kitchen on Sunday mornings and drink milk too?

Peals of laughter rang out just under the everyday sounds of the house. It sounded a bit stronger than it usually did, but was still masked by the refrigerator. At that moment, I identified the source of the giggling with Emma Laura Carter, whom I assumed last lived in this house in 1930 or 1931.

My ever-faithful mantle clock struck the half-hour -- 4:30 a.m. I had time to get a little rest before Sam came to escort me to church. Now, what dress went well with under-eye circles?

PAGEBREAK

CHAPTER SIX

I opened the door with a yawn. Sam looked at me with that impatient parent look again.

"You look awful."

"Good morning to you too," I replied, feeling awful.

"I didn't mean that ... that ... way," Sam stammered. "You look like you're coming down with something."

"I'm fine. I just couldn't sleep last night, so I got up."

"When?"

"Oh, about two-thirty. I'm just really tired, but I'll be okay." I tried to smile, but I'm sure it was more of a grimace. My head was pounding.

Sam looked at his watch before smiling back at me. "So are you feeling up to a morning in church?"

* * * *

I made it through the sermon. I'm not sure about all the points the preacher made. I was listening to a buzzing sound in my ears and trying to breathe.

My allergies must be acting up.

"AHHHH-SHOOO!" I sneezed for the third time in an hour just after the closing prayer.

"I'm getting you back home, Katherine, and I'll have the crew take the next couple of days off," Sam whispered to me as the congregation began breaking into small groups to chat or go off in search of lunch.

"Yes, I think I need a nap and some allergy medicine. Are you sure you can take time off from the job?"

"Yes, we can take time off. The guys won't mind. But, you know, you could always get that apartment, if you feel we need to be working."

I narrowed my eyes at him but didn't say anything. The elderly lady who had winked at me last week approached from behind him, and I didn't want to argue the matter in front of her. However, there was no way I would leave the house now. I had just found Emma Laura.

"Samuel," she announced her presence more than addressed him.

"Good morning, Grandmother," he greeted her as he put an arm around her frail shoulders.

"Well, are you going to just stand there, or are you going to introduce me to your lady friend?"

His smile told me this must be the stubborn grandmother he'd mentioned the other day. I liked her already.

"Grandmother, this is Katherine Rayburn. Katherine, this is my Grandma Hope," he said with a sigh.

"It's nice to meet you ... " I wasn't sure what to call her.

"Grandmother," she finished for me. "and it's very nice to meet you too." She turned to Sam, and

gave his arm a pat. "I know I told you to find a lady friend, but I didn't mean for you to keep her up all hours of the night." Then to me she said, "Dear, you look like you could use a cup of tea and a good long rest."

* * * *

I sat in my kitchen early Sunday evening feeling slightly lightheaded. The allergy medication took away some of the symptoms but the headache continued to throb. What was I allergic to? My normal allergies only popped up in the spring.

My ears popped. *I hear her. She's in the back yard, giggling.* My mind produced an image of Emma Laura around ten years old, swinging on a homemade swing. The seat was a piece of lumber that was tied by rope to a high tree branch.

One of the last photos I'd seen of her had been in a swing just like that. Jasper, one of the older brothers was about to push her, or they were just posed that way. My reverie showed her in the same gingham dress with ribbons in her hair. *Except she was alone. She had no brothers or sister in the back yard with her.*

You're thinking crazy thoughts, Katherine. You know there are no lingering spirits.

"Okay, fine. I'll just go outside and see what's really out there," I said aloud to the rational me in my head.

I stood up quickly, then sat back down. The motion of standing made me dizzy. After a moment, I tried again, only with more deliberate moves.

The kitchen door swung open into the backyard. I could hear the birds singing, the rustle of the leaves in a slight breeze, and there ... faintly, the tinkling laughter of a little girl. With my head stopped up, my hearing seemed to be on a different level than normal. I heard sounds from a different perspective.

I closed my eyes; I could see the place as it had been. The grass was thick and green. An oak tree in the middle of the back yard played host to the swing, and a birdbath was about eight feet to the right of it. Rose bushes lined the back fence instead of the honeysuckle that grew there now. I was there, then, in 1930 or so. I could feel it.

"Are you going to the party?" Emma Laura asked. She sat on the swing wearing red gingham with matching red ribbons in her hair.

"What party?"

"Elizabeth's engagement party, that's what party, silly!"

"Of course. What other party is there?" I pictured the invitation mixed in with the photos. It was to be a formal affair.

"Papa says that if Caleb Henry wants to marry his daughter he'll have to be able to give her a decent house, so he's selling them ours. I'm going to miss my swing, but the new house is going to be more modern."

"Katherine?"

That was Sam's voice. *How did he get here? Here in the early '30s?*

"Ha, found you. Are you getting some fresh air?"

I turned and there he was, standing on my almost barren property. No rose bushes, no lush grass, only the trees were there, and a couple of them were gone, victim to who knows what.

"Yes. I just needed to get out of the house."

"Grandmother sent some tea. I told her I thought you were a coffee drinker, but she insisted you needed a healing tea. It will help you sleep, if you don't mind overactive dreams." His expression told me he was skeptical about the healing properties of the tea.

"That was very nice of her." Overactive dreams are just what I need. They'll match my overactive imagination perfectly.

PAGEBREAK

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sam brewed the tea. It smelled horrible. There was a floral note with a gym sock undertone. It was the first thing I could remember smelling all day, though.

"Are you sure you're doing it right?" *Tea shouldn't smell like this.*

"Yes. Trust me. Grandmother's teas have been a part of my life since I was a little boy. Now, let me get you a cup. You'll need cream and lots of sugar."

"Why cream and sugar?"

"To disguise the taste of valerian root. It's nasty," he stated with an expression to match his words.

"What's in this stuff?" I asked as he stirred in the sugar.

"Chamomile, rose hips, valerian root, and Grandmother and the good Lord only know what else."

"Are you sure it's safe?" I was just a bit apprehensive.

"I've lived through it before."

He handed me my cup on a saucer. I almost chuckled at the formality of it all. I was sure Grandmother would approve.

I took a sip. I couldn't bring myself to swallow it right away, but what was I going to do with it? Spew it back into the cup?

"No, you don't," he said, apparently anticipating my reaction. "Drink it. I know, it's vile, isn't it? But it won't do you any good if you just keep it in your mouth, or spit it out."

How does he know what I'm thinking? Might as well swallow it, and fast.

The hot liquid went down my throat and settled in my stomach. *Gross.* That was the only word I could think of. It was like drinking the laundry water. With sugar, granted, but the laundry water, nonetheless. I felt queasy.

"Do you have any crackers?" Sam's voice moved far away then came close again.

"No." My tongue felt thick, and I took another sip.

"Then I'll make you some toast. You might need something on your stomach."

"Something other than witch's brew?"

"I thought the same thing the first time she gave it to me," he confided. I had the feeling he was keeping a snicker from escaping.

As I slugged back more of the herbal concoction, I couldn't think of it as tea, Sam made two slices of dry toast for me to nibble.

"There, that should help you rest," he announced after I finished the last of both food and drink.

"Shall I tuck you in, or can I trust you to go to bed now?"

"I'll go now ... Daddy."

"I prefer 'Doctor.'"

"So you'd rather play doctor than house?" It was the tea talking, but I couldn't help it.

"Good night, Katherine. Have a pleasant sleep," he said with a blush. I was graced with a quick peck of a kiss on the forehead before he swept out of the house.

* * * *

There was music playing somewhere. The sound of many conversations held at once clamored from the same far-off place.

The party. Elizabeth's engagement party. What other party was there, after all? I sat up. My head felt fuzzy, and my mouth was dry.

I donned my robe and slippers. I couldn't miss the party, now could I?

The closer I got to the stairs, the louder the party sounds became. Finally, I made it to the railing. People milled about downstairs. A Victrola was in the corner of the sitting room. Piano music poured out, and a sweet-sounding female voice was singing about little white lies.

Emma Laura, wearing a light blue velvet and lace dress with puffed sleeves, stood by the cherry phonograph, apparently playing the part of the DJ. When the song finished, she carefully removed the thick black disc, and placed it in a slipcover book. She turned a couple of pages of the record album, and selected another.

Once she had the next record in place, and the Victrola spinning, jaunty music filled the room. A husky woman's voice broke into song.

*... Kiss me honey, it makes my love come down,
Cuddle close, turn out the lights,
Do just what you did last night ...*

Emma Laura started to bob her head, and move her shoulders to the tune. Cora Carter, her hair in its usual bun, charged into view from the direction of the kitchen. I could just make out her words to the bouncing girl.

"Stop it this instant. That's vulgar, and so is that song. Your brother should be ashamed of himself for having it in his collection."

Emma Laura did as her mother said. She stood completely still, her head down. Mrs. Carter changed the record to a classical piece that I vaguely recognized as Bach.

The girl looked up after her mother had bustled back out of the room. Our gazes met and locked. There was something so familiar in those blue eyes. She seemed to recognize me, too.

One of the boys brushed past me and shivered, but kept going. No one but Emma Laura appeared to see me.

PAGEBREAK

CHAPTER EIGHT

My tongue felt twice its normal size. Inside my head, cotton threatened to explode from my ears. I opened my eyes. Judging from the bright coral light streaming in from outside, it was early morning. The clock proved that assumption. Its red digital numbers told me it was 6:08 a.m.

I had work to do. The deadlines for both the renovation article and the Valentine's Day story were creeping up on me. I always pictured a black panther stalking in the shadows when I thought about deadlines. You could stop running and be devoured, or you could push forward and outrun the beast.

I slid the covers back. Why was I wearing my robe and slippers? I must have gotten up in the middle of the night, although I couldn't remember doing anything like that. In fact, the last memory I had was of Sam kissing my forehead.

A springy, almost jazzy tune played in my head. Humming, I left my bed to start the day.

My upstairs bathroom was equipped with a shower-tub combo that probably dated to the fifties. Pinkish tile covered the shower wall. This would all go away, to be replaced with more fitting fixtures when Sam's crew finished all the work on the downstairs bathroom. We wanted to capture the feeling of the earliest decor.

After regulating the water, I stepped into the tub to start my shower. The tune in my head took form with words, and I began to sing.

*"When I see two sweethearts spoon, underneath the silv'ry moon,
It makes my love come down, I wanna be around
Kiss me, honey, it makes my love come down ..."*

I had no idea where I'd heard that song. It was very catchy, and now it was stuck in my head.

* * * *

Coffee stared back at me from my cup. It just wasn't the same without doughnuts, and the man that usually brought them.

I picked up the phone, and started to dial. Instead, I put the receiver back in its place. I needed to finish my work. Besides, Sam probably had his day plotted out anyway.

Moments after I pulled my hand away from the phone, it rang. I jumped with a start, counted to five, and tried to answer the phone in a normal voice.

"Hello?"

"Did you sleep well?" It was Sam.

"I guess so. My coffee cup is lonely."

There was a pause before he spoke again. "Your coffee cup?"

"Yes. It wants your cup to sit next to it."

I heard his truck pull into the drive then, and his door slam.

"Are you decent?" he asked over the phone.

"Yes. I'm dressed, if that's what ... " I stopped talking and hung up the phone. Sam had opened the front door and was standing in my doorway.

"Didn't your mother ever teach you how to say good-bye when you hang up the phone?"

"Didn't yours ever teach you to knock?"

"I'm sorry," he said, slipping his cell phone into his front pocket. He looked positively ashamed of himself.

"I guess I could forgive you if you have my chocolate glazed doughnuts."

"I have chocolate and raspberry-filled this morning."

"Forgiveness sold to the man with the white sack in his hand." I did my best auctioneer impression.

Sam looked relieved as he took the sack into the kitchen. Under normal circumstances I would be furious with a man who just barged into my house, but something softened my anger. He meant well,

and frankly, I wanted him there.

* * * *

It didn't take long before I was too tired for company. Just sitting on the couch and talking made me exhausted, but I didn't think I could sleep.

"Do you want more tea? Grandmother sent enough for several days."

I tried to gauge the benefits I'd received from yesterday's cup of tea. I couldn't say if I could see a change in my condition or not. I woke up feeling good enough to sing in the shower. It just didn't last long. However, I *did* sleep last night.

"I guess I could have just one more cup. I don't want to sleep all day, then be awake all night, though."

"What if you had another cup in the evening?"

"Tell you what, I'll work when I get up, and if I need it, I'll have more tea."

"Why don't you call me, no matter what time and I'll come make you more tea. I wouldn't want you to make it too strong," he offered, with sincere concern.

"Okay, we have a deal."

Sam made my second ever cup of "healing tea." I decided to know it was *not* to love it. This dose was just as revolting as the first. In fact, the knowledge of how it was going to taste going down just made things worse.

"Do you think a little lemon would make this better?" I asked halfway through my serving of ... whatever it was.

"We could try it. I'll bring lemons next time I come."

"I can imagine it would only taste like furniture polish."

"So it *would* be better with lemon, then?" he teased.

It was getting harder to hold my head up. My kitchen swirled around me, and melted.

"Whoa, there, Katherine. You're about to put your face in the cup."

"Hmmm ... "

I felt him move me back in the chair. The next thing I knew I was leaning my head on his shoulder. My nose was against his neck. What was that cologne? Something woody.

We were moving. He was jostling me, and I could feel the tea slosh inside me.

"Here we go. A nice soft bed."

Am I falling? Oh, that's my bed.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to drop you. I'll just get the fan on, and pull the blinds."

"Good-night, dear." I heard my voice.

"Good-night."

PAGEBREAK

CHAPTER NINE

I smelled bacon. Bacon was frying in the kitchen. My mouth watered.

I eased out of bed and blearily found my way down the stairs. It must be getting close to noon, judging by the light outside. Why would someone be frying bacon now? More importantly, why would they be doing it in my kitchen?

"Emma Laura! Please come help with the sandwiches. The ladies will be here any time now."

I froze. A quick look around told me this was not my house. At least it wasn't yet. I sat down on the steps somewhere in the middle of the staircase. From there I could see into the sitting room. A gold velvet-covered sofa sat where my couch should be. The walls were papered in a rose print and Oriental rugs covered the hardwood floors.

The back door slammed.

"I'll go wash up, Mama. Did you already cut the tomatoes?" Emma Laura called out.

"Yes, now hurry."

Her footsteps came closer. The downstairs bathroom was tucked away beside the stairway. I knew she would be there soon. Where would I hide? I was an intruder in a time I didn't belong.

She came around the corner from the sitting room, paused and looked at me. Her eyes were large with surprise. Then she closed them, and began counting.

"One, two, three, four, five ... " she whispered each number.

I crawled back up the stairs, and crouched in the hallway as she continued to count. Emma Laura was still in view, but I didn't think she would be able to see me.

"... ten," she finished, and opened her eyes.

Slowly she approached the staircase, looking at the spot I'd been only moments before. She let out a breath she appeared to have been holding before continuing to the bathroom.

She could see me, but apparently she didn't believe in me. I had to hold back a giggle. I was the real, living, breathing human being here. Or was I?

* * * *

I awoke with a start. It was half-past noon, and I was hot. My fingers and feet both felt swollen.

If I get up for a drink of water, will I still be in my house?

"That was a strange thought," I announced to the empty room.

I vaguely remembered Sam carrying me to bed. That must have been only four hours ago. I was still incredibly groggy, though. Thirst won out. I edged out of bed to get a glass of water.

Visions of rose print wallpaper and Oriental rugs came to me as I navigated the stairs on weak legs. Suddenly, I had a craving for bacon. A BLT would hit the spot.

It could wait, though. I didn't have the energy to cook. Maybe I could ask Sam to bring me one from the diner across town.

When I entered the kitchen, I could smell the tea. It was as if someone left the contents of an athlete's laundry basket in my sink. I suddenly lost my appetite.

The water ran for a moment before I put my glass under the stream. As I sipped my water, life came back to some of my brain cells. I could remember creeping up the stairs and hiding from Emma Laura. Another flash of insight showed me a party scene and music pouring out of the Carters' Victrola.

Overactive dreams indeed.

I was too tired to think about it any longer, and climbed the stairs to return to bed. Images of 1930 swirled around in my head as I settled back on the pillow.

* * * *

I opened one eye. There were voices drifting in through the window.

"You give that back, Sam!" I recognized Emma Laura.

"You'll have to come get it," a boy, presumably Sam, taunted.

"That's my diary. You better give it back, or I'll throw your baseball in the river!"

I slowly got out of bed, and peeked out the window. Emma Laura and Samuel Carter were beside the house. He was dodging her attempts to snatch a leather bound book from his hand.

The reflecting ball stood on a pedestal, just as I'd glimpsed the other night. Angel statuary stood here and there surrounded by vibrant blooms. The siblings were coming very close to trampling the flowers.

"You two! In the house, now. March." Cora Carter had a no monkey business attitude about her. With a family of six, I could imagine she needed it.

From downstairs, I could hear protests from both children. I couldn't make out the words, but I'm sure they were justifying their actions.

I looked around my room. The wallpaper was dotted with little blue flowers. The bed was not my bed. The headboard was wrought iron covered in white paint. A blue spread neatly covered the mattress. In the corner sat a dressing table. Ribbons in a cheerful array of colors hung from the mirror.

Feet stomped up the stairs. The bedroom door swung open and in huffed Emma Laura. Another door down the hall slammed just before she kicked hers closed.

I was caught. Our eyes locked. Her mouth fell open and she dropped the diary on the floor.

"You aren't there. I saw you last week by the swing, and you weren't there then. I saw you at Elizabeth's party, but you weren't there either, and you aren't here now."

"You're right. I'm not here. You talked to me by the swing. Why?"

"Because I thought you were one of Elizabeth's friends, but then you disappeared, and Mother said I was out there talking to myself," she said quickly, then took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "One ... two ... three ... "

"I won't just disappear this time. I don't think so, at least."

She opened her eyes, and glowered at me. "I wish you would. I even wrote about you in my diary, and Sam stole it. Now he's teasing me, and Mother thinks I've gotten touched in the head."

"I wonder if I'm the one who's touched in the head," I said as I reached out to touch her on the shoulder. She was solid, a flesh and blood child.

Her eyes got wide. She took a step back.

"You're like ice."

A tap on the door captured her attention.

"Emma Laura, who are you talking to in there?"

"Just my dolls, Mother."

"Who are you, anyway?" she whispered.

"My name's Katherine," I whispered back, even though I was sure no one else could hear me.

"I'm Emma Laura."

"I know."

"What are you?"

"I don't know."

PAGEBREAK

CHAPTER TEN

Something covered my face. I tried to open my eyes. When I was successful, it was dark, and there was some noise coming from far away. I pulled myself into a sitting position and my pillow fell off my head. How had I tossed, turned and twisted to get my pillow over my face like that?

My bedside clock said it was already four in the afternoon. Almost evening.

The phone rang downstairs. That must have been the noise that jostled me awake. There was no way I could get there quickly, so I eased my way out of bed and to the steps. If I was too late, then they could leave a message, or I could just look at the caller ID.

“Katherine, it’s Sam. If you need me, call.” The answering machine speaker made his voice echo through the sitting room.

I was numb and tired. At least the heat didn’t bother me as badly as it had before. People can become accustomed to living in high temperatures. I must have acclimated.

Thirst drove me to the kitchen for the second time that day. I ran a glass of water and drank it in just a couple of gulps. Pressure in my head made me dizzy.

“I need to call Sam,” I said out loud to myself.

The numbers on the phone keypad blurred. I closed my eyes. When I opened them, it was somewhat better. I dialed. For all I knew, I used sense of smell to get the number right, but Sam answered.

“Sam? It’s me.”

“Katherine! How are you?” His voice was loud in my ear.

“I just got up. I’m going to get myself awake, then do some work. The world is one big blur right now, though.”

“If you need me to come over, I’m just a call away. Okay?”

“Okay. I’ll do that ... bye for now.” I couldn’t think of just saying good-bye. Even temporarily.

“I’ll see you later.”

I heard him hang up. I found the base of the phone and followed suit.

I knew I was still dehydrated, so I filled a large tumbler with ice water. Plans for my renovation article fell into place as I sipped. To keep them from vanishing, I had to get to work immediately.

My laptop powered up on command and invited me to get moving. The article flowed out through my fingers in record time. I saved it to go over later. I could never edit as soon as the work was done. Too many things could be missed that way.

Armed with my notes from the chocolate factory and snatches of other research, I went to work on my Valentine’s Day story. I was plunging ahead, a woman on a mission.

That piece too formed in my brain like magic. The words came at a steady rate. The next time I looked at the clock, it read 10:25 p.m. Where had the time gone?

Both works were drafted and ready for polishing and even expanding before being sent to my editors. I felt like singing -- I was so overjoyed to be caught up on my work again.

The only song that was in my head was that strange bouncy tune that I’d sung in the shower. When was that? Surely it had been longer ago than this morning. I felt as if I had lived several days’ worth of experiences since then, but it was just this morning. To top it off, I’d only slept today.

Out of curiosity, I decided to look up the words to the song. The Internet was at my fingertips -- I might as well use it.

The search portal revealed several pages featuring lyrics to “It Makes My Love Come Down” as a match to my query. I opened one, and it was word for word the song that stuck in my brain. The release date was listed as 1929.

I clicked on a link labeled “listen here,” and the same music poured out of my little laptop speakers that I knew accompanied this song.

From some deep recess in my mind, I pulled the image of a Victrola and Emma Laura. The song streamed out of the megaphone-type speaker of the phonograph while the adorable girl bobbed to the tune.

The vision went hazy, and I tried to pull it back. It was gone. I could recall only those details, and nothing more.

Overactive dreams.

PAGEBREAK

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was almost midnight. I knew I needed to go to sleep, but I couldn't bring myself to ring Sam just to make a silly cup of tea.

I'd watched him prepare the mix before. I could do it just as well, I was positive.

When the stuff was the right shade of reddish-orange, I poured it in my cup. Sugar and cream came next. There. A perfect cup of tea. If you grew up with the Addams family, at least.

The familiar taste filled my mouth with the first sip. Nothing to it. I could brew it up as well as Sam any day, although it did taste a little more, well, powerful.

The cup was empty, finally. I sat the china in my sink, and contemplated the trip to my bed.

Those stairs seemed awfully steep. The couch wasn't too far. Hmmmm ... the couch was soft and snugly. I staggered -- I could feel it -- but I got to the couch. I curled up comfortably just before the room whirled from existence.

* * * *

The couch wasn't soft anymore. In fact, it was outright inhospitable. I rolled off the offending piece of furniture, intending to put my feet under my body. It didn't quite happen that way, but at least I wasn't hurt. The Oriental rug helped cushion my fall. I would have been grateful, except I didn't own an Oriental rug.

I was there again, in my house's past. Cora Carter busied herself in the kitchen. I watched her from my vantage point on the floor. The smell wafting from the stove was so familiar. Hideous. It was Grandmother's healing tea.

"Jasper!" Cora called from the kitchen.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered, coming in from the back.

"Emma Laura's terribly ill. Her fever is burning her alive. Get your father. I think it's what's gotten into her lately." The woman's voice was not panicked, but urgent. She had the demeanor of a general.

She arranged a cup and saucer on a tray along with toast. Jasper shot out the back door, apparently on his way to carry out orders.

Cora carried her tray through the sitting room, right past my spot on the floor.

"Hope I'm not coming down with something. That was quite a chill," she said to herself.

I stood and followed her up the stairs. I stayed back as she entered Emma Laura's bedroom. I knew the girl would see me, and I was afraid of spooking her again.

"Drink this. It's medicine. You'll need the toast, too." I heard Cora say.

"It smells," Emma Laura protested.

"Well, the smell seems to have brought you around a bit."

"It tastes like Jasper's football sweater," Emma Laura whined. I agreed with her on that point.

"Just how do you know how that old sweater tastes?"

"I've smelled it."

A man I recognized as Roland Carter, the man of the house, burst up the stairs.

"How is she?" he asked from the doorway.

"She's feeling the effects of the tea. I think it's the fever or maybe even influenza. Either way, we're likely to lose her," Cora explained, but cut short as she broke into a sob.

Roland moved into the room to comfort his wife. Concern etched his features. Jasper stood in the doorway near me, shivering.

"Mother, I think I've caught a chill. It's almost September, and I'm 'bout ta freeze," he said.

"Go to bed. Now. Cover up, and get warm. I can't have two of my babies near death's door."

The young man turned and went quickly to another room, presumably his.

"What will I do if she doesn't pull out of this? I should have realized there was something terribly wrong when she was talking to people that weren't there," Cora said around sobs.

Her husband held her close while he rocked her gently back and forth.

I felt dirty, like a voyeur intruding on them as Emma Laura slept silently in the wrought iron bed.

But how could I get out of this time? I'd never tried before.

Maybe, I could just go up to the attic. I walked to the attic stairs, wondering if I could open doors. The proof laid just a few steps ahead.

I reached for the knob. It was solid. I turned it, careful to not make a lot of noise. The door opened as it should. I went in, and closed the door quietly behind me.

I chuckled to myself. Even the attic was a tidy place. General Cora Carter had a firm grip on the household.

The last time I had been in this attic, I had wondered what became of the family. Why had they moved, and where was Emma Laura? I was afraid I had my answer. Whatever "the fever" was, or maybe influenza, had taken her from the Carters at this young age.

My left arm suddenly felt pressure on it, like a hand gripped the bicep.

** * * **

A new smell assaulted me as I came to. Disinfectant.

"Katherine? Are you with us?" Sam.

"Hmmm ... I think so," I answered in a groggy voice.

The room came together from a collection of colors. It wasn't my house. A green curtain closed in a section of it containing the bed I was in. Blankets covered me up to my chin. I needed them. The air-conditioned environment was chilly to me.

"What am I doing here? Is this a hospital?"

"Yes. I brought you here when you wouldn't wake up for me. Dr. Stewmon says you have a severe sinus infection, and that's really all. The tea you drank was probably a little strong, too."

"Oh." I couldn't think well enough to answer more intelligently. The worst thing -- I knew I was befuddled.

"I'll get a nurse. I'm sure they'll let you go home now that you're awake."

"Hmmm. Poor Emma Laura," I mumbled.

"Excuse me?"

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CHAPTER TWELVE

"Emma Laura. She died from a fever," I answered.

"Emma Laura is just fine. Are you feeling alright?"

"But she had a fever."

"I just talked to her. Grandmother is doing just fine. No fever." He sounded puzzled, and more than a little worried about me.

"No, Sam. Not your grandmother. Emma Laura Carter. You wouldn't understand, and I'm too tired to try to explain it."

"Emma Laura *is* my grandmother, and she's fine, Katherine," he said in his parent voice.

"Emma Laura Carter, Sam. She died. In 1930. From a fever. That's why the Carters moved out of my house." I was certain of this.

"And I'm telling you, Emma Laura Carter is *just fine*. She moved with her family when her sister and brother-in-law bought the house. She grew up, met a dashing young private first class in the forties, married him, and raised two boys. One of them was my father. Emma Laura Carter Hope is alive and well, Katherine." He continued to use *that* voice.

It soaked in, slowly. Emma Laura was ... *Grandmother?*

* * * *

Dr. Stewmon released me from the hospital. I had some prescriptions and a headache. Sam drove me home and walked me to the front door. We stood on the porch, taking in the calm of the evening.

I felt ridiculous, but if Emma Laura were alive and well, who was the little girl who giggled in my house?

"So, how would you like some lemonade?" Sam asked with a smile.

"You'd have lemonade with a fruitcake?"

"You're not a fruitcake. I've had that tea myself, you know."

"So, what happened when you had that stuff?" I really wanted to know.

"I went on an Indian hunting trip with a young brave."

I smiled. I worked hard to hold in the guffaw. It didn't work. I could picture the scene. Sam out hunting deer with a Native American boy who thought he was some sort of spirit, and Sam along for the ride under the influence of Grandmother's tea. My laughter came to a sudden stop. *It was real.*

"Thanks for not laughing at me. Any longer." Sam's voice was heavy with sarcasm.

A breeze fluttered my hair, and I heard her. That was my little girl.

"Whoa now. You're looking a little peaked. You need me to help you to the couch?"

"No. Did you hear that? I've been hearing that little girl giggle since I moved in." I was talking like a crazy woman again, but I had to find out about her.

"I hear Emma Laura's wind chimes. They always sounded like laughter to me, too."

"Wind chimes? Still here after all those years?"

"You know that old oak in the back? Grandmother hung wind chimes there before they moved." He took me by the hand, and started leading me there as he continued to explain. "Aunt Elizabeth made sure there were always chimes there. When one set broke, or rusted, she put out another set. When *her* daughter started her family here, she continued the tradition. Everyone calls them Emma Laura's wind chimes, even though they're just replacements."

"So Berniece Bradley is your cousin?"

"A somewhat distant cousin, yes."

"No wonder you know this house." Sinus infection or not, I still had a knack of stating the obvious.

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EPILOGUE

Twelve years passed. In that time, Sam and I shared our joys and sorrows. We were married just after the house was finished. Our daughter, Emma Laura Hope was born two years after that. Grandmother was deeply in love with her namesake. When Grandmother passed on, we were lost.

My Emma Laura sat in the sitting room, admiring the gleam of the freshly waxed hardwood.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she asked me.

"Why, yes it is," I answered, a little surprised. Eight-year-old girls didn't usually comment on shiny floors.

"Remember when I was really sick last January?"

"Oh, how could I forget? You were very sick. I think I'll always remember your pneumonia."

"I played hide and seek with you."

"What? You were in bed. You slept for almost a week. Remember, we gave you Grandmother's tea to help you rest."

"Yes, but I got up, and the house was all yucky. You and Daddy were making it pretty again."

A tingle went up my spine.

"I think you heard your Daddy's stories about how we met. Maybe you dreamed those things." I was being rational.

"Maybe," she said as she got up to leave the room. "Oh, and Mama, I *told you* the kitchen is peach."

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Haunted
by
Laura Hamby

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For New Orleans...

About Laura

It seems like I've been writing forever. My first attempt was the journal we were to write in every day when I was in 6th grade. Thus bitten by the Writing Bug, I've been writing ever since. I can't really remember a time that I didn't have a notebook and pen with me—back in the day before computer notebooks. I've yet to find the cure for the Writing Bug except to write, write, write. Three years ago, I decided it was time to pursue writing with a serious eye on the prize: publication.

I live on the East Coast of the USA with my wonderfully supportive hubby, three sons, and a black cat. We enjoy taking in the history of the area and taking road trips as a family (sans cat). The men in my life love fishing season, which gives me loads of time to write on the weekends.

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PROLOGUE

Eighteen years ago...

"That's the haunted place." The girl spoke in a hushed, *we're in church* voice. She wrapped her arms around herself and enveloped her thin upper arms with tiny hands.

"There ain't no such things as haunted houses."

"Sure there are. Ain't you never seen the Misty Lady?"

The boy snorted and dug his dirty bare toe into the soft dirt. "That ain't nothin' but weather, Alisanne."

She persisted. "Ain't ya heard the sad music playin' when she's out and about?"

"No. An' neither have you. You're just repeatin' things that don't bear repeatin'."

"Ain't so, Remy Beauvais. You take that back." Alisanne gave him a hard shove.

He only laughed, amused by her puny efforts to knock him over. Small-but-mighty Alisanne Sommers. Remy didn't really know why he tolerated her tagging along after him, other than his mama had admonished him to be nice to Alisanne. After all, Alisanne's own

mama died not six months ago, and Remy seemed to be the only person she'd actually speak to ever since the funeral.

She annoyed him.

At ten years old, she looked eight. Her delicate features made her look more elfin than human, or so he fancied. Ever since his grandparents had given him the Tolkien books for Christmas three years ago, elves, dwarves and magic dominated his thoughts.

But believing in ghosts? Nope. Lunacy. One of Grandmama Beauvais' favorite words. He kinda liked it himself. Rolled off the tongue with ease. *Lunacy*.

The wind pushed at the gate which hung at a drunken angle off its post. The squeak made Alisanne jump.

Remy laughed until his sides hurt.

Alisanne kicked him hard on the shins. That stopped his hilarity right quick. "Ain't no call for you to do that, Alisanne."

"There are ghosts. There *have* to be ghosts."

Remy shook his head, feeling as superior as a twelve year old boy could in the face of nonsense streaming out of the mouth of a baby. Alisanne's chin jutted out and she pursed her lips together so hard they disappeared.

"What you want there to be ghosts for? Everybody knows when you die, if you've been a good Christian, you get to go to heaven."

"Not if you have unfinished business you don't," Alisanne explained. Her thin face lit up as she stared up at him.

Remy shifted from one foot to the other. No one had seen Alisanne smile ever since her mama took sick last year. With insight rare for an almost teenaged boy, Remy knew somewhere deep inside himself that this was very important to Alisanne.

"Unfinished business? Like what? You forgot to pay your phone bill?"

"No." Alisanne paused. She peered through the rusted iron bars at the forlorn Rousseau mansion on the rise towards the back end of the property.

"Then what?" Impatient now that dark thunder head clouds rolled across the sky, Remy didn't want to get drenched while waiting for Alisanne to explain.

"Like somebody forgot to say goodbye," she whispered this. The breeze whisked the murmur away, echoing back at them. The hair on the back of Remy's neck stood on end when Alisanne added, "Mama forgot to say goodbye to me before she died. That's what unfinished business means, Remy."

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CHAPTER ONE

The present...

Alisanne Sommers stood on the dusty drive. The whisper of the wind through the cypress trees blended with the hum of insects on the humid air. Summer in New Orleans stifled, and she hadn't missed it one bit. Not for one second during the ten years she'd been away.

In that time, not even a country's width of distance could keep her inner demons at bay. A decade had passed like no time had elapsed at all. She'd come home. She'd always known she would. After all, her ghost would never be able to find her in the cold north of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The dreams followed her. Everywhere she went. No escape for her. Not then, not now. Ghosts filled her life always, and she saw no immediate end to that.

The Rousseau Mansion hadn't changed since she'd come to tell it goodbye, the day after she'd graduated from high school. She couldn't leave New Orleans without letting the old familiar landmark know, as it figured in her life as prominently as her ghosts.

The stately old mansion sat back on its lot, well away from the crumbling sidewalk. Despite the wonderful Old French Quarter location, this enormous home had been empty for almost one hundred years.

Sure, there was a caretaker. Had to be. What else would explain the neatly trimmed grass? Or the fact that the mansion hadn't fallen to the ground?

Alisanne sighed. Growing up with the tales of the *Rousseau Misty Lady* had only fed her staunch belief that ghosts had to exist. Why, the story behind the *Misty Lady* was steeped in local lore, with hints of a soured romance. Just the sort of thing to catch the fancy of a sorrowful young girl, who happened to be an incurable romantic.

Or so her dearly departed Papa used to tell her.

With both her parents now gone, no good reason remained for her to stay in New Orleans, but the thought of returning to Milwaukee, so far away from their graves, chilled her more than a Wisconsin winter. Up there, she'd be alone. At least here in Louisiana, she could visit the cemetery any time she slipped into a maudlin frame of mind.

"Thought I'd find you here."

"Remy." Dare she turn around to see if it really was Remy Beauvais? In this part of the city, it could very well be a specter. Heaven above knew he haunted her dreams.

"Still looking for ghosts, are you?"

"I suppose I am. Ghosts kept me away, and now they hold me here." She angled herself so she could see both Remy and the house. Her heart dipped to her toes. Remy looked even more delicious than she remembered. Sooty black hair tousled around his lean, angular face, and provided the perfect contrast to his bright blue eyes. Life was so unfair.

"Still haven't given that up? So you chasing two ghosts now?"

She savored the sound of his voice. With the flat vowels and hard consonants of Wisconsin abusing her delicate Southern ears, she'd almost forgotten how a melodious Louisiana voice could soothe. Remy's voice deepened as he'd matured, and now, it sounded like it started somewhere below his knees.

"No, Remy. There's no unfinished business between my father and I. We talked the night before he..." Her voice broke. Tears pricked at her eyelids. "He said goodbye. Like he knew."

"He couldn't have known, Alisanne. None of us know that."

There. The usual disgusted Remy voice. That hadn't changed much. The ache in her heart deepened into a dull pain with her realization that nothing would ever change between them. Alisanne drew in a shaky breath before she replied.

"He sounded so robust. Not like a man who would get up the next day, shower, shave, dress, eat breakfast, and then die of a massive coronary as he did up his breakfast dishes."

"Your father couldn't help it any more than your mother could." Remy's fisted hands rested on his hips. He stared at her through hooded eyes.

"Your comforting manner makes me feel oh-so-much better, Remy. Have you been practicing your compassion skills while I was away?" She glared right back, stung that he couldn't try to make an attempt to understand how she felt about this.

"Ma's been calling your hotel all day. She's worried about you." His exasperation resonated through his words, in his body language, and sparkled in his devastatingly blue eyes.

Smooth change of subject there. His mother and hers had been best friends. Marie Beauvais hadn't thought twice about stepping in to fill the gap left in motherless Alisanne's life. Rather than resent the woman's attempt to replace her mother, Alisanne was grateful to have someone who cared enough about her to offer her the unconditional love she'd needed.

"You knew right where to find me, huh?"

Remy relaxed his stance. The setting sun glanced off his dark hair to illuminate his face. "You're predictable."

"Thanks a heck of a lot." Alisanne huffed. She directed an angry frown at Remy.

"Look, she's worried about you." Strong tanned fingers drummed against a denim-clad leg.

"Please tell her I thank her for her concern. I just need some time to myself. To adjust to being alone in the world." Alisanne wrapped her arms around her waist in a protective gesture.

"She wants you to move in with her, since you refuse to stay at your family home."

Then she'd have to see Remy on a regular basis. She couldn't bear that. In the deepest recesses of her heart, she harbored a secret tender for him. One she knew he'd never return. Not while he still could make an ordinary comment sound like an accusation, as he just had.

"I'll call her in a few days." Alisanne turned to walk away. She rounded the corner and walked half a block before Remy roared past her on his motorcycle. When he was out of sight, she did an about face to retrace her footsteps back to the Rousseau mansion. Conditions were perfect for a ghostly sighting. Twilight descended while a light breeze cooled the air around her. The drone of insects tapered off as the evening grew darker.

The tall iron fence that surrounded the old house jutted into the air with their leering gargoyle faces gazing out around the neighborhood. Fear clenched her heart. While she'd been fascinated by the eerie tales surrounding the Rousseau family for nearly twenty years, she'd never actually seen the *Misty Lady*.

Folklore held that the identity of the famous ghost was Madame Adeline Rousseau, second wife of Monsieur Bayard Rousseau. By all accounts, this wasn't a happy marriage, as Monsieur made no effort to hide his numerous indiscretions. After a late night confrontation on the stairs, Madame went into early labor due to a fall down to the landing. A fall precipitated by Monsieur's shove to move her out of his way. Injured in the accident, Madame didn't survive childbirth.

Madame Adeline Rousseau didn't pass quietly. With her final breaths, she cursed her murderer, leveling a malediction against the entire male line of Rousseaus. As long as the Rousseau name continued, she vowed, she would have unfinished business, and would not rest until she'd wreaked her revenge.

Not too long after Adeline's funeral in 1838, Jean-Baptiste, aged twelve and Bayard's only legitimate son, succumbed to yellow fever. The following year, Monsieur himself died of an unknown ailment. Both times, many people vowed they'd seen Adeline strolling through the mist that surrounded the city in the early hours of the mornings of these deaths.

Adeline continued to appear once or twice a year after that, and each sighting coincided with the death of a man or boy bearing the name Rousseau. Monsieur apparently had sired many children over the years in his indiscretions. Many of them were sons. Her so-called appearances tapered off in the late nineteenth century to about one every other year. By the early twentieth century, it was thought Madame finally had found her rest.

With the death of Adeline's daughter in 1912, the Rousseau mansion passed out of Bayard's

legitimate lineage. None of the daughter's offspring could be located, and after the specified amount of time passed, a young man by the name of Henri Rousseau had the misfortune of inheriting the mansion. As soon as he moved into the house, sightings of the *Misty Lady* came back into vogue. Nine months after he moved into the Rousseau mansion, Henri closed it up and left the country.

No one knew why. Rumors circulated, but with no way to substantiate the wild claims, they died down without causing much more than a mild sensation.

After Henri Rousseau left, no one lived in the mansion. Not even the owner who came after him. Each successive owner provided basic upkeep for the vacant home. And people, tourists mostly, continued to insist that they'd encountered Madame's vengeful spirit walking in the mist.

It was all about unfinished business. Madame Adeline Rousseau had been earthbound because of her curse. Would the next logical assumption be that Alisanne's mother must be earthbound too, because she forgot to tell her daughter goodbye?

Oh, how that theory had made so much sense to a grieving girl. How silly it seemed now. Still, if there was a chance...

Mist rolled in, shrouding the vegetation and buildings. It muffled the sounds of traffic, and left damp droplets on Alisanne's bare arms. The Rousseau home, once so proud, rose up against the creeping white tendrils of fog.

No rest.

Alisanne stared at the house hard. Nothing unusual emerged, despite the words she'd heard.

"You convinced yet?"

She jumped. "Remy!"

"It's not safe for you to be alone out here."

"Afraid I'll actually see the *Misty Lady*?" she taunted. She kept her back to him on purpose, annoyed he'd somehow doubled back to spy on her, and without her hearing that bike of his to boot.

"No." Laughter colored his voice. "Worse. I'll see you back to your hotel."

"I can manage very well on my own, thank you very much." She tossed her head. Her short hair ruffled in the light breeze the movement made.

"Oh, come on now. You know you want a ride on my Harley." He pulled her away from the fence.

"No, I can't say as I do." Hoo boy, what a liar. Alisanne couldn't think of anything she'd like to do more at this moment, other than seeing the *Misty Lady* and proving her theory correct.

"Helmet. Get on the bike, Alisanne."

She batted her eyes at him, even though she knew he couldn't see the affectation in the foggy night. It just made her feel better. "Why, Mr. Beauvais, I think I will, seein' as you asked me so sweetly."

"Layin' that Southern *fem-I-nine* charm a bit thick, aren't you?" Remy climbed onto the Harley. She grasped his gloved hand as he pulled her to sit behind him.

With her hotel only a few blocks away, Alisanne knew she didn't have that much time to relish their enforced closeness. Too bad Remy sat so rigidly, so obvious in his attempt to minimize their close, physical contact. She controlled the gusty sigh that threatened. No, it wouldn't do for Remy to even *think* he affected her in any way.

She could be just as impervious to him as he was to her.

Sure.

Absolutely.

Why not?

Because, as an incurable romantic, she wore her heart for all to see, complete with the footprints of uncaring loves who didn't return her affections. Remy's size twelve footprint had been the first.

Remy braked hard, causing Alisanne to slide into his back. Overhead, the gleaming white lights of the hotel brightened the night almost into daylight. She jumped off the bike. Shaky fingers unfastened the helmet's straps which cut into the skin under her chin.

"Good night, Remy." She set the helmet on the seat she'd just vacated. Time to beat a hasty retreat, much like the British had during the War of 1812.

One fluid movement brought Remy off the bike. "I'll see you to your room."

"There's no need," she refused. The carousel door spun with a force she hadn't applied. The small space filled with the scent of new leather and musky aftershave. "Your listening skills haven't improved much."

Remy chuckled. "I listen to you when it suits me."

Alisanne paused, now in the lobby of the hotel. "Must never suit you, Remy, 'cause I can't remember a single time you've listened to me. Ever." She strode away without a second look back.

The stairs. Less confining than an elevator, and she didn't try to kid herself by thinking Remy wasn't hot on her heels. His boots echoed in the stairwell behind her.

Thank heavens her room was located on the second floor. Her lungs burned in protest to her heart-pounding pace. Naturally, her room was as far away from the stairs as it could be. Breath came in gasps now, and she hoped she'd make it to the room in time to find her inhaler before she fell over from lack of oxygen.

She stopped at the soda machine to catch her breath. Coins jangled in her pocket, so she pulled out a fistful and fed the machine. A bottle of tea rolled out at the bottom.

Remy reached around her to grab the drink. He turned her to face him and offered her the tea, after he opened it for her. "Drink slowly so you don't choke. Where's your inhaler?"

Choke? How could she not when he surprised her with his question? She couldn't begin to imagine how he knew she needed one, as by the time she'd gotten the thing, he'd immersed himself in his *too-cool-for-you* stage. He'd almost made her hate him back then.

Remy's eyes glowed at her in the artificial light of the concession alcove. Alisanne cleared her throat. Too darned hard to think with him looking at her like that. Remy was one Cajun who could curl her toes with one smoldering glance.

"It's in my room. I haven't needed it for a long time."

"Doesn't do you any good in there," Remy scolded.

"I wouldn't have needed it if you weren't chasing me. I'm fine now. I've caught my breath." Alisanne strove to keep her tone even. Hard to do with Remy leaning towards her, his gaze intent on her face.

Oh, how she didn't like his scrutiny any more now than she had as a teenager, when he'd been on her case for one thing or another. Seemed he'd spent much of his time either ignoring her or reining her in. The sculpted planes of his face shone with his healthy tan, even under the thick overgrowth of his whiskers. "You need to shave." Best redirect her thoughts away from how age had perfected him. "I'll survive. I always do."

He leaned in closer. His hot breath stirred her bangs. Alisanne's knees buckled. *Impervious. He doesn't affect you that way anymore.* Those eyes of his saw through to her very soul, or at least so she fancied. His mouth firmed into knowing smile, causing her to wonder if he could read her thoughts.

"How can I not, when they're written all over your face? Your face still shows every one of your thoughts."

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CHAPTER TWO

Remy rode by the Rousseau mansion after he left Alisanne safely in her hotel room. He parked at the curb and cut off the engine. The signs of renovation remained hidden behind the empty house. Like most of the residents of the French Quarter, Remy had wondered why the owners let it sit there, rotting on its foundation. The mansion called to him, like he knew it called Alisanne.

"Boss, you're out late."

"Checkin' in on the site, Fred?"

The burly construction worker jerked his head towards the house behind him. "Security alarm went off."

"It's been doing that a lot." Remy didn't like these increasing episodes. Something was wrong with the whole system, as the alarm went off for no apparent reason. "Guess I'll have Huey look at it in the morning. Did you see anything?"

"Nope. Don't recall the system actin' up before you inherited this place," Fred rumbled. He scratched his chin with thick fingers.

"I inherited when I was twenty-one. It's been mine for nine years." The mansion had been held in trust for him until he reached the age specified by the great-uncle who'd bequeathed it, as well as a minor fortune. Most of that fortune went to refurbishing the mansion to its former glory, as the condition of the old house had deteriorated to the point where it was almost a wonder it stood at all.

"Yeah, we've been working on it for, what, six or seven months? The trouble started with the first delivery of lumber. Could be the ghost don't like us messing with her territory." Fred crossed his arms over his barrel chest. He didn't look too happy. Remy knew Fred to be a superstitious man. So much so, in fact, that he carried a piece of wood in his back pocket to rap on whenever he felt the need to knock on wood.

"Sure, Adelie Rousseau died in childbirth, soon followed by her stepson and husband, but a curse? Lunacy." Remy discounted the tales surrounding the place as sheer superstition. After all, he technically was a Rousseau, though he didn't bear the name. His mother was the last Rousseau of that lineage.

"Maybe you should forget you're a descendant of the Rousseaus, boss, and sell the place off," Fred suggested. Not for the first time, either.

"That's what Ma says. The terms of the will are quite specific. I only get rid of this place when I die. I don't have to live in the place, but I can't sell it either."

"Ain't there a loophole? Oh well, I left Lulu watching that crime drama she likes so much. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, Fred. Thanks for keepin' an eye on the place." Remy restarted his Harley and sped away from the house. Alisanne remained heavily on his mind.

She hadn't changed much. Still tiny, and her short dark hair made her look like an elf. Her narrow face showed the strain of recent events, while her amber colored eyes reflected an inner sadness he didn't remember being there before.

Alisanne had deserved so much better from him, and he'd been a jerk. He didn't really blame her for treating him like poisonous snake curled up on her doorstep. She tried to give him wide berth, and he'd forced her to accept a ride on his motorcycle.

It had been hard to sit so stiffly in his efforts to give her the space he should, when all he wanted to do was feel her curved against his back. Have her hands resting on his hips as they'd raced towards the hotel, and imagining he could feel the tingle of her hot breath on the back of his neck. Being a true gentleman really stank at times.

This was one of those times.

Food would go a long way towards helping him get a grip. A long day at work, seeing Alisanne again for the first time in ten years, the house, not to mention other things he'd just as soon forget about.

"Hey, man, long time no see."

At least his favorite hole-in-the-wall eatery remained the same. "Jay, you live here, huh?"

"Not always. Just during operating hours. Hazards of being the Big Boss. What brings you 'round here?" Jay Weller rubbed a bright white towel in circles over the highly polished surface of the bar. "It's been a while."

"Food brings me here. A grilled seafood sandwich with a side of red beans and rice." Yeah, Remy'd stopped coming around so frequently when Jay's wife, Hilary, started coming on to him. She'd been too interested in the renovations on the Rousseau place for Remy's comfort.

"You hear that, Hilary?" Jay hollered. He continued to polish the bar. "Bring me something too, please."

"Yeah, yeah. Grilled sea sammich with beans and rice. Must be Remy."

"Whatcha doin', Hilary?" Remy called. The manners drummed into him over the years by his diligent mother couldn't be ignored. He ignored the college kids in the corner who glared at him for interrupting their quiet conversation. A few others that he recognized as regulars paid no attention to the loud exchange. In the darkest corner of *Jay's Digs*, a group of individuals heavily into the vampire scene attempted to appear mysterious and threatening. Remy found them to be neither.

"Cookin'! That's all I ever do around here."

Remy shook his head. "Why did you hire her? She's ornery as all get out, Jay." Just one year behind them in school, Hilary had a straightforward manner that some might consider abrasive.

His friend shrugged. "Seemed like a good idea at the time."

"He's a guy. Why do you think he hired me?"

Jay rolled his eyes. He tossed his towel into a bin Remy knew was located behind the long, dark wood fixture. "And look where that got me. Shackled to the woman. Heard Alisanne Sommers' father died. Poor kid, she's had a heck of a hard time. She back in town?"

Remy seated himself on a high-backed stool. "She is. Drivin' Ma insane, since she insists on staying at a hotel."

The kitchen doors eased open and Remy got an eyeful of Hilary's back. Her long dark blonde braid swung as she pivoted around to walk forwards. She balanced two large plates on either hand.

"She still strange?" Hilary lowered the plates to place them before Remy and Jay. She took two sets of silverware wrapped in white paper napkins from the front pocket of her blue apron.

To Remy's intense amusement, she unfurled one set of utensils and snatched the knife. With one quick, deft movement, she sliced Jay's sandwich in half. Hilary grabbed the bigger half, biting into the soft roll with a big chomp.

"Strange? No more than you are," Remy retorted.

Hilary swallowed. "There's a big difference, bud. I'm *quirky* strange. Alisanne is *weird* strange."

"She's had a hard time, Hil. You might want to cut her some slack." Remy applied himself to eating his dinner rather than watching his friends' reactions to his suggestion.

"I just knew it," Hilary declared.

Remy shoveled some rice into his mouth, but Hilary's heated words sent chills down his spine. She didn't sound pleased at the prospect that he might actually like Alisanne. But then again, she wouldn't be.

Hilary chased him back in high school with a scary single-minded intensity. When he'd been busy trying not to notice how Alisanne blossomed.

For a while, the situation had caused problems between Remy and Jay, at least until Jay'd noticed who kept Remy preoccupied. Remy recalled his astonishment over Jay's announcement that Hilary harbored serious interest in him. Like a true friend, Jay offered to run interference, stop Hilary from vying for Remy's attention. Never seemed to bother Jay that *his* girl preferred Remy. After all, Remy

had no interest in Hilary at all.

"You have a problem with how I choose to run my personal life, Hilary?" Remy pushed the beans on his plate around with the crust from his bread.

She poured tea into three tall glasses. "I object when I know you can do so much better, Remy. Alisanne Sommers is a nut job, and you deserve better."

"And I deserve better myself," Jay added.

Remy glanced between Jay and Hilary. Whatever seemed to be happening between these two leaked into their perceptions of the world around them. No sense in talking about serious things with them when their own troubles put blinders over their eyes and wouldn't allow them to see beyond their issues.

"I have an early morning tomorrow," Remy said. He tossed a twenty onto the counter, next to his half-eaten meal. The poisonous atmosphere killed his appetite before the food satisfied him.

* * * *

Morning came with a glorious clear blue sky. By mid-morning, even the shade looked for shade. An unexplainable yearning drew Alisanne to the cemetery. The granite crypt radiated the heat of the day outwards. Alisanne braced herself against the hot rolling waves and studied the words carved on her parents' final resting place.

Jeannette Louisa Sommers. January 11, 1955–March 30, 1985. Beloved wife and mother. Resting with Our Lord in Heaven.

Gerard Joseph Sommers. April 2, 1951–

The rest of her father's line remained blank. He'd only been gone for two and a half weeks. It still seemed so surreal to her. He'd been such a young man. Too young to die. Just like her mother.

Mama. Mostly what Alisanne remembered of her was the scent of Mama's favorite perfume that always followed her, and her soft voice. The unconditional love. Papa had loved them both unconditionally as well. Alisanne regretted that era had come to a too-early end. Regretted she'd spent the last ten years living so far away from home, driven away by more than just unrequited love. The memories of the family so abruptly torn apart overwhelmed her.

She moved away from the crypt, stepping carefully among the crowded tombstones. Chills ran up her spine—not unusual. That always happened when she visited the cemetery. The peaceful air held just a hint of something that couldn't quite qualify as menace. No doubt her active imagination was overworking here.

The tombs grew older the further she walked. No flowers decorated these weather-beaten stones, indeed, names and dates faded to the point of being unreadable.

A mausoleum rose ahead of her. It bore the legend *Rousseau*. The air cooled here in the shade cast by the building. Alisanne ventured around it, her eyes trained on the pitted marble.

Adelie, 1814-1838. The breeze picked up, dried weeds and leaves blew across the hard-packed ground. The mausoleum entry stood recessed in the small building and the wind moaned as it passed. *No rest.*

No rest? Alisanne tugged at her ears. No, the wind couldn't talk. She hadn't really heard a woman's voice. It sounded again. *Remy Beauvais. No rest.*

Heart pounding, she raced out of the cemetery, and stopped only when she leaned against her car. She pulled her inhaler out of her pocket. Two puffs of the nasty tasting stuff, and Alisanne felt the constriction of her lungs loosen.

Remy. Without a doubt, Alisanne decided he was in some sort of trouble. She needed to warn him, but dismissed the idea. He'd call her a lunatic. And she didn't think she could bear his disdain again. Still, she couldn't fight the urge to help him. She'd just have to be sneaky about it, so as not to give him a reason to tell her how deluded he thought her.

The time had come to pay a visit to Marie Beauvais. Remy's mother and best friend of Alisanne's late mother. Right after she did some research at the library.

Back when Alisanne had been a girl visiting the library, the head librarian, Mrs. Vassar, seemed very old. Now the woman surpassed old and went straight to ancient.

"The Rousseau collection has expanded by several books since you were here last, dear. They're in

the back.”

“Wow, she wasn’t kidding,” Alisanne muttered to herself. The Rousseau Room now held three bookshelves—two new ones. A narrow table angled away from a small window, and one metal folding chair sat tucked underneath.

She picked a likely-looking book off one shelf. The dust covering the leather binding made her sneeze several times. A furtive glance out the open door reassured her that no librarian hovered nearby.

Alisanne pulled a warm bottle of water out of her bag and made herself as comfortable on the cold metal chair as she could. The book she’d chosen discussed the Rousseau marriage and their deaths. It read like a scandal rag. After reading only a few pages, she set it aside and reached for another. The slender volume she chose presented the verifiable facts in a dry, yet effective manner.

It seemed that Monsieur Bayard Rousseau cheated not only on his second wife, but on his first as well. Not to mention the mysterious circumstances shrouding the first Madame Rousseau’s demise. Alisanne fingered the pile of books she’d set on the table as she scanned the titles on the spines. There. A book entitled *The First Madame Rousseau: Solange Tibault Rousseau*.

Madame Solange Tibault Rousseau, born in Paris, France, to Jean-Claude and Aimee Tibault in 1804.

She met a young, charismatic Bayard Rousseau in the spring of 1823 when he visited Paris. Nine years older than Mademoiselle Tibault, he managed to convince her to return with him to New Orleans, Louisiana a year later as his bride. The following letters, penned between 1824 and 1836 by Madame Solange Rousseau afford us a unique glimpse into her life. These family letters are published here by arrangement with the heirs and estates of Madame Solange Rousseau’s daughters, Eugenia Rousseau Montblanc and Francine Rousseau Vaulet.

Alisanne forgot to breathe while she read the letters translated from French. As she read the final letter, tears sprang to her eyes. Madame Solange had tried to love her husband, but found she could not when she discovered he couldn’t be faithful.

She blinked to clear her eyes so she could read the genealogy chart at the back of the thin book. She arched out of the chair in surprise. Someone had gone to a great deal of trouble to investigate Bayard Rousseau’s progeny, legitimate and illegitimate.

Remy.

Agitated, she left the tiny room long enough to go to the ladies room and splash water on her face. She intended to go back and study that book again from cover to cover. The room remained just as she’d left it only minutes before. However, the small Madame Solange volume had disappeared. Alisanne spent twenty minutes searching for it before she admitted defeat.

Mystified, she returned the other books to the shelves and left.

PAGEBREAK

CHAPTER THREE

"I wondered when you'd come by. It's a blessing to see you again." Marie Beauvais flew down her porch steps, arms stretched wide. Alisanne slid out of her rental car in time to close the door with her hip before Marie crushed her in a hug.

Alisanne's heart lodged in her throat. Marie's genuine love engulfed her to bridge the years like she'd never left.

"Come inside. The bugs are out in full force," Marie chatted as she pulled Alisanne into the house.

The temperature in the old brick house felt a good twenty degrees cooler than the hot, humid air outside. An old-fashioned fan whirled in the corner of the front room. Not only did it circulate cool air, it perfumed the air with the scent of the homemade potpourri which sat on the table set several inches in front of the fan.

"You've lost weight. No surprise there. I imagine the food in Wisconsin is just dreadful. Bland. Sit! Sit! I'll bring out refreshments."

Alisanne glanced around the familiar room. This home harbored the same comforting familiarity as her childhood home. Nothing here had changed, just like nothing ever had in her father's house. This gave her a greater sense of security. A feeling that had gone missing when Papa died and left her alone in the world.

"There. I just made a fresh pitcher of sweetened tea. Lucky for you, Remy hasn't been by in a couple of days, or I'd be out of chocolate chip cookies." Marie set a tray on the low coffee table.

"Well, sit down, sweetie. You look like you have much on your mind."

Alisanne sank into her favorite chair. Small, it fit her perfectly, and it swivelled. An added bonus. "How come you never told me you're a Rousseau?"

"No beating around the bush for you, huh?" Marie's comfortable laugh trilled, pricking more buried memories. "Remy said he saw you last night. Did he tell you he inherited that old mansion in the Quarter?"

Alisanne sat up very straight, the cookie she'd just taken now forgotten. "No. He didn't say a word."

Marie's expression turned guilty. "Oh boy. I'm in trouble now."

"I won't tell on you."

They grinned at each other. They'd had many such conversations over the years. "He's renovating it. Thinks he should live in it," Marie confided. "Dumb idea if you ask me, but he didn't."

Alisanne bit her lip. "Why does he want to live there?"

Marie gazed steadily at her. "To prove that all the rumors surrounding the family are wrong. You know him. If he can't see it or touch it, it's not real."

"No wonder he's still single." Alisanne snorted. Remy'd had his fair share of girlfriends. She'd bet the house on that one. With his good looks and the charm that ooze from him? Oh yeah. Loads of women. Very depressing thought.

Marie winked. "Honey, I think he's just waiting for the right woman to get her act together. Lord knows he's been out with all the available wrong women."

Alisanne coughed, trying not to gag on the thick tea she'd just swallowed as Marie confirmed what she'd been thinking only a few short moments before. That couldn't mean what she thought it did. Could it? No. Remy didn't like her at all. He'd said so, many years ago. Broke her heart badly enough that several years passed before she offered it to another man. He'd stomped on her too. So had the guy after that. And the guy after that.

Thank heavens none of those so-called relationships had turned more serious than a few kisses.

They just served to make her wary of the entire male species. Her heart couldn't take another pounding.

As much as she'd like to believe Marie, experience pointed to the contrary. "Remy has little patience for me, Marie."

Marie's smile widened. "He rarely shows patience at all."

Alisanne rolled her eyes. No way would she ever tell his mother what Remy'd said to her. Marie didn't need to know that Remy was the reason Alisanne had left New Orleans in the first place. "I found a book at the library that detailed the Rousseau genealogy. All of it."

"Really? I'm amazed anyone could put a comprehensive one together, given ol' Bayard's spreading the love around, so to speak." Marie blushed.

"Well, it's how I discovered your connection."

Marie nibbled on a cookie. "Imagine that. Not to change the subject, honey, but I want you to know that when you're ready to deal with your Papa's house, I'm here to help you."

"Thanks, Marie. I'm having a hard time working up the courage to go into the house. Being there, where he died."

"Your father had a very happy life, honey. Trust me. He's gone on. He's with your mother."

"How about this weekend? It will be better if I just plan to do it." She'd put it off long enough. There were no fairies that would come in and do it for her, no matter how hard she wished.

"I'll meet you there," Marie agreed. "Nine o'clock?"

"Perfect." Alisanne stood. "It's been great seeing you again. Your cookies are as sinful as ever."

"You stop by any time. I've missed you."

Alisanne drove away several minutes and quite a few hugs later.

Heat radiated off the blacktop of the streets, and before she pulled into the hotel parking lot, she decided to valet park. Last thing she wanted to do was clean asphalt off her shoes. Besides, her cell phone rang just as she turned into the hotel parking lot. A glance at the screen told her the caller's number was restricted. Rather than answer, she let it go to her voice mail.

The valet held the car door open for her. Moments later, the cooled air of the hotel washed over her hot, sticky skin. The dark interior of the hotel lobby bustled with activity. She dodged groups of people while trying to make her way to the elevators. Another woman stood before the elevator bay. Alisanne tried to ignore her, except that the woman studied her with an assessing gaze one usually reserved for inspecting livestock.

Alisanne stared back and contemplated the wisdom of asking the brunette to open her mouth for a tooth inspection. She had the feeling that this rude woman knew her.

"So, you're the preferred daughter-in-law. That alone will assure that even if Remy does leave me, it won't be for *you*."

"I'm sorry?" Who was this woman, and why did she feel compelled to talk to Alisanne? Perhaps this woman had escaped from the local mental hospital.

"Yes, you are. Remy Beauvais is mine. Keep your grubby paws off!" The woman crossed her arms over her chest and tapped a pointy-toe shod foot.

"And you would be...?"

"A disgruntled ex-girlfriend, who doesn't seem to understand we're over."

Both women turned to the new addition to the conversation. Remy, wearing grimy torn jeans, heavy work boots and a bright yellow t-shirt that stretched across his chest and left little to the imagination, strode up to them.

"If you're going to ambush someone, Francine, you should at least introduce yourself."

Francine gaped at him, her face a sickly shade of red. To Alisanne's relief, the woman fled without another word. A ding announced the arrival of an elevator. Remy nudged Alisanne into it with a work-roughened hand.

"Sorry about that. Should have thought to warn you. Francine went psycho-stalker on me. Funny thing is, she did the breaking up."

"Is she dangerous?" She licked her dry lips. Worry for Remy's well-being overrode all other emotion.

"No, just regretting her haste. Ma called. You made her day." His voice filled the elevator.

"I should have called on her sooner," Alisanne admitted. The elevator halted and she stepped out into the corridor. Remy followed her. "You just keep getting taller and taller, Remy. I swear, I'm on eye-to-bellybutton level with you now."

Remy's laughter filled the corridor. "You've always been a little bit of a girl."

Alisanne fumbled with the key. Remy took it from her nerveless fingers. With a quick twist of his wrist, he had the door open. This didn't give her nearly enough time to contemplate the implications of his statement. Perhaps not so much what he said, but how he said it.

He'd noticed she was a girl.

A good start. But it still couldn't make up for his imitating the south end of a north-bound mule for so many years.

"You came by for a reason, I assume?" She turned to lean against the doorjamb. She tilted her head back to see his face. In such close quarters, she had no choice. He towered over her. "You don't have a phone, so you had to see me in person?"

"Ma 'fessed up. I thought I'd invite you to the mansion, to see the renovations."

Alisanne stopped breathing. She felt her eyes widen. "A personal invite? You're being nice to me. Why?"

Remy lifted her to his eye level with the comment, "I'm getting a crick in my neck from lookin' down at you."

"That has nothing to do with why you're being nice to me. You feeling sick or something?" Thub-dub went her heart. How could it not when Remy held her so effortlessly...and looked at her like he wanted to...

Mesmerized, she fixated on the curve of his mouth. Oh, how it knotted her stomach when he did that Elvis smirk of his— one side of his mouth quirked just so, his eyes dancing with mirth.

These jumbled thoughts whirled through her mind in the half second before he followed through. His lips covered hers and the resulting zap coursed through her blood at the speed of light. Convinced she must crackle with electricity, Alisanne wrapped her arms around Remy's shoulders.

His strong arm came across her back to press her against him so snugly she didn't know which thundering heartbeat belonged to her. Alisanne felt herself sliding down until her feet touched the floor, yet Remy kept his arms around her. When he at last ended the kiss, she rested her forehead against his chest.

Trembling hands caught her hair to cup her head and pull back until they made eye contact again. Sweat beaded on Remy's forehead while his fathomless eyes bore into hers.

He knew her and every little secret she carried.

A shaky breath in and out, then the world intruded into their brief interlude. Distant chatty voices pinged into Alisanne's awareness. The telltale swoosh of elevator doors whispered down the hall. Alisanne brought her fingertips to the sensitive skin around her mouth, which still tingled from Remy's whiskers brushing against her face. Remy's husky voice brought her focus back to him.

"The construction crew won't be at the house until nine tomorrow morning. Be safer for you if you came before they arrived."

She glared at him. "You kiss all sensible thought out of my head, and then start talking shop?"

He leaned over to speak into her ear. His lips all but brushed her ear lobe. Goose bumps covered every square inch of her body.

"Yes, love, I'm talking shop. You're going to belong to me legally, in the eyes of the church, before I make love to you. Understand what I'm saying, Alisanne? So, eight in the morning, at the mansion. Alright?"

"Alright."

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CHAPTER FOUR

Sleep eluded Alisanne that night. Her usual dreams tangled with new ones of the danger she perceived Remy to be in now. Whispered moans of *no rest* and *faithless* echoed through even the familiar nightmares. A faceless entity chased her across all the nightmares to connect them into one long, terrifying event.

At two in the morning, she rolled over and turned on the bedside lamp. The bedding lay in a twisted heap half on the bed, half on the floor. Sweat slicked her skin, making Alisanne feel uncomfortable and sticky. Light chased the cobwebs away, but Remy's earlier words continued to haunt her.

You're going to belong to me...

Hoo boy. Coming from any other man, such possessiveness would have her running in the other direction. Probably screaming. No. Definitely screaming.

Not so with Remy. His saying it had the opposite effect. It required every ounce of her self-control to not chase him down the hall when he'd left her leaning up against the entry to her room. He'd whistled a tuneless ditty as he'd strode away from her. Wrong. He'd swaggered.

Here her long-held, most cherished desire looked to be coming true, yet she couldn't believe it. It was too soon. Much too fragile a hope. A niggler of doubt still existed somewhere in the back of her brain, and that had a dampening effect on the gleeful pitter-patter of her soaring heart.

The clock ticked towards dawn. At last Alisanne fell into a light slumber while she reclined in the large armchair. The television flickered, the sound turned down to all but inaudible. Cartoons from the 1970's held no appeal to her, and provided just the snoozing effect she needed to nod off to la-la land. Worked every other time nightmares kept her awake.

The telephone jangled at seven. Groggy from lack of sleep, she thanked the front desk clerk for the wake-up call. She stumbled to the bathroom. After ten minutes spent under the cold shower spray, Alisanne glared at her reflection in the mirror. At least the water washed away the last vestiges of her unnerving night, even if it did nothing for her appearance.

The bags under her eyes darkened due to lack of sleep. She looked haggard. Time to bring out the big guns. Alisanne reached for her cosmetics.

"You look like a tart," she announced to the mirror. She scrubbed her face, then applied the cosmetics with a lighter hand. Still not happy with the effect, she decided to let it be while she got dressed.

One final glance in the mirror reassured her she didn't look as made-up as she thought. The denim blue and white striped shirt with its crisp denim collar paired with blue jeans took the focus from the gunk on her face. She hoped.

One glance at her watch sent her flying out the door. The phone jangled just as the door latched. Alisanne fumbled with the lock to get back inside her room. It could be Remy calling to change plans.

"Hello?" Breathless from the mad dash across the room, over a pile of bedding, to reach the phone, Alisanne regulated her breathing.

"Faithless. Must fulfill the curse." A click followed.

Too bad the hotel phone couldn't trace the call's origin. On a whim, she called the front desk to have all incoming calls routed to her cell phone.

Now running further behind, she didn't have enough time to race through the continental breakfast room to grab a muffin. Just as well, as she'd added a few extra pounds since she returned home.

The morning sun worked its way through the branches of the cypress trees lining the driveway up to the mansion. A thrill of excitement at being inside the fence rather than outside looking in coursed through her. She parked under a tree, next to Remy's motorcycle.

Sunlight bathed the driveway pad. Alisanne slipped her sunglasses on against the brightness bouncing off the cement. Remy'd just climbed off his bike.

"I like seeing the house with the sun on it," Remy mentioned when she joined him. "Dispels all those silly tales about the place."

"I've never seen it like this," Alisanne replied. She shifted under the weight of his gaze. When Remy slid his sunglasses to the end of his nose to peer at her over them, she bit her lower lip.

A frown creased at the bridge of his nose, drawing his dark eyebrows together. "You wearin' make-up, love?"

Alisanne nodded once. She bit down on her lip, drawing blood. Remy pulled a bandana out of his back pocket and dabbed at her lip. "Careful, you'll hurt yourself."

"Who are you, and what have you done with Remy Beauvais?"

Instead of answering, he nudged her with his elbow. "Beat ya to the house."

His words didn't sink in right away. Halfway to the house, he slowed, and jogged backwards so he could speak to her. "You're speechless. If I'd known being nice to you would do the trick, I'd have been nice to you sooner."

"You rat!"

Remy laughed when she gave chase. She caught him on the front steps, or rather, he allowed her to catch him. Alisanne wrapped her arms around his waist in an attempt to knock him over. He twisted around to dislodge her with one sweeping movement. Breathless from running and laughing, she gasped.

Remy sat on the top step and seated her next to him. She leaned against him as she attempted to regulate her breathing back to normal. He checked her jeans pockets until he found her inhaler.

"Yeck." She capped the appliance after taking two puffs.

"Have a mint." Remy offered her a roll of candy. Alisanne took three. "Sorry. I forgot your asthma."

"I'd like to forget it too. Doesn't bother me in Wisconsin, for whatever reason. Papa reminded me to keep my prescription current for the inhaler, though, so I would have one when I visited. Reminded me of it during our last conversation, as a matter of fact. I'd told him I was coming home for the summer."

Alisanne's voice broke. Tears choked her, making it impossible for her to continue. Remy encircled her shaking shoulders with an awkward arm. Not quite a hug, but still human contact. She wouldn't cry. Nope. Take a deep breath, let it out, take another.

After several minutes, she controlled her grief. "Oh Remy. Why did they leave me alone?"

Remy took her face in his hands, forcing her to look at him. He stroked her cheek bones with his thumbs. "You're not alone, love. You're never alone."

A gusty sigh shook Alisanne while more tears threatened to spill. Her lips quivered, but she wouldn't allow herself to cry. Tears would betray her for the quivering bundle of mushy gelatin she'd turned into when Papa died. Papa wouldn't have wanted her to mourn him. Her throat ached with effort it took not to bawl her misery aloud. Fingernails dug into her palm, and the discomfort drew her focus away from her need to give in and have a good, long sob session.

"Until you've been alone, Remy, it's easy to say that." She'd heard the "you're never alone speech" from many people over the years. People who had no clue about aloneness. Alisanne's college roommate had loved to expound at great length on the subject. Until Alisanne, testy with frustration, pointed out that one who'd grown up with three siblings, and even now lived only twenty minutes from home, had no right to lecture an only child hundreds of miles from home.

Remy's gaze flickered. "You're right. I'm sorry."

Guilt for her shortness with Remy caused Alisanne to leave the step they sat on together. "I...uh, well. I've heard that so many times." She heaved a deep sigh. "It's gotten old."

Remy rose to his feet. "No offense taken. Now that I think on it, it's a very presumptuous thing to say."

"Not when it's meant in the spirit you intended." She twisted her hands together. "Do I still get

the nickle tour?"

Remy grinned at her. "For you, I'll give you the dollar tour." He offered her his hand. Without hesitation, she grasped it. Her little hand disappeared into his when he closed his fingers.

"I'm still waiting for you to revert to the mean Remy," she admitted, oh-so-softly.

They stopped before the great oak doors. Thick colored glass inlaid in the doors sparkled jewel tones. Remy's response matched hers in volume. "I know you are, love. I'm sorry I hurt you. All I can say in my defense is that I was young. You did nothing to deserve my attitude, other than you bloomed into a very pretty gal. You went from being a pest I could ignore to being a pest I didn't want to ignore. You understand?"

Alisanne gave him a wide-eyed look. This confession surprised her as she'd thought he didn't even notice her way back when.

Turns out he noticed her alright.

The door swung inward without so much as a groan. "Your tour begins in the entry, Mademoiselle."

A shadow in the corner of the covered veranda caught Alisanne's eye. She stared at the now sunny spot, wondering about what she'd seen. No. The *Misty Lady* came out in the mist, for crying out loud. Hence the name.

The scent of lilacs drifted on a light breeze that picked up at that moment. Alisanne made a mental note to ask Remy where he'd planted the lilacs as she followed him into the house and shut the door.

Remy leaned against the column that framed a wide walkway in the center of the large parlor as he watched Alisanne stroll around the empty, echoing room.

"What do you think?"

"You did this?" Alisanne twisted around. "I don't know what to look at first."

"I had help."

She stopped a few feet from him, to turn in a slow full circle. "It looks authentic."

Remy expelled his breath through his mouth. "That was the hard part—doing the research. Did you know, you can send paint chips you've scraped off the wall to be analyzed? They can tell you the original color of the room. It's amazing. The upstairs is almost finished. Adapting this old place to modern plumbing took imagination."

"How old is this place?"

"It was built in 1799, so over two hundred years old."

"Amazing to think this place stood empty for almost one hundred of those years."

Remy beckoned her to follow him to the stairs. "Nothing was allowed to fall too far into disrepair. The previous owners may have been absentee owners, but they did see to minimal upkeep."

"Wonder why that was?"

They stood at the railing and peered down to the first floor. "Condition of inheritance. I had to sign a legal document to that effect."

"This effort seems more than minimal," Alisanne observed. "More like renovation."

"The house is two hundred and six years old. It needed more than basic attention."

"Are these the stairs Adeline Rousseau fell down?"

"The very same. Don't tell me, you felt a cold spot on the landing. That's a favorite gag of the construction workers."

"No, no cold spot. She didn't die on the stairs."

Alisanne traced her finger along the smooth hardwood banister, following the grain of the wood. A tingle spread through her hand, up her arm. She shivered when the air around her cooled just long enough to make her wonder if she'd imagined the chill. "I wonder how many people touched this very spot. I wonder if she would linger here, this being the site of her fatal injury."

Remy shook his finger at her. "Tsk, ts, ts," he chided. "There are no such things as ghosts."

"Why not?"

"You're incorrigible. Come see the master bedroom. It overlooks the parterre garden in the back." Remy indicated the door to his left.

Alisanne went straight to the turret window. The view encompassed the entire back part of the property. The stunning garden below looked surreal, almost too perfect.

"There aren't any lilacs."

"No." Remy's voice echoed with a more resounding resonance in this room. Alisanne wondered why for a brief moment before she answered.

"I smelled lilacs before we came inside the house." She turned to him. Consternation wrinkled her forehead.

"Maybe we're downwind from the Garden District." A shrug. "The lilacs bloomed in the spring. It's late summer. You probably smelled something else."

"Maybe. Are you going to live here when it's complete?" Alisanne strolled around the room; her eyes scanned every minute detail.

"Yes, that's the current plan. Ma's not happy about it, though." He watched her pace the room.

"Is she going to move in with you?" She paused to examine the wainscoting.

"Here? She's as nutty about the so-called ghosts here as you are. No." Remy chuckled.

Alisanne ran her hand along the bright yellow wall. "Is the molding original? It's the same throughout the house." Alisanne stopped before him. Her head tilted to the left so she could gaze up at him. She squinted at him for another moment before she raised her eyebrows at him.

"Most of it."

"It's gorgeous. Are you going to furnish it with period pieces?"

"Some antiques, some reproductions. I've just about used the money I inherited along with the mansion." Remy motioned she should precede him out of the room. Alisanne hugged the wall, well away from the heavy wooden railing that lined the open side of the hallway. The side that looked down to the foyer. They descended the stairs.

"Well, I'm good and jealous. You know I've always loved this house. *You* get to live in it." Alisanne waved one hand in the air.

"Hey, boss. Where you want we should start today? G'morning, ma'am." Workers tramped in behind the big man whose voice boomed like a crack of thunder.

"Where we left off yesterday. Alisanne Sommers, this is my crew boss, Fred Rice. He's responsible for all the fine detailing you see."

"Very nice job, Mr. Rice."

The man flushed deep red. He beat a hasty retreat.

"What did I say?" Alisanne blinked as her mouth quirked off to one side.

"He doesn't like to call attention to his talent." Remy explained. "Sorry to rush you out, love, but the work day has started. Why don't you walk through the parterre garden before you go?"

"I'd like that." She looked at her feet while she fought the feeling that Remy was tossing her out. The time had come for her to go, but its arrival hit abruptly.

Remy grabbed her hand, and pulled her against him with a yank. She gasped when she bumped into him. Remy tilted her chin up with his free hand as he held her captive.

"You have plans this evening?"

"Besides ordering room service and flipping through the channels on the television? I thought I might tweeze my eyebrows." Alisanne almost said *clipping her toenails*, but that information shouldn't be disclosed to anyone.

"If you do that, you won't have any left. No, put on some fancy clothes, maybe a dress? We'll tackle the town tonight."

"You askin' me out, Mr. Beauvais?" Could it be?

"Yes I am, Miss Sommers."

"On one condition." Her heart raced.

"Conditions already? It's just our first date. It's way too early for you to place conditions on me." His stern expression faltered into a pleased grin. "What's your condition, love? I'm hoping that even if I mangled the invite to oblivion that you'd still say yes."

Her eyes blazed. Remy placed a quieting finger against her lips, smoothing them under his finger

tip. After half a second, he allowed her to speak.

"You pick me up in a car, not the motorcycle."

"Is that a yes then?"

"Yes."

PAGEBREAK

CHAPTER FIVE

Alisanne listened to the bees droning in the garden as she walked the beautifully laid path that wound through the enclosed space. A six-foot wall of ivy climbed all four sides of the walled-in garden, a more than effective enclosure for privacy. A fountain bubbled in the very center. All paths wended their way to this place. Well-sculpted shrubs and symmetrical gardens were dotted with statuary and benches.

Wind whispered through the trees several feet removed from this haven. She couldn't help but admire the entire property. A large cement pad, new from the unblemished surface, provided ample parking, but was unseen from the front of the oversized lot. In fact, unless one knew it was there, it was hard to find.

The sun climbed to its zenith before she left. Reluctance dragged her heels. She reached her car and opened the door to allow the heat to escape before she climbed inside.

"No rest. Remy."

Alisanne knocked her face against the top corner of the car door in surprise as she jerked her head in the direction of the voice. A gust rustled through the trees.

"Ouch," she muttered. She pressed her left hand to her cheek bone. "Such a klutz. Hearing things again. Time to have the old hearing tested."

"Faithless." Alisanne caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. She twisted around to see who was trying to frighten her. All she saw was the back of a man turning the corner around the house, out of her line of vision. Not Remy. No, he wouldn't try to scare her.

Alisanne hustled into the car. She slammed the door hard. After three tries, she managed to insert the key into the ignition. The car roared to life as a great blast of wind shook the car. Dark clouds rolled across the sky, boiling and bumping into each other way up high in the atmosphere. Seconds later, a steady sheet of rain fell.

"It was the storm arriving. It was the storm arriving." She chanted this litany all the way back to the hotel.

The rain continued to cascade as she pulled into the protective overhang of the hotel's valet parking. A valet came forward. Alisanne handed her keys over and accepted the parking stub. Thunder boomed overhead, lightning flashed—all within quick succession. At least she hadn't gotten drenched in the downpour.

Hunger forced her toward the small restaurant located just off the lobby. The maitre-de seated her by a window, where she watched water roll in beads down the outside pane, blurring the view of the street.

"We meet again."

Splendid. Remy's weirdo ex-girlfriend. Alisanne wondered if the woman had a life. The creepy sensation that she'd acquired a stalker shook Alisanne. She ignored the intruder, gazing, instead, at the menu as she decided what to order for lunch.

"He invited you to the mansion, didn't he?" Francine seated herself in the empty chair at the table without so much as a by-your-leave. "I bet he told you he inherited that haunted hulk."

Alisanne raised one eyebrow as she reluctantly lowered the menu. Francine's bitter laugh resembled a bark of a dog. "He's so full of himself. The real owner hired him to do the renovations. He's just a construction contractor, you know. No one like him would inherit the Rousseau place. Has he fed you that nonsense about being a Rousseau?"

Something didn't feel right. Alisanne tried to rise to her feet, but Francine's bright red clawed hand grabbed her right arm, just above the wrist, and twisted.

"Sit. We're getting to know each other." Francine smiled. It didn't quite meet her eyes, but it did make her look less...looney.

"What do you want?" Alisanne sat back down, grateful when Francine let her arm go.

"You should know what you're getting into with him." Francine nodded. Alisanne decided the woman thought she conferred a great favor upon her.

"Remy has roving eyes. He'll get tired of you and go find his satisfaction somewhere. That boy hasn't been innocent in a very long time. Keep that in mind when you're the one pining for him."

Alisanne almost laughed out loud. Francine had no way of knowing that she'd spent *years* pining for Remy.

"Don't let me keep you from ordering your lunch." Francine stood. "Think about what I've said. Don't get involved with him. Rousseau men never are faithful. Never." She knocked the table as she made her point as she left the table.

Think, Alisanne did, but not what Francine wanted her to contemplate upon after her departure. No, what concerned Alisanne more than whether Remy could remain true to any woman was why Francine sought her company. What on earth did that strange woman hope to accomplish?

The sandwich she'd ordered tasted like sawdust, the tea could have been ocean water for all she cared. The urge to get upstairs to her room and get on her computer gripped Alisanne.

"You're not an easy person to find."

Alisanne stopped in her tracks when presented with a barricade in the form of a tall blonde woman. Her shoulders slumped in defeat. So much for getting to her room any time soon. "It must be National Stalk Alisanne Day."

"Beg pardon?" Hilary's eyebrows shot up and drew together as she gazed at Alisanne.

"Never mind. Hilary St. Martin, right?"

"Was. Now Weller. Heard you were back in town."

"News travels fast." Alisanne expelled a gusty breath and waited for the other woman to state her business. She fidgeted with her room key. When Hilary continued to stare at her, Alisanne turned to walk away. She didn't have the time nor the desire for another battle of the wits. Especially with someone who appeared to have lost hers.

No rest. Alisanne shivered. She resisted the urge to peak over her shoulder at Hilary.

"I'm sorry about your father." Hilary said. A thread of indecision ran through her words.

"Thank you. Congratulations to you. I didn't know you'd married Jay Weller." Alisanne came to a reluctant halt and faced the other woman.

"You know Jay?"

"He's Remy's best friend. Of course I know Jay."

"Look, Remy's just getting his life back together after dating that nut job Francine Whatsername."

Alisanne gave one slow nod. "Uh-huh. And you don't think he needs to get involved with another *nut job*?"

Hilary shifted her balance from one foot to the other, and then back again. She had the grace to appear somewhat embarrassed.

"You know, since you're married, I can't see what business it is of yours who Remy dates."

"I'm his friend. Just stay away from him, or you'll be sorry."

Alisanne blinked, taken aback as Hilary made her threat before she walked in the opposite direction at a fast clip.

* * * *

The bottom of the door brushed against a pile of paper on the floor as Alisanne let herself into her room. Goose bumps rose on her arms when she recognized the obstacle as the book that went missing at the library the other day. The one about the first Madame Rousseau, that included the genealogy at the very end.

The door clicked shut as she reached down for the book. It fell open to the last page detailing the current generation of Rousseau descendants.

Francine Lamar. Lamar? Alisanne traced the line up to Adelie's daughter, her mind awl with all the possibilities. Aimee Louisa Rousseau *Lamar*. The next conclusion Alisanne reached for required

quite a stretch. With no other proof than the same first name, she decided Remy's ex must be Francine Lamar. Who needed actual, hard proof? Proof was for sissies. Francine and Remy were distant cousins, not even cousins in a direct line.

What game was Francine playing? Fear gripped Alisanne and squeezed her heart so hard it hurt. She dug her cell phone out of her purse, then stared at it through unseeing eyes.

She didn't know if Remy had a cell phone.

One thing was for certain, however. She needed to get to him. Warn him. About Francine. Francine Lamar, several-times-over great-granddaughter of the vengeful Madame Adelie Rousseau.

She grabbed her raincoat as she headed back out the door. The little book fit into the interior pocket with some room to spare.

Headlights on, wipers racing at full-blast, Alisanne flew back to the mansion. Only Remy's motorcycle sat on the parking pad. Light shone through the stormy afternoon from the windows of the house.

She pounded on the door while her heart matched her frantic rapping. Water dripped from Alisanne's coat onto the veranda. She tapped her toe against the porch. Again, the scent of lilac hovered on the porch, stronger, somehow, than the smell of the rain.

A surge of relief made her knees weak when Remy appeared. "Oh, good. You're still here." Without a word, he opened the door wide enough to admit her.

Alisanne heaved a great sigh. She palmed the book, opened it and showed him. "Look, see? Francine, your ex, is a direct descendant of Adelie's."

After several moments, Remy replied. "Francine's last name isn't Lamar, Alisanne. It's not even French."

"What?" Water dripped into her eyes from the hood of her raincoat. Remy pushed the hood off her head for her. She blinked up at him, her lips pursed in confusion. "I don't recall that you even told me her last name at the hotel. Why didn't you?"

"I suppose I didn't because I was trying to get her away from you fast. She's poison. Anyway, she's Francine Wilkins. Not Lamar. Is there any reason we're talking about her?"

Alisanne repeated the unsettling lunch conversation. Remy slid her coat sleeve up her arm to inspect her wrist. She snatched her arm away when his fingers probed bruised skin.

"You hurt your face." Roughened fingers brushed her cheekbone with a delicate touch so sweet Alisanne's breath hitched in her chest.

She sighed. Words tripped off her tongue as she recounted the strange voices she'd heard saying *no rest* and *faithless*, at the cemetery, in his yard, and again in the hotel lobby when Hilary Weller confronted her.

"Are you listening to me?" Alisanne demanded at the end of her spiel. Remy handed her a manila folder. She opened it. The folder contained a deed for the Rousseau mansion and it had his name typed on it in vivid black ink, plain as day.

"I thought she couldn't be telling the truth." She held the folder out to him.

Remy took it and put it away with a sigh. "I'm sorry she bothered you again, love."

"Some super-sleuth I am. I feel so...stupid." Alisanne sagged, much like a deflated balloon. Mortification singed her cheeks.

"Why? You braved the storm to come save me."

Alisanne shrugged her way out of the coat as Remy tugged on the material. "You have no idea how embarrassed I am. I've really let my imagination run wild with this."

"Love, your imagination has always been wild." He guided her to the kitchen. A table surrounded with mismatched chairs sat in the middle of the large room. "Sorry, this is the only room in the house with chairs. Sit. I'll make you a cup of tea."

She sat, bemused that his statement didn't hold its usual rancor with her fascination for ghosties.

"You shouldn't stay at the hotel any longer. Francine knows where to find you. Short of being together all the time so I can protect you from her, the best thing for you to do is not be there."

"Your mother and I are cleaning Papa's house this weekend."

"Move in. It's yours now. No sense in paying the hotel when the house is free."

"They died there, Remy. And I have an active imagination."

"You're not a kid anymore, Alisanne Miranda Sommers," Remy lectured. "Let go of your ghosts. I guarantee you, your parents aren't just sitting there in that house, waiting to haunt you. They're in heaven now, love."

She blinked back the stinging tears. There. She knew he'd resort back to Mean Remy. Alisanne didn't hear him move to stand beside her chair. His blue-jeaned hip brushed against her cheek. A warm hand rested on her head for a moment before his hands slipped down to her upper arms, to lift her to her feet.

His arms slipped around her in a gesture of comfort. One hand rubbed a circle on her back while the other rested against her hipbone.

"Let's go. We're still on for tonight, aren't we?" Remy spoke into her ear, his voice whispery.

She expelled her breath in a long, steady stream as she tilted her head back to see his face. His arms remained encircled around her and she cherished their closeness. Remy grinned down at her. His smile faded too soon.

"You're begging to be kissed," he announced.

Alisanne shook her head in denial. Too late, for his lips captured hers. This kiss differed from the first one. Whereas that one had been demanding, this one reassured. The overall effect was the same, however, and who on earth could miss the look of sheer male triumph in those sky blue eyes of his when it ended?

"I'll see you to your car before I lock up, love. I'll pick you up at the hotel in an hour and a half. Does that give you enough time?"

Enough time for what? To somehow calm her pulse, keep her heart from leaping out of her chest, resolidify her rubbery knees, breathe normally again?

* * * *

"Thank heavens the rain stopped. Don't you own any enclosed vehicles?" Alisanne couldn't help herself. The comment flew out of her mouth only seconds after she had the thought.

"You recognize it, yes?" Remy opened the passenger door.

Oh my yes, she recognized the beaut parked in the drop-off zone. Candy apple red, shiny silver bumpers, shined four wall tires. A 1966 Mustang convertible. Remy's pride and joy.

He'd restored it himself during the summer he'd decided to be too cool for a fourteen-year-old girl.

"You okay?" Remy looked at her over the top of the car door.

Alisanne shook her head to clear the cobwebs left by sour memories. "I'm fine. I do recognize the Mustang."

A low whistle escaped through his pursed lips. "You begged me to take you for a ride in it all summer."

She offered a small smile which caused Remy's expression to darken. Her breath quickened as she didn't know what caused the change, or if it was even directed at her.

"Where did you want me to take you then? Lake Pontchartrain?"

"Papa and I liked to watch the sail boats. That was the summer that he broke his ankle, though, so we couldn't go very far." She stared past Remy, lost in the haze of years gone by.

"The lake it is, followed by seafood? Or are you in the mood for Cajun?"

Alisanne settled into the car. Remy closed the door before she answered. "Cajun."

"Cajun it is. Hang on," he mentioned when he slid into the driver's seat. "It's going to get windy."

She sat back, content to watch the city go by as Remy drove. He pulled into the first parkway he found next to the lake. With the sun dipping into the western horizon, long shadows fell across the serene lake surface.

Remy helped her from the car. He leaned against the hood of the car and pulled her to stand directly before him. He slung his arms over her shoulders. Alisanne hummed with happiness.

She wanted to close her eyes and imprint this moment on her memory forever. Just in case a repeat

of this moment never happened again. Tension eased out of her shoulders in the warmth of Remy's embrace.

"Sun's about gone."

She nodded. Ah, it had to end at some point. Better to do it now, before those long-buried feelings for him seized control of her brain and she said or did something stupid.

"You'll have to let me go, Remy, so I can get back into the car."

"Not ready to do that yet, love. Took me long enough to get you here in the first place."

That couldn't mean what it sounded like. No. Not from Remy. Well, maybe the New Improved Remy. Still uncertain at this remarkable change in his attitude towards her, Alisanne preferred to play it safe. Not read anything into his actions or words.

Even though her heart sang with joy at this turn-around, a small voice sounded in the back of her mind, urging her to be cautious.

PAGEBREAK

CHAPTER SIX

Weeks of being closed up left the air inside the home Alisanne grew up in stale and musty. Her nose twitched at the dusty closeness that settled over her. Still, that familiar sense of security that being home stirred up couldn't be ignored. Nostalgia overwhelmed her. Alisanne savored the sensation; it had been absent way too long.

"I'll open the windows in the bedrooms," Marie Beauvais announced.

Spurred to action, Alisanne opened every window she could in the main rooms. A fine layer of dust covered all the wooden surfaces. It wouldn't take much to put the house back to rights since Papa kept the house as immaculate as Mama had.

Alisanne paused at the breeze-way to the kitchen. Clean dishes from Papa's last breakfast still sat in the plastic drying rack. A broken glass littered the floor. A cupboard door swung off its top hinge, hanging halfway open with a drunken sag. It looked like Papa had grabbed at the handle on the cupboard to steady himself when the heart attack seized him. She blinked hard to clear the tears that filled her eyes.

"Oh, that's better already," Marie called. She came to stand behind Alisanne. "Oh, honey, come away from there. Go clean the bathrooms. I'll take care of this."

Alisanne moved on wooden legs. While she'd known the circumstances of how Papa had been found, this was the first time she saw how it happened. Nothing in the world could have prepared her for that.

The hall bathroom smelled moldy from disuse. She turned the overhead fan on to help clear the air while she squirted liquid bleach cleanser on the sink and toilet, and sprinkled powdered cleaner in the tub—half a bottle where the bath mat had left mildewed rings.

Remy found her bent over the edge of the tub. "If you scrub any harder, you'll scour the porcelain right off."

"Remy?"

"Last time I looked."

The brush clattered against the tub when Alisanne dropped it. The sound echoed in the small bathroom. "Why are you here?"

"Ma called."

"Why?"

"She's upset she didn't think to come over and make sure everything was in order before you saw it." In three steps, he stood beside her. He offered a hand to help her to her feet.

"It startled me," Alisanne admitted. She held her hands out at an awkward angle, keeping them away from her clothes and his. "But why call you? It's not like you can fix what happened."

"No, but I can fix the cabinet door for you. That's why she called."

"Oh." Alisanne bent around him, to reach the sink. She rinsed her hands quickly.

"So I dropped everything to come over." Remy handed her a bright blue, velvety towel.

She accepted it with a muted, "Thank you."

"You okay?" He nudged her shoulder when she kept her gaze lowered away from his.

"I'll survive. I always do." Shaky fingers refolded the small towel. Alisanne smoothed the folds with the tip of her index finger. Hoo boy, the temperature seemed to have increased in the small bathroom since Remy arrived.

"Sure?"

Alisanne looked up, surprised at the softly spoken question. Concern creased his face, along with compassion. "Sure enough, Remy. I know you're busy with your final renovations."

"Renovations, shmenovations. I have a good crew. They'll work without the big boss watching over them."

Alisanne transferred her gaze to the wall, looking around Remy. Warm fingers, rough from hard labor, caught her chin. "Why won't you look at me?" He tilted her chin upwards.

She licked her lips, suddenly parched. Why, indeed. After the impromptu trip to the lake, he'd taken her to dine at Arnaud's. Creole food rather than Cajun, and all because she'd mentioned as they cruised by the restaurant that it was one place where she'd always wanted to dine but never had.

A glitter of understanding sparked in Remy's eyes. "You're still unsure about my intentions, aren't you?"

"Can you blame me?"

"Not at all. Lord knows I deserve it for the way I treated you when we were teenagers."

Remembered hurt squeezed a heart already weary with pain. She sagged against the wall. "You told me I could pester the Pope to oblivion and that you would never be able to think of me as much more than a diseased mosquito. That I should give up trying to make myself attractive, as that would never happen in two millenniums. You'd kiss a rabid bat before you'd ever want to kiss me. Shall I continue?"

Remy pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes squeezed shut as his face contorted with remorse. "No, there's no need," he said after several moments.

"You've done a complete turn around. You convinced me you could never have any type of romantic feelings for me, and now...well. You can understand my caution."

"Teenage boys are awful," Remy answered. "It's amazing enough of us survive our teenage years to grow into men. If I could change the past for you, Alisanne, I would. I made your life more miserable by being a jerk to you, and for that I am deeply sorry."

She stared at him. Surely the bleach fumes must be affecting her brain. A woman had to have standards, didn't she? Like not being taken in by the same guy twice? He did look repentant—painfully so. Alisanne bit her lip in indecision. This was too much for her to process. Too fast, and way too soon. Even though this was everything she'd ever wanted. True happiness had been absent from her life too long now. Oh, how she wanted to cling to Remy, to what he appeared to be offering right now. She wanted to trust this new start, but a tiny niggle of doubt remained. He'd gone from genial to surly before. And that meant he could do it again.

* * * *

Alisanne's war of indecision registered on her face. Like all her thoughts were wont to do. He wanted to convince her his intentions were good. He couldn't undo the past. All he could do was learn from his mistakes, grow and move on. It had been the biggest mistake of his life to let her leave ten years ago without a protest.

"Give me a chance, love. Live in the here and now. Let go of the rest."

She folded her arms and dropped her chin until it rested on her chest. "I'm overloading, Remy. I want to give you another chance. I do." Her head came up, her eyes blazed sapphire at him. "The sins of childhood shouldn't be held against us. Unless we make the same mistakes over again."

Man, she was good. Able to offer a second chance while cautioning what would happen if he disappointed her again so sweetly. The woman had spirit to spare, an admirable quality.

"What are you two talking about in here? Remy, if you've ever cleaned a bathroom, I'd faint with the shock," Marie said. She stood in the hallway, looking into the bathroom.

"Of course I have, Ma."

"You're just saying that to see if I'd faint on the spot."

"You threaten that too much for me to actually think it will happen," Remy answered. "I'll be right out to fix the cabinet."

Marie nodded, her eyes bright with curiosity. Remy knew his mother well. She'd corner him in another room and hound him until he satisfied her maternal whims.

"I'm going to run the vacuum cleaner."

"Yes, Ma."

She lingered for another moment, before she melted into the shadows of the hallway. Alisanne brushed past Remy. He blocked her exit before she could escape.

"Does that mean I get another chance?"

She poked a finger in his chest. "Just you remember, Remy Michel Beauvais, if you hurt me, the *Misty Lady* legend will sound like a sweet bedtime story in comparison to what I'll do to you." She glared up at him to emphasize her point further.

Remy pursed his lips together to keep from smiling at her. She still thought she could wallop him. Heck, if he did get stupid and ruin this last chance, he'd let her.

"Yes, ma'am."

Alisanne snorted. She pushed him aside with her elbow and left him alone in the bathroom.

His mother turned the vacuum cleaner off when she saw him. No sign of Alisanne, though. Remy detoured to the front door to grab his toolbox.

"What do you think you're doing?" This demand cracked through the air like the electricity did in a thunderstorm.

"Fixing the cabinet, Ma." Be cool, calm. A lifetime of experience with his mother fueled his efforts. She wanted to get him on the defensive at this point, her usual tactic.

"With Alisanne. Don't think I don't know what I know."

"Could you be more cryptic?" Remy raised an eyebrow at his mother when she shook her finger at him.

"She's always had a tender for you, you big oaf. She's been through too much to be able to deal with more heartache. If you make her leave again, Remy...I'll...I'll..." She trailed off, flushing bright red.

"You'll what?" Remy prompted.

"I'll stop making chocolate chip cookies for you! That's what." Arms crossed, lips pursed, shoulders stiff—his mother vibrated with purpose. She'd made the worst threat she could think of.

"Then I'll be careful, Ma. Wouldn't want you to stop makin' those cookies." Remy drawled. He winked, then flexed his eyebrows quickly.

If she'd been covered with feathers, they'd have ruffled as she gave Remy what he knew was her final word on the subject. "See that you are careful."

Remy clucked under his breath as he passed her on his way into the kitchen. She smacked him, catching his hip. Remy chuckled, and quickened his pace.

"You're terrible, Remy. Just terrible."

"Love you too, Ma."

The vacuum cleaner roared back to life.

* * * *

Alisanne sat on the edge of her father's large bed. The familiarity of the pale blue chenille bedspread comforted her as she rubbed her hand against the knobby material. Mama bought the bedspread shortly before she got sick, and Papa, despite how worn out it became, couldn't bear to part with the bedding.

She stared at the heavy chest of drawers, across from the foot of the bed. Mama's dresser. Covered with eighteen years of dust, treasures sat right where Mama had set them. An antique perfume bottle, still half full with Mama's favorite cologne, now almost scentless with age. A jewelry box, with ivory inlaid on the top in the shape of a flower sat in a place of honor. Alisanne saved her allowance for three months to buy that jewelry box for Mother's Day. A ring holder, with Mama's rings still in it, as well as a locket, a watch and a pair of gold hoop earrings.

Papa's chest stood by the closet door. The open door to the closet looked like a dark yawn against the white wall. Alisanne knew Mama's clothes still hung in there. A treasure trove of late 1970's fashion.

Alisanne took a deep breath. She'd always wanted to go through Mama's dresser, but Papa had never permitted her touch it. The top drawer slid out under her trembling hands as the sound of vacuuming resumed.

The scent of long enclosed cedar wafted on the air. Alisanne sneezed. An array of decorative boxes nestled in the deep drawer. She recognized many of the cases. In one corner, a pile of neatly folded filmy scarves spilled over.

Alisanne pulled them out in order to refold them before she put them back. A yellowed envelope fell over. Her name flowed across the front, written in Mama's elegant script. Alisanne's heart skipped a beat. The scarves fell into a forgotten heap at her feet.

"Mama," she murmured. She hugged the envelope to her chest. Cedar mixed with Mama's perfume. Alisanne breathed in and out several times to savor the faint aroma of *Emeraude*.

The envelope wasn't sealed shut. She pulled the flap open and took the letter from its haven. Mama's best stationery; the parchment colored paper with edges that looked like they'd been burned. Mama had written over the faint watercolor spray of flowers centered on the page.

Alisanne looked at the date. Mama had written this letter one week before she'd died. To the day. Alisanne began to read aloud.

"My dearest Alisanne...You brought great joy into my life. I don't have the words to tell you how much I don't want to leave you so soon. I know your Papa will raise you to be a fine young lady. Remember that you are his reason to live after I'm gone. You'll take good care of each other, I know, and my heart rests easy."

She wandered to the wicker chair placed under the window sank down into the homemade cushions. *"Ah, cherie, you have so much ahead of you. So much I wanted to share with you—your first crush, your first love. Oh, your prom. Graduation. Finding your true love. Getting married, having babies. I have so much advice I wanted to give you, but that would take a book, which I regret, I don't have the time to write. I'll share the best advice my own Mama shared with me..."*

Alisanne's head hurt from the unshed tears threatening to spill. Her throat tightened, the constriction made reading aloud difficult, but she continued. She needed to hear her mother's words spoken. Papa had commented time and again how much she sounded like her Mama.

"The path of true love is never easy. The more difficult the road, the more rewarding the love you'll find at the end. I promise this, as I learned this for myself. Your Papa! You'll find my diaries in my bedside table. You can read all about our romance for yourself."

"What I want most for you, my beautiful girl, is for you to be happy. You'll be beautiful—you're the image of my mother. Just look at her pictures on the wall in the hallway, and you'll see yourself as you get older."

"Take chances, live, love, learn, and grow, Alisanne. I'll always be with you, in your heart, your memories, and watching you from heaven. I love you, cherie. I cannot bring myself to tell you goodbye, as I leave you reluctantly..."

"She didn't forget to tell you goodbye, love. She couldn't say the words."

"Why didn't Papa give me her letter?"

Remy knelt before Alisanne, so close her knees dug into his abdomen. "Where did you find it?" He brushed her bangs to one side.

"In the top drawer." She pointed as she sniffed. Remy smelled like sawdust. She held her breath for a moment, until the urge to sneeze passed.

"He probably didn't know it was there."

Alisanne nodded as numbness overtook her. Remy shifted so he could lift her out of the chair. Still holding her, he sat down. His legs felt hard beneath hers, but with his arms around her, she felt cuddled. He tucked her head against his shoulder. Surrounded by his strength, Alisanne let loose with her years of pain.

Remy rubbed a circle on her back, a soft, soothing gesture which calmed her wrenching sobs. After a while, she noticed he rocked her, oh-so-gently while he hummed under his breath. She could feel the vibration of his hum beneath her cheek.

Oh, how wonderful to be held in his arms. It was just as she imagined it would be. Sure, he'd held her several times in the past couple of days, but this time felt different. His solid frame encompassed her. The contact gave her a sense of peace she hadn't felt for a very long time.

That he sat there holding her, allowing her to soak his shirt with her tears without saying a word, illustrated how much he'd changed from the thoughtless teenaged boy he'd been. It was possible that their rocky past was her path to true love. Hoo boy. She could deny it every time she opened her mouth, but her heart knew the truth.

No matter what Remy did, he'd always hold her heart. Always had. Always would.

PAGEBREAK

CHAPTER SEVEN

"That's odd." Alisanne stood, hands on her hips, and stared at the clothing she'd just hung up in her closet. The black dress she'd worn to Papa's funeral appeared to be missing.

A quick pawing through the empty suitcases proved fruitless.

The drive back to the hotel took forever. Three times she got stopped to wait for a funeral motorcade to pass. As she waited for the third one, she realized her heart no longer twisted in response. She could think of her mother without the overwhelming sense of loss that she'd known for most of her life.

Her thoughts turned to Remy. Remy who'd offered to stay with her for the rest of the day, his reluctance to leave her written plainly on his face. Both Remy and Marie had left her, with many protests, around noon. Marie made her promise to call later in the afternoon, and Remy told her he'd take her out for dinner again tonight. Hard to resist such a charming invitation.

"I'll only be ten minutes. Don't bother to park it," she told the valet who hopped forward to take her keys.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Thank you."

The clerk at the front desk gave her a key to her former room without batting an eyelash. A crowd of people gathered at the elevators, so Alisanne decided to take the stairs. Two flights of stairs taken slowly wouldn't send her into an asthmatic spasm.

The door creaked shut behind her. She rounded the first half-story landing. The stairwell echoed around her with a tortured voice.

"No rest."

Alisanne continued upwards. Another echo reverberated. *"Remy. Die. No rest."*

Almost to her destination, Alisanne came to an abrupt halt when the missing black dress fell from above, to puddle at her feet.

"No rest until Remy dies."

A door closed somewhere above her. Alisanne scooped up her dress and ran up the next flight of stairs, asthma concerns forgotten. The dress hadn't fallen too far, for such an accurate landing, so the perpetrator couldn't have been too far up.

Her breath came in gasps by the time she reached the third floor exit. The door knob wouldn't budge beneath her hand. Alisanne twisted it the other way. Still nothing. She banged her hands on the metal door.

Laughter drifted around her.

Alisanne leaned against the wall. She couldn't catch a decent breath and she couldn't find her inhaler in her purse.

Ten minutes later, she descended the stairs. She held onto the railing with one hand. She moved slower than a little old lady with a walker. The deserted lobby harbored only a couple of construction workers patching a hole in the wall by the entry. Alisanne tried not to stare at Fred Rice as she left. She wondered why he happened to be at the hotel today.

Outside, under the awning, she waited for her car to be brought over.

No rest. Faithless.

Alisanne surreptitiously surveyed her surroundings. She didn't want to give herself away if the culprit watched. In the corner, almost hidden by a potted tree, a tall blond woman stood. Hilary Weller. The enormous sunglasses the woman wore made identification more difficult, but when the woman strode to a car bearing vanity plates that read *Jay's Digs*, Alisanne heaved a troubled sigh.

When she was finally settled back in her car, she started it and turned the a/c on high. "Steady,"

she told herself as she looked at her reflection in her rearview mirror. Her wide dark eyes stared back at her from a face pale with recent exertion. Breath still came in shallow gasps, but she wasn't hyperventilating anymore.

A car pulled out in front of her, and in the brief instant when the other driver glanced over to check traffic, Alisanne saw her. Francine. Remy's nutty ex-girlfriend. Francine Wilkins. Wilkins—not Lamar.

Traffic engulfed her car, and she lost sight of Francine's little sporty two-door. Alisanne found it odd that Francine, who presumably had a job and a home, would be at the hotel where she had stayed.

Too overwhelming to be mere coincidence. A quick detour to the library to check public records would answer the questions forming in Alisanne's mind.

* * * *

Late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the Rousseau property. Remy's property, legally. Property that Alisanne now assumed Francine Lamar Wilkins thought belonged to her, as she was the direct descendant of a Rousseau born in legitimacy.

She held the proof in her hands; copies of the legal documents she'd found on file in the library. Remy would have to listen now. She had documentation. Proof.

Alisanne didn't bother to park neatly. She slammed the car to a halt and turned it off. She almost didn't notice that the construction clutter had been cleaned up either. The wind churned through the trees and buffeted against her back as she ran to the front door.

Die, Remy. Die. No rest. No rest.

Alisanne swung around, studying the driveway and drive. No sign of a silver sports coup. That didn't mean a darned thing, however. If she was right, and Alisanne knew she was, Francine lurked nearby.

The front door gaped open. Alarmed, Alisanne entered. Sense returned two seconds after she passed through the entrance. Just like those silly girls in those stupid horror movies who went in to investigate...

A gunshot.

Alisanne dug into her purse for her cell phone. A raised voice covered her own soft words, answering questions posed by the dispatcher at the 911 end of the call.

"It's mine! Your nasty family robbed mine of our rightful inheritance!"

Alisanne held the phone out, with the hopes the dispatcher could hear the shouting.

"The attorneys thought your branch of the family died out, Francine. All you had to do was go to the law firm with proof of your claim. The house would, by the terms of your great-grandmother's will, revert to the legitimately born line of the Rousseau family. Uncle Robert didn't know you were still alive, Francine. Nobody did."

Ugly laughter ricocheted through the house. "That was what Mother wanted. The curse couldn't be fulfilled if we couldn't get *your kind* to crawl out of the woodwork."

"Should've listened to Alisanne when she told me you were a Rousseau."

Alisanne cringed when another gunshot blasted. Remy's shout of pain unrooted her from her spot in the entry hall.

"Who's that? Somebody out there?"

Time to throw even more caution to the wind. Alisanne closed herself into the closet under the stairs. She peeked through the sliver of space between the door and the jamb.

Francine strode through the entry hall. "I know someone's here. Alisanne? Is it you, honey? Surely you know I'm doing you a favor. History's proven time and again that Rousseau men can't be faithful. He'll only break your heart."

The closet door opened. A pistol dangled from one of Francine's fingers. The deranged gleam in the woman's eyes spoke volumes. Alisanne would have to tread with extreme caution or she could very well end up as dead as she feared Remy to be.

"You're right. He's a heartbreaker, that one. He's broken my heart before." Alisanne injected as much bitterness as she could into each word she uttered. She'd learned about hostage situations when

she'd worked as a bank teller to put herself through college. Just keep the crazy person happy and talking.

"Why did you go back to him?" Francine twirled the gun.

Alisanne gulped. She knew not one thing about weapons, and couldn't tell if this one had the safety on. She suspected it did not. Funny how that part hadn't been included in the bank's safety seminar.

"Well," she drew the word out for several syllables. Thank goodness for the drama classes she'd taken in college. "I came back to New Orleans because my Papa died. I'm alone now."

Francine nodded. "I understand alone."

Alisanne breathed in and out, trying to keep from passing out due to lack of oxygen. "I haven't lived here in ten years, and I got out of touch with my friends. Remy's mother and mine were best friends."

"Natural to turn to family friends," Francine agreed. "Too bad it was Remy. Can't trust him, you know. Never trust a Rousseau man."

"I've heard," Alisanne soothed. In her madness, Francine started to repeat herself, and Alisanne meant to keep her calm by all means. *Keep the crazy person happy and talking.*

"Adelie learned that the hard way. She paid for her mistake with her life, too. My ever-so-great-grandmother's diaries are filled with entries about her father's betrayal. Aimee taught her children to hate Rousseau men."

Ah, what a lovely thing to pass down through the generations. No wonder Francine was insane. The insanity had been cultivated with each and every generation since Adelie's death.

The wail of sirens racing toward the mansion drew Francine's attention away from Alisanne long enough for her to scoot out of the closet. She headed for the kitchen, with the notion that she might be able to rescue Remy. Somehow get him out of the house, away from Francine.

"You called the cops?" Francine's outraged screech ricocheted off the bare walls. Pure fury resonated around Alisanne. "Stop moving, you ungrateful witch!"

Too late. Like a deer caught in the headlights, Alisanne froze, only a few steps from the dining room.

"I did you a favor!" Francine screamed. She leveled the gun at Alisanne. In what felt like slow motion, Alisanne swerved just as the gun fired.

"Nnnnnnnnoooooooooo!"

A hulking body flew through the air. Remy landed on Alisanne and knocked her to the floor with a decisive thud. The last thing she heard was a commanding "Freeze!" before she lost consciousness.

PAGEBREAK

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jumbled images of events past and present tumbled through Alisanne's mind. Her mother and Adeline Rousseau were one and the same as often as not. Remy called her. Papa hugged her.

"She's lost a lot of blood."

Who lost a lot of blood and where did they lose it?

"May you never find peace in this life or the one in the hereafter, Bayard Rousseau!"

"He'll never be faithful. I did you a favor. A favor. A favor. A favor."

Someone jerked her. Hazy pain ate at the edges of her consciousness. Alisanne decided to ignore the pain and talk to the dead people instead.

"But Mama, you never said goodbye."

"I couldn't, ma chérie. It hurt too much to think I had to leave you so soon."

"I didn't curse all the Rousseau men. Such a notion! Why would I want to be a ghost, forever linked to a place that holds nothing but sad memories for me?"

"Alisanne? Alisanne!"

Remy? Remy got shot. The crazy woman shot at Alisanne, and Remy knocked her out of the way. Boy, did it hurt when he landed on her. He must have shoved his shoulder into her, because the right side of her chest hurt so bad her arm went numb.

"Remy?"

"Hi, love. How are you feeling?"

"I forgot you played football in high school."

Remy smoothed the hair off her face. "Football?"

"You have one heck of a tackle. I think you broke my shoulder when you knocked me down."

Speaking took more energy than she had. How annoying that her inhaler disappeared from her purse. She would have sworn she'd put it in her bag. "Hard to catch my breath."

"The EMT thinks the bullet might have nicked your lung."

"What bullet? I didn't get shot. You did. Twice."

"That first bullet just grazed my leg. Will probably only need stitches. I didn't knock you out of the way fast enough. I'm sorry, love. I'd trade places with you in a heartbeat."

Alisanne coughed. She covered her mouth with her hand, and when she withdrew her hand, it felt sticky. Upon closer inspection, Alisanne saw the mess on her hand was blood.

"We need to go."

"Remy? I'm scared." She tried to lift her hand up towards him, but it hurt too much.

"You're going to be just fine," he reassured her.

Damn her eyes, she couldn't make them focus on his face. His words did sound sincere. She closed her eyelids. Made it easier to hear the voices that whispered to her. So nice to speak with her parents again. She'd been so very lonely for them.

* * * *

"Rem, you in here?"

Remy stretched. He'd sat in the surgical waiting room since being discharged from the ER three hours ago. His mother rubbed her rosary beads together in the chapel and prayed.

"Jay. What brings you here?"

"Hilary heard on the police scanner that there'd been a shooting at your place."

"I didn't know she cared." Too exhausted for much chatter, Remy snapped his answer.

"She thought you'd been hurt." Jay held his hands out, palms up, in a conciliatory gesture.

Remy didn't feel very generous at this point. Hilary'd made her position more than plain since Alisanne had returned to town. He'd hung up on her twice when she'd called to yell at him about his seeing Alisanne. "I can imagine her relief that it's Alisanne fighting for her life instead of me."

"She's in the chapel with your mother."

"Good thing I'm wearin' rubber-soled tennis shoes. I'll be safe when the lightning bolt hits the hospital."

Jay gave a low whistle. "I didn't realize you disliked Hilary that much."

"Jay, Hilary called me several times to read me the riot act for spending time with Alisanne. How she knew that, I don't know, and I don't really care. That's not the point. The point is she doesn't get a vote or a say about the lady in my life." Remy paused as he made eye contact with his oldest friend. "Just like I didn't get one about her being in your life. Hilary made you happy. That's all that mattered. Alisanne makes me happy."

"I'm not the one with a problem with that, man. I've always liked her." Jay replied.

"Losing her now isn't an option as far as I'm concerned, but I figure it's not up to me to decide."

"So what happened?" Jay asked.

"Francine went psycho on me. That's what happened. Don't know exactly how Alisanne figured it all out in the end, but she did try to warn me that Francine had a hidden agenda. Wish now I'd listened to her."

"Yeah?"

"She told me Francine was a Rousseau, related to me distantly. I didn't believe her at the time."

"Why would she think that?" Jay sat up, his attention riveted on Remy.

"She did some research and came up with an extensive genealogy. You know she's always been fascinated with the legends around the Rousseau family. Saw the name Francine Lamar on the family tree and decided it had to be my ex."

A cell phone trilled, and Jay pulled his out of his pocket with an apologetic shrug. "Gotta take it. I left Hilary's brother in charge of the restaurant."

A few terse moments later, Jay snapped the phone closed. "Sorry, but it's gotten busy, and Bo can't handle it. You gonna be okay?"

"Yeah, I'll survive. You go take care of your place. Ma's around the corner."

"Oh yeah. Almost forgot." Jay pulled a small tape recorder from his hip pocket. "Hilary gave me this on the way over. There's a tape inside that replays the words *no rest, faithless* and *die Remy*. All she told me is that she's not proud of herself. Any ideas?"

Remy frowned. "Yeah. Alisanne kept hearing those words in the oddest places. Was it Hilary? How?"

His friend shrugged. "We've been spending a lot of time apart lately, Rem. So I don't know how she managed it, only that she did. I'm sorry. I did tell her she needs to get help if she wants to come back home to me and our daughter. She came with me here this afternoon as a show of good faith. Please don't judge her too harshly. She's disturbed."

Remy nodded. "Just keep her away from us."

"Without a doubt, my friend."

The entire situation smacked of the bizarre to Remy. He didn't know what to say to Jay. The moment of awkwardness passed unremarked upon.

Jay slugged Remy's shoulder. "Call and let me know, would ya? "You bet. Thanks for comin' over."

"You betcha. Anytime for an old friend."

Alone again, Remy limped over to the window to look outside. Fully dark now, he glanced over the

view he had of the city. He imagined the tourists on their spook walks pausing to stare at the Rousseau mansion while the guide, a self-professed vampire naturally, retold the legend of the *Misty Lady*. After the events of the day, he could almost believe in the famous old ghost. Almost.

"Is there anyone here for Alisanne Sommers?"

Remy turned. A nurse in starched white smiled back at him. Remy's heart stopped. This woman looked exactly like the old oil painting of Adeline Rousseau. The *Misty Lady*.

"I'm here for Alisanne." Difficult to speak with one's tongue stuck to the roof of one's mouth.

"She's in recovery now, sleeping peacefully."

"Is she going to be alright? She has to be. I need her to be fine. I can't lose her again." Desperate for reassurance, Remy searched the nurse's face for anything that would give away the answers he needed.

The nurse's expression turned speculative. "I don't have all the details I'm sure you'd like."

"Surely you can tell me Alisanne will live. She lost a lot of blood." Remy pressed. He thought a nurse sent out to speak to family and friends should be able to respond with a certain amount of knowledge to at least the basic questions.

"Her recovery will take some time."

Remy wanted to scream. What was wrong with this nurse? All he wanted was a straight reply.

"As long as she's going to recover."

The nurse clasped her hands together. Light seemed to bounce off her, but Remy attributed that to his own injury, exhaustion and concern for Alisanne.

"It matters to you that she lives?" A careful question, phrased just so.

"Of course it matters. I love her. She just came back into my life, and I need to tell her that."

Remy spoke with the conviction of one grasping at any hope offered. Alisanne couldn't die before he'd made his declaration. He'd start believing in ghosts himself if she did.

The nurse brightened. "That's sweet. She'll be out of recovery soon enough. You can tell her when you see her."

"When will that be?"

"Oh, an hour or two. Be patient. You have all the time in the world." She left him with those words.

Remy resumed his post at the window. He arranged the chairs so he could prop his stiff leg up and still see out over the city. The painkiller's effectiveness waned, but it was too much effort to find the in-hospital pharmacy to have his prescription filled.

"Any word?"

"Didn't you see the nurse in the hallway, Ma?"

Marie crossed the small waiting area. "Didn't see a nurse. Hilary Weller stopped in. She said Jay was with you."

"He was. You must have just missed the nurse," Remy said absently. "Alisanne's out of surgery. Haven't seen the doctor yet, however."

"She'll be fine." Marie rubbed his arm.

"You know this, huh?" Remy slanted a weak grin down at her.

"Of course I know this, Remy. I talk to the Lord on a regular basis, and He often answers."

"So He told you Alisanne would be fine." He kept his tone light. No reason to offend his mother.

"Yes, He did, you heathen. He also said He'd like to see more of you in church." Marie arched her eyebrows.

Remy laughed. His mother spent much of her time urging him to go to church. "He will, if she does."

Marie hugged him. "I'll remind you."

"Of that I have no doubt." Remy let a long-suffering sigh out, just to tease. Ma had a way of lifting his tension. Just as Alisanne did.

"How are you feeling?" Marie studied him with a critical, motherly eye.

"I'll survive. I'm getting hungry, though." He'd die of starvation before he'd leave without

word on Alisanne's prognosis.

"Mr. Beauvais?"

Remy recognized the doctor who'd talked to him before going into surgery. "Good news?"

"Excellent news."

* * * *

"*He loves you...*" The sparkling warmth faded with the strange dreams Alisanne'd had, leaving her bereft. The garden scent of her dreams was replaced by the antiseptic odor unique to hospitals. Machinery beeped quietly in the background.

Someone had parked a hippo on her chest. Her nose itched, and her fingers almost dislodged the tubes running up there. Tubes everywhere, as a matter of fact. Alisanne caught sight of a nurse in a crisp white uniform standing at the foot of her bed.

"Warm enough? You're in ICU. There's someone who wants to see you very much."

"Remy." The sound of her voice, scratchy and thin, startled Alisanne.

The nurse smiled and gave a serene nod. "Do you love him as much as he loves you?"

"He told you that?"

The nurse adjusted the blanket. "Yes."

Alisanne sighed, happy with the news.

"He'll be in soon, dear. Rest for a while."

Alisanne obediently closed her eyes. No voices whispered to her this time—a good thing. It reassured that she wouldn't die tonight.

"One visitor, ten minutes each hour, sir."

Remy entered her room. She watched him out of the corner of her eyes until he came fully into her line of vision. She couldn't turn her head far enough to the right to see the door.

"Hey, love."

Oh, that wonderful Southern voice of his again. Deep, slow, rolling. Music to her ears.

"Hey yourself."

"You had an exciting day." Remy came around the bed and halted to her left, a hair-breadth away. He reached over the side rail to rub her left shoulder.

"You okay?" After everything that happened, there he stood. A miracle. Alisanne heard each intake of breath he took, fancied she would hear his heart beating a strong tattoo. He looked weary, but at least he was there to be looked upon.

"Got nine stitches in my leg. You have more stitches than I do." He gave her a very exaggerated wink.

Alisanne's weak giggle made her cough.

"None of that now. You need to conserve your strength. Get well." Remy reached over the railing to brush a strand of her hair from her forehead. His fingers lingered against her skin. So warm. So alive.

"Any reason for that?"

Remy took her left hand into his. His blue eyes filled with an emotion she'd waited a very long time to see reflected there.

"Because you have to spend the next seventy-five years or so putting up with me."

"I do?"

"Save that for the priest, love."

She squeezed his hand. He squeezed back.

"Anything else?" A whisper. Hoo boy, this small conversation wore her out more than she'd thought possible. She wanted to sleep, but her unfinished business with Remy kept her awake.

"Yeah, there's something else." The railing clanked when Remy lowered it.

"Shhh...We don't want the nurse to come in yet." Alisanne admonished. Oh, it hurt to talk too much, but she wouldn't let Remy know that. He'd leave, and she didn't want him to do that yet.

He leaned over her, his hand cupped one side of her face as he kissed her forehead. He nudged her nose with his, and trailed kisses down the side of her face.

"I love you, Alisanne Miranda Sommers. I always have, I always will."

"Mmmmm." Eyelids too heavy to keep open any longer fluttered shut. "I love you too, Remy."

"It's a forever deal, Alisanne."

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EPILOGUE

Remy pushed the wheelchair out of the hospital lobby into the humid late summer air of New Orleans. Alisanne missed the cool air from inside before Remy had taken three steps towards the curb.

"You brought the Mustang."

"You can't ride the motorcycle yet."

"Do you only have bad boy vehicles?"

Remy set the brake on the wheelchair before coming around to help Alisanne to her feet. "Love, I am a bad boy. You told me so yourself just the other day."

"It was very naughty of you to hide my bathrobe while I showered."

Remy held her close. She tilted her head back to see his face. He didn't appear repentant at all. Hoo boy. He had *that* look on his face. The one that said he was besotted with her. Of course, she'd never tell him so, sure in her belief that the word *besotted* would offend him with its unmanliness.

"Ma's at the mansion making those last minute adjustments for your arrival. You sure you want to stay there? Francine did shoot you there."

"Just tonight. To prove once and for all the place is not haunted."

"Speaking of haunted, Hilary was responsible for those weird moans of *no rest* and *faithless* that you heard. Tape recording. Oh, did you see the nurse who looked like Adelie Rousseau?" He helped her climb into the convertible. Remy let the orderly take the wheelchair, now that Alisanne had been safely transported to his car.

Shocked, she stared at him as he got in on the driver's side. The Hilary-dun-it explanation didn't matter right now. Not when Remy all but confessed a belief in the *Misty Lady*. "You saw her too?"

"Only on the night of your surgery."

"I dreamt about them all— my parents. Adelie. Right after Francine shot me. I'm surprised you made the connection, Remy, being the disbeliever that you are."

"The *Misty Lady* is a treasured New Orleans ghost, love. Whether you actually believe in her or not, you must admit, there's something compelling about her story."

"After the shooting, I dreamed about Adelie and my parents."

"More unfinished business?"

"Nope. Not at all. Through all of this, I've finally learned that life's too short to waste it mooning over unfinished business."

"Hooray!"

Alisanne laughed as Remy pumped his arms into the air before he leaned over to give her a good long kiss on the lips.

"It's about time," he told her.

"Yes. It *is* about time."

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