

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Le Mystère
SAMANTHA
WINSTON

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Le Mystère

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LE MYSTÈRE

Samantha Winston

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Prologue

Bayou Lafourche, Atchafalaya Basin, 1977

In the black, velvet night someone hunted her.

He'd been following her since she left the *bastringue*. At first she hadn't been worried, lots of folk took the shortcut across the swamp after the dance. Simon had accompanied her as far as the fork and then had asked if she'd be all right. She'd just laughed. The bayou was her home and she knew it well. The path was wide and the pale sand glowed faintly in the moonlight.

The air stood still. The heat in Bayou Lafourche was oppressive, sending stinging, salty sweat into her eyes. Mosquitoes whined, some landing on her arms and legs. Their bites stung, but she didn't dare move. She didn't dare breathe.

Then the clouds had covered the moon. Quiet footsteps had come closer, but when she asked who was there, no one answered. Now she crouched in a small bush, painfully aware of how poorly it hid her.

A bullfrog croaked, making her jump.

Close by, there came the sound of a low laugh. Gooseflesh prickled on her neck. Her heart hammered madly. She couldn't see anything in the pitch darkness. But she sensed a presence. Someone came near, closing in on her...chuckling as he approached.

Her nerves stretched to the breaking point. A splash sounded on her left and she bolted, rocketing out of the thicket. Her feet hit the familiar path leading to her shanty, but the laughter came closer. A hand grabbed her and she lost her balance. She fell, grunting as she skinned her hands and knees. Before she could recover, hands were around her neck.

She wanted to scream, but she couldn't. The hands were tightening, and a harsh voice whispered in her ear.

“Sorry, *ma belle*, but I need you dead...and buried where no one will find you.”

She tried to breathe, tried to escape, but the hands were too strong. The last thing she knew a flash of light blinded her and then...nothing.

* * * * *

Twenty-five Years Later

The *mam’bo* stared at the man. He was evil, she sensed it. Badness surrounded him in an aura that pulsed with each breath he took. “What do you want?” she asked, her voice low.

Outside the crickets stilled. In the quiet, the man spoke. “I seen her.” The skin around his mouth and nose whitened.

The *mam’bo’s* eyes narrowed. “Seen who?”

“*Non, mam’bo*, I ain’t sayin’ her name. Be enough to say she’s dead, been dead twenty-five years, yet for two weeks now in my dreams I seen her standing in a patch of moonlight, lookin’ jes like she did twenty-five years ago. The same dream comes back every night, and in it she looks straight at me and says it’s my turn now.” The man shook his head. “She’s dead. *Defan* bitch!”

“Twenty-five years?” The *mam’bo’s* skin was prickling now. She looked out the window. “You said it is the same dream?” She shook her head. “Bad signs. Dreams about the dead are bad signs. Twenty-five years is a quarter century, with the moon—”

“I don’t care about that. Tell me what I got to do to make her go away and never come back.”

The *mam’bo’s* lips tightened, but she nodded to a bench and he sat down. She went to the corner where a black hen and a white rooster were penned. She reached into the cage and selected the hen.

She did her business in this room. Callers came at night usually. She ushered them into the peristyle where most rituals were performed. Partly enclosed, it was adjacent to

the holiest room in the *oum'phor*. Baskets, rattles and trays hung from the ceiling. A burning fire cast red light on the man's face.

On the hard, earthen floor, an intricate *vèvè* glimmered malevolently. She'd drawn it with chalk and in the dark it took on a greenish glow. The *mam'bo* took pungent, stinging leaves out and crumpled them, inhaling their bitter scent, then sprinkling them on the lines of the *vèvè*.

She grabbed the black hen and tore its head off. The bird's wings flapped, but she held it over a jar until no more blood trickled from the neck. She set the bird down and picked up the jar. Holding it toward the fire, she peered at the quantity and color. Too dark for her liking, too thick, clinging to the side of the glass. Not a good sign. She hesitated and then took a sip. The hot blood burned. She held the blood in her mouth then swallowed.

Her hands shook as she set the jar down. She walked in slow circles around the bloodied *vèvè*—seven times—praying to the *loa* she was summoning for help. Her eyes closed. Would Charlotte help her now? Where was that *loa*? Time passed. Sweat rolled in huge droplets down her face. A whiff of perfume tickled her nostrils, but it wasn't Charlotte's French scent. It was lighter...like lily of the valley and cool dew. And then images appeared.

Darkness, a white path. In the middle of the path a huge bullfrog crouched, it swelled and then vanished. People appeared, but they were transparent and dressed in outdated clothes from the seventies. A pair of scales. A clock. Dancing shoes. A woman, shadows and mist. The woman was blurred but something glittered on her hand. The *mam'bo* strained, but the image wouldn't come clear. The *loa* left her and the vision vanished. Time for something else.

"Give me the rooster."

He did.

She twisted the rooster's neck and threw the bird in the air. "*Dis moi tout!* Tell me all!" The dead bird hit the floor, nerves making its legs pedal. Wings flapping, it

skittered from one side of the *vèvè* to the other, coming to rest near the left-hand side. "In the bottom quarter," muttered the *mam'bo*. She had rarely seen such bad signs. This man was evil, but whatever he was up against was strong. The images were starting to make sense. He wasn't lying. Whoever this man had seen *was* dead and had come back for revenge.

"What do I have to do to protect myself?" the man asked, impatience clipping his words.

The *mam'bo* pursed her lips. "You must take this person's bones and burn them. When they are ashes, you'll be safe."

The man nodded thoughtfully. "Any particular day or night?"

"It has to be done before the moon wanes. Afterward she'll be here to stay, or you'll be gone with her."

The man nodded. "Last question. Do you know why she's back?"

Such evil intentions seeped from this one. For a second she considered not answering, but she had to. *Mam'bos* didn't question evil or good, fate would take care of him. "She's back to set something right. What it is, I don't know, but I see something glitter in her hand. Is it a wedding ring? A bracelet? I don't know. But she's looking. Yes, she's looking for something. There is a *lien*—a link between the *bijoux*, the woman and you. But what it is, I don't know."

"Forget you saw me, *mam'bo*." He took her hand and pressed a wad of bills into it. She winced as his fingers dug into her wrist. If she hadn't sensed the evil within him, she would have cursed him to his face. "Forget I ever came here. *Maintenant, adieu*."

"Yes, sir," she muttered, glaring at his back and rubbing her bruised arm as he walked away. "*Adieu*. You ain't ever coming back here again. I saw that too."

Chapter One

Luke kept his eyes on the old oak. He'd caught a glimpse of white as he'd rounded the bend. The oak was dead, the long strands of moss hanging from its branches made it look like a weeping willow. He'd cut the boat's motor, and now he glided silently downstream in the darkness. Was it a deer? He picked up his binoculars and peered through them, but even the night-enhancing lenses didn't show anything. Could have been a deer, maybe an albino, or a possum coming down one of the branches. It probably wasn't a poacher, but his job was watching for poachers, so he wasn't going to leave until he'd settled the question one way or another.

Making sure his rifle was in its rack, he dipped his paddles into the black water, moving the boat toward the low, sandy bank. It grated softly as he pushed it on shore then, moving lightly, he grabbed his gun and leapt out of the boat, crouching in its lee. Poachers often took offense at being caught. His last partner Dan had been shot a month ago, and so far no one had been sent to replace him. Dan was out of the hospital but still on sick leave. Well, the Louisiana Department of Fish and Wildlife probably had better things to do than find replacements for rangers in this neck of the swamp.

Luke stared at the sand. The moonlight showed nothing. Not a trace of hoof or foot. If anything had been here, it would have left tracks. He ran his hand thoughtfully over his jaw. He had seen something though. Maybe it hadn't been close to the water. He stood up and tilted his head, listening hard. After a moment he flicked his flashlight on and ducked under the curtain of Spanish moss. His beam of light fell on a white figure and he raised his gun automatically. At first his brain thought that his eyes were playing tricks on him. His feet stumbled to a halt. His whole body froze. He found himself staring down the sights of his gun at a young woman.

She knelt at the base of the oak. She'd been digging – he could see that. For what?

She stared at him gravely, no sign of fear in her eyes. He lowered the gun.

"What are you doing here?" His heart still pounded in his chest, the last time he'd come across someone hereabouts there'd been a shootout.

The woman frowned. "I'm not sure." Her voice was lilting and had an accent he couldn't quite place.

"*Patois, eh?*" She looked Cajun, with dark hair and eyes, and pale skin.

"*Mais, oui.* But I prefer English, if you don't mind." The young woman got to her feet and brushed her hands off on her white dress. Her dark hair floated about her shoulders in a soft cloud. She straightened, pushed her hair back and looked around. A puzzled frown twisted her face. "I'm not certain," she murmured.

As she stood, Luke's breath caught in his throat. His heart, instead of calming down, thudded painfully against his chest. There was something enthralling about the woman, something bewitching. He couldn't find his words, and he knew his cheeks must be burning under her level gaze. Finally he managed to blurt, "What do you mean, you're not certain?"

"I'm not sure what I'm looking for." Her grave voice echoed strangely in the night, and her eyes were bottomless wells of pure sorrow. The moon moved behind a cloud. In the darkness, a shiver of unease ran over his body.

"Can you help me?" she asked plaintively.

"Help you do what?" Luke kept his voice very gentle. He could not tear his eyes from the slender woman. She was so beautiful with her white, white skin, black hair and black eyes that seemed to hold the entire night within their depths.

"I don't know." She shook her head and her long, dark hair swirled around her shoulders. "I have to find something, but I don't know what. I just know that I must find it."

"Something buried around here?" Luke looked at her hands. They were covered with dirt and her nails were broken. Disquiet prickled his skin.

"I'm confused. Here or nearby. Or maybe on the other side of the river. It's all mixed up in my head." She put her hands on her temples and pushed. "I can't seem to remember anything. I don't even know my own name."

Luke was startled. "You don't?" That was odd. Perhaps she was injured. He shined his flashlight on her face. Bruises covered her neck and scratches marred the side of her face. Why hadn't he noticed that before? "I have to get you to a hospital, *mam'selle*." How had he missed that? She needed help and all he could do was stare at her! What was wrong with him?

"No!" She stepped toward him, her expression beseeching. "Please, you have to help me."

"I will. Don't worry, I will." Close up, she became even more ethereally beautiful. A pang stabbed at his heart. She was so lovely. She reached her hand out and he took it.

Ice stabbed at his arm. He cried out. At the same time a flash of greenish light so bright it hurt his eyes seemed to flare off her body. The icy pain in his arm swept over him like a jolt of electricity. Everything happened in a second—the cold, the light, the shock. And then he was holding a warm, very solid hand. The pain passed. *Mon Dieu!* Had he'd simply imagined it or did he just have a minor heart attack? He gasped and let go of her to press his hand to his chest. His heart beat, strong and steady, but sweat chilled his back and chest.

What the hell?

The woman looked at him and her face bloomed into the most beautiful smile he'd ever seen. "You agreed to help me." To his consternation, she burst into tears.

"Hey! Hey there, don't cry." Luke patted her shoulder awkwardly. His rifle was hooked over the same arm holding the flashlight, and he was still shaky after the chest pain. He couldn't quite gather his thoughts. One thing he knew, he couldn't leave her here alone. Luke put the gun and the flashlight down and pulled her into his arms. "It's all right. You've had a nasty shock. When I get you to the hospital, they'll take care of you, don't worry." He spoke into her hair. Tendrils tickled his nose and he caught a

whiff of a flowery scent—it reminded him of lily of the valley. His granny always picked huge bunches of the fragile white flowers in the spring.

In his arms, the woman stopped trembling. She snuggled close to him. Her body might be slender, but her breasts were well-rounded and pushed softly against his chest through the light cotton shirt he wore. As he tightened his arms around her body, he grew conscious of her curves, of the width of her shoulders and slope of her back. When her thighs pressed against his, his loins tightened. In a minute he was going to have a raging hard-on.

What would she think when his cock stiffened against her? Would she be upset? Frightened? Or would she respond to his sexual invitation? For a minute he wanted to lay his naked body onto hers, to let her know how she affected him. But then he remembered she was injured. What had he been thinking? Had he gotten moonstruck? His granny had warned him that might happen if he stayed out in the moonlight too long. He'd mocked her, but now he started to have doubts. How else could he explain his overwhelming response to this woman?

"Um, I'm going to take you to my place now, all right? Then I can get you to a doctor. You need some help." Luke stepped back, regretfully letting his hands slide from her body. Afterward, his hands itched to touch her again. Was she ever beautiful! But that didn't explain the urgent aching in his belly. He'd never been able to get aroused without the cold grip of reality grabbing him and waking him up. After what happened to him, he'd never approached a woman. He couldn't. That hadn't bothered him before. So why did he react so strongly to her? His whole body tingled at her touch and his cock swelled uncomfortably. *Merde*, his jeans had never been this tight.

The woman stood still, her eyes closed. Another tear wandered down her cheek.

"What is it?" Hot anger boiled in his chest. Just the sight of that lone tear and the bruises on her fragile neck made him crazy. Whoever the hell had done that to her, he wanted to bash his face in. How dare they hit a woman? He unclenched his fingers, trying to get a hold of his temper. What on Earth was going on here?

She looked up at him and his breath caught in his throat. He'd never seen such an intense gaze. "I'm starting to remember things," she said in a low whisper.

"Can you remember your name?" Luke took her hand again. The urge to touch her was too strong to resist.

"Jess...Jessica. No, Jesse." She spoke haltingly. "Jesse...that's my name. I can't recall anything else. Except music. There was music." She pressed a hand against her forehead and grimaced. "Everything is jumbled. I can't remember anything else. Just my name—Jesse. And music." Her hand fell to her side and she staggered. Luke caught her just before she fell.

She weighed no more than a bird. Her bones seemed fragile, like spun glass. *Spun glass?* The strangeness of the night had made him fanciful. He didn't usually think in such terms. This woman was a mystery he needed to solve. Plus he'd never met anyone like her, especially out here in the middle of nowhere. And that was another riddle to be solved—he knew all the locals, and he knew he'd never set eyes on her before. He'd have remembered her.

"How did you get here? Did you come in a boat or by foot? At least try to remember that." Luke carried her to his boat and set her down on the bank.

"I can only recall pitch darkness and some music." She shook her head and her face crumpled. "I'm sorry, maybe I fell and hit my head. It feels really strange."

"Here, let me help you get into my boat, Jesse." He settled her in, and then he put his gun away and pushed off. Once in deeper water, he pulled the engine cord and the motor started with a sputtering roar. Turning the boat back upstream, he took the left branch leading back to Bayou Lafourche. On the way, out of habit, he glanced up at the towering structure on the hill. Overlooking an unnamed corner of the Atchafalaya Basin in solitary splendor was an old mansion. Luke knew it well and with cause.

"What are you looking at?"

Luke blinked and pointed through the trees. "That old house."

"The Braquesmar mansion?"

“No one calls it that anymore.” He frowned. Braquesmar was his last name, but he didn’t want to say that. “How did you know its name?”

“I...I don’t know.” Jesse shook her head, an expression of frustration marring her smooth features. “I just know it, that’s all. Why isn’t it called Braquesmar anymore?”

Luke shrugged. “It’s now the Lesnoire estate. No one lives there. It’s been abandoned since it changed hands. The present owner bought it as a favor to my granny.” His voice took on a bitter tone.

“It used to be your granny’s?”

“My great-grandfather built it. My family lived there until the tragedy.” Luke tore his eyes from the mansion and looked at Jesse.

“Tragedy?”

That was an understatement. “Everyone knows about it. My father was accused of murder, and that lost him his reputation, his job, his home and ultimately his life.”

Jesse rubbed her forehead. “That sounds awful but familiar somehow. Tell me more. How did your father die?”

Luke didn’t particularly want to talk about it, but it had all happened so long ago he’d stopped feeling anything but frustration that the police had never managed to prove anything. “He hanged himself after protesting his innocence.”

“I’m so sorry. That must have been hard for your mother.”

More wounds to open. It must be the night for grief from the past. Maybe this woman was a spirit. In her white gown with her pale skin and dark eyes, she could pass for one of *Tata’s* invocations. A wry smile quirked his lips. He had definitely stayed too long in the moonlight. “My mother died giving birth to me, so my granny was left alone to raise me. Mr. Lesnoire made my granny an offer she couldn’t refuse. She sold our house.”

“Why is it abandoned now? It’s almost a ruin.” She turned her head to catch a last glimpse of it then looked at Luke expectantly.

Was she doing it on purpose, digging up his past like so many bleached bones? “Jacques Lesnoire tried to make the house into a luxury hotel, but it’s surrounded by National Park land—nothing around it can be developed. He tried everything, from bribing the governor to threatening to turn it into a casino. Then he tried to buy our land, adjacent to the house. But my granny won’t sell the land, and the only thing that he got was the house and a couple of acres leading to the river. Nothing he could exploit.” Luke gave a hollow laugh. “Out of spite, Jacques Lesnoire decided to close up the manor and leave it to ruin. In a few more years, it will be overgrown with weeds and look like a ghost mansion.” As he spoke, the hair on the back of his neck prickled.

“How sad,” Jesse whispered. “But at least you still have the land.”

“That’s nothing.” Luke shrugged again. “The land isn’t worth much, it’s all swamp and bayou.” For a minute he wondered how it would have been to grow up in the mansion, and then he sighed. No use fretting over things that couldn’t be changed. As his granny would say, *Ne te tracasse pas, fiston*. Don’t worry, son.

“It’s so pretty here. I think it’s worth something. It’s worth the peace and quiet, and the wildlife that lives here is priceless.” Jesse spoke in an impassioned voice, startling Luke into looking around him differently. The light of the full moon made everything appear as if cast in silver, and some of the peace Jesse spoke of crept into his soul.

The riverbanks were still as the boat glided by. Sometimes they caught sight of raccoons fishing in the shallows, and once they startled a deer as it lowered its head to drink. Fireflies floated through the dense underbrush and flickered in starry patterns above the marsh grasses. Luke found the silence restful. He was used to it—used to the bayou and the dry, whispery sound of the grass as the night breeze moved it, but he hadn’t appreciated it in a long while.

The woman sitting in the boat was wrapped in silence too. She sat, her knees raised, her arms curled around her legs. Her dress was light, but the night was hot. She shivered.

“Are you cold?”

She looked up at him, knocking the breath right out of his lungs. *Mon Dieu!* Such a beauty!

“No, I’m fine. Just a little tired, that’s all.” She went back to staring at the riverbank.

“Who hit you?” Luke asked after a while. He couldn’t believe someone had lifted a hand against her. Whoever had done it was a bastard. His blood boiled, and then he took a deep breath. *Calm yourself, Luke. Ne te tracasse pas.* He couldn’t help her remember anything if he frightened her.

She turned her face to him. In the moonlight, it was very pale and the bruises stood out like dark stains on her neck, stirring sharp pity in him. “I don’t know.” She put her hand to her neck and winced. “It’s as if I woke up under that tree, and everything before that moment is a blur. All I can recollect is the music.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry.”

Music? “What kind of music? Rock, classical, jazz?”

She gave a small laugh. “It’s an old folk song. *A la Claire Fontaine.*” She hummed a few bars. “Someone was playing this on an accordion and singing.”

That made no sense. “Were you at a party? A dance? You were definitely attacked. It looks as if someone tried to strangle you.” Whoever had attacked her might have killed her. She looked fragile still, not quite right. As soon as he got her home, he’d call a doctor. He’d feel better then.

She looked uneasy. “I know someone attacked me, but I can’t remember who or why. When I think about it, it’s all dark, and I’m afraid.”

“What are you afraid of? That he’ll come back and try again?” He was upsetting her, so he tried a different tack. “Where do you live?”

She hugged her knees tighter. “Around here, I think. I’m not certain, really. It’s so odd. I have no recollection at all of living anywhere. I know it sounds strange...” Her voice trailed off and she looked at him. “Something is wrong. I know that. It’s more than my bruises or being attacked. There’s something I have to find, and if I don’t find it, something terrible will happen to me.”

Another prickle of disquiet shivered Luke's skin. She spoke so strangely sometimes, he could hardly understand her. *Something terrible?* Worse than being attacked and nearly strangled? "You have amnesia. The doctors will be able to help you, Jesse. *Ne te tracasse pas*. Don't fret."

She nodded. "I'm not." But she didn't sound convinced. Her voice was faint and she looked tired all of a sudden. Luke wanted to hold her again, to press his body against hers and keep her safe in his arms.

His whole body yearned for this woman. This strange, beautiful woman. It excited him and frightened him at the same time. But for now she had to get well. When she recovered, he'd... What? In his mind he saw himself standing at her doorstep—wherever that was—holding a bouquet of yellow honeysuckle. She would smile at him, her face lighting up, and then she'd kiss him. Her mouth would taste sweet, like a honeysuckle flower, and her lips would be like satin. Their mouths and bodies would...

He shook his head sharply. He was mad. He'd gone mad. She'd cast a spell on him. But what a spell! His mouth twitched in a rueful smile. He wanted to see her again soon. Hopefully she lived nearby.

"Here we are." Luke cut the motor and the boat glided to the pier. He caught sight of her pale face. "Hey, are you all right? Stay there, I'll tie her up and help you out." She looked as if she were about to pass out. He'd never seen anyone turn so ashen.

He caught the post and swung out of the boat. The planks creaked under his weight. Working quickly, he tied the boat up and secured it to the dock. Out of habit, he glanced at his house. The screened in porch, which jutted out over the water was dark, and he couldn't see if his granny waited up for him or not. She sometimes sat there at night when the heat wouldn't let her sleep. Perhaps she was there, sitting, watching. What would she think of Jesse? He'd never brought a woman to his house.

Then he turned back to the boat. Jesse was gone. She'd vanished without a sound. Where was she? Had she fallen overboard? He rushed to the water and looked in, but nothing had fallen into the river. The water stayed smooth, only the faint current

rippled the dark surface. Besides, the water only reached his waist here. If she had fallen in, she could just stand up.

He scanned the dock. Beyond, tall trees shadowed the path leading to the house. Where had she gone? "Jesse?" There was no answer. Uneasy, he picked up his rifle and trotted down the wooden pier. He looked in the shade beneath the live oak, but there was nothing. No one was sitting on the old, wrought iron bench overlooking the landing. He bounded up the steps to the house three at a time and pushed in the screen door. His granny was on her rocking chair, looking at him with a worried expression. In the dark, the whites of her eyes glinted.

"What is it, Luke? Why are you back so early?"

"Where is she?" Luke set his rifle in its rack and turned to his granny. "The girl in the boat with me. Where did she go?" Foreboding prickled his skin.

His granny shook her head. "Luke, what are you talking about? You were alone in your boat. There was no one with you."

* * * * *

It seemed as if a cloud covered the moon. In an instant darkness enveloped her and she found herself alone on the dock. Dry leaves blew across her feet, skittering across the dock with loud rustles.

Where had Luke gone? Where was the boat? She stood, shivering, with only the wind rustling in the trees as company. Wait a minute. The wind blew through bare branches. Hadn't it been summer a minute ago? Where were the fireflies and the croaking frogs? What was happening?

A voice rose above the wind. "Jesse! Jesse?" It sounded like Luke!

"I'm here!" She shivered and walked to the end of the pier. "Where are you?"

"Laws chile, ain't you finished yellin'? You's gonna wake up the dead!"

Jesse whirled around and found an old man sitting at the end of the dock, fishing. Brown skinned and white of hair, the man wore patched and baggy trousers held up

with suspenders. His jacket lay on the dock next to him, along with an antique, wicker fishing basket. He hadn't been there a second before.

"Who are you? How did you get here?" Jesse's voice quavered.

"Oh honey, I been here for ages. Done fell off this here dock one day, had a heart attack I s'spect, an' now I come back here and fish whenever I long to. Ain't hard to explain." He patted the wood next to him. "Have a seat. I can tell you's confused. Ain't nothing wrong with that. You jes don't know you're dead yet. Happens sometimes."

Dead? Jesse started to argue, but instead she sat down heavily next to the old man. Her legs dangled into the water, but she didn't feel the current or the wet. She tried to dredge up some tears and couldn't. "Why can't I cry?" It was a silly question, but the words popped out of her mouth before she could think. *She was dead?*

"Just a minute, I think I caught something." The man reeled up his line, but the hook was empty. "What were you sayin', chile? Oh yes. Tears. Ain't no tear left in you, honey. No substance to you at all. What I'd like to know is, why you come back all a sudden like this. Normally we hang around where we died, sometimes we leave and sometimes we come back. Time don't mean much to us. But you don't belong here, and I ain't never seen you before."

"I don't understand what is happening to me." Jesse touched the wood. Her hand distinguished hard and soft but nothing else, as if she wore heavy mitts. Her feet, dangling in the water, might as well be dangling in thin air. Even her emotions seemed lacking. She could dredge up no fear or horror, only a dull sort of anger she couldn't comprehend. *Dead!*

"But shouldn't I remember how I died?" She realized that she'd accepted what he'd told her. Somehow she believed him. This was no dream, but she also knew, obscurely, that something was wrong.

"You know, I believe I have an answer to your dilemma." The man stood up, packed away his fishing gear, and then slung his coat over his arm. "Come with me, chile. We're going to see Charlotte."

“Charlotte?” Jesse followed the man to the end of the pier.

The man stepped off it and seemed to hover over the water. He turned and shot an amused look at Jesse. “Come on, you won’t sink. Hold my hand, I’ll take the shortcut.”

Confused, she stopped at the end of the dock. “But I don’t want to leave Luke!” Luke...she couldn’t leave him. She had to find him! An emotion stirred through her, bringing a sudden tingle of sensitivity to her hands.

“Who is Luke?”

“He’s the man who found me and brought me here. He lives in that house.” She looked up at the darkened building. A shutter flapped in the wind, and it seemed to her that the house looked suddenly derelict, as if no one lived there. However, a force held her pinned to the dock. Luke had something to do with it. Her bones, when she thought of him, ached. When she turned to the old man again, he smiled at her gently.

“Then he must still be alive. You won’t find him here, honey chile. You’re not in the same time frame now. Can’t rightly explain it, but if you want to see him again, you best hope Charlotte can help you.”

She wanted to see Luke again. With a sigh, she stepped out over the water and touched his hand. The air grew warmer and a bit lighter, and she found herself standing in front of a white door. She tried to dredge up some sort of emotion as she stood there. She’d just floated through space. Why wasn’t her heart pounding with amazement? But all her feelings seemed locked away inside her, beyond her reach.

“Knock,” said the old man. “I got my hands full holdin’ you an’ the basket.”

Jesse did as she was told. The door shivered and vanished. “Come in,” said a light, girlish voice. Jesse stepped into a vast room. She recognized the place as being a *mam’bo’s oum’phor*.

Now how had she known that? She must have come to a *mam’bo* once before. Before she had died. A shiver ran over her.

“Well, don’t just stand there. Come sit down!” The speaker turned out to be a haughty-looking young woman. She wore beautiful, old-fashioned clothes and her hair curled in a golden chignon. She smoothed her hand over the brocaded hoop skirt and gave a little tug to the lace sleeves of her opulent chemise. “I’m Charlotte,” she said. “Where is your other shoe?”

My shoe? Jesse looked down. Why hadn’t she noticed before? She only had one shoe. “I don’t know.” *How odd.*

“And your dress is all torn. *Mon Dieu*, you look a fright!”

The old man stepped forward and spoke a little impatiently. “Miss Charlotte, this here gal needs help. I done brung her here for *Tata Rubie*, so you be nice and go get her now.”

Charlotte tossed her head and sniffed. “I certainly don’t have to take orders from a slave, Pishou.”

“Why, Charlotte, I had hoped a few hundred years would teach you a little humility. I guess you’ll never learn, will you?” The new voice was cultivated and slightly mocking. As Jesse watched, a tall man in riding clothes materialized.

Charlotte smoothed her hands over her hair and tugged on her dress, descending her already low neckline. Her nipples almost peeked out from the froth of lace on her bodice. “Oh Sir Quentin,” she cooed. “How lovely it is to see you tonight. Will you be staying for a while?” Was it her imagination, or did Charlotte flush when Sir Quentin appeared? She seemed to grow more intense somehow. Jesse watched closely as Charlotte draped herself on the new ghost’s arm.

“Charlotte.” His voice held a stern note. “How many times must I tell you nice women don’t undress in front of men, nor do they press their charms too closely?” He patted her hand and stepped away from her, adroitly disentangling himself from her arms.

He brushed an imaginary speck of dust off his impeccable waistcoat and bowed over Jesse’s hand. “So pleased to meet you, my dear. I am Sir Quentin. May I have the

pleasure of knowing your name? Don't mind Charlotte, she never learned any manners in that cat house she grew up in."

Charlotte whirled around and glared. "I was just teasing Pishou. I'll go tell *Tata*." Then, gaze softening, she asked, "You're not mad at me, are you, Sir Quentin?"

"Why should I be mad at you, Charlotte? You didn't insult me. Pishou, on the other hand, deserves some respect. If you want me to pay my respects to you one day, you have to prove you are worthy of respect. Spreading your legs, showing your breasts and insulting your friends are the signs of a spoiled slut."

Charlotte paled and then whirled around, her face twisted in what looked like despair. "I am sorry, Pishou."

Jesse blinked. Emotion! Charlotte could feel things. Could it be linked to her passion for Sir Quentin? Perhaps love had something to do with her vibrant looks and nature.

Or perhaps there was something else special about her. She seemed very...powerful despite her capricious ways. Whatever the reason, next to Charlotte, Jesse had the impression of herself as a wisp of smoke.

"Luke," she whispered. A powerful vibration surged through her. A fragile pulse beat in her chest. What sort of chain bound her to Luke? She had to find out.

The old man scratched his head and spoke, interrupting her thoughts. "I don't much like being reminded I was a slave, just as you don't like it when we call you a whore."

"I said I was sorry." Charlotte gave a little huff and disappeared.

Pishou chuckled loudly. "My an' don't Miss Charlotte mind her manners when you's here, Sir Quentin. Sure is nice when you show up."

"Please excuse her, my dear," said Sir Quentin, appearing at Jesse's side. "We do tend to take advantage of her. You see, she is the strongest of us and can appear at will

to *Tata* Rubie, and we have to use up a lot of energy. So tell us your name and how you came to be here?"

"My name is Jesse, but I can't remember anything else."

"Ah. A murder victim," Quentin said airily.

"Or it could have been an accident." Pishou shrugged. "Sometimes it happens so quick a body don't know he's dead. Ain't that so, Quentin? Seems we had a time convincing you that *you* was dead."

"I just couldn't imagine ever falling off my horse." Quentin heaved a great sigh. "I'd agree with you, Pish old friend, but look at her neck. Not exactly accidental bruises, are they? Think, Jesse, can you recall being strangled?"

Jesse winced. Her emotions might be dulled, but the word strangled made her throat hurt. Why? Love and hate were two sides of the same coin. Could those passions have animated her? Was that why she'd come back? She put her hand to her neck. "I just don't recall."

Pish patted her shoulder, but she didn't really feel his hand, more like she felt the idea of his hand patting her shoulder. "Don't fret, Jesse. *Tata* Rubie will help you. If that flighty Charlotte tells her you're here she'll summon you soon. So why don't you sit over here and relax."

She did, settling near the fire. As with the river though, she didn't really sense the heat from the flames. She stretched her hand toward them, but the firelight seemed to flicker through her skin, as if it were transparent.

A small log rolled off the fire and began to smoke, so Jesse reached for the poker to prod it back into the fire. Her hand slid over it and she couldn't touch it. It was like trying to grab something in a mirror.

"Don't bother, *cherie*," Sir Quentin said, waving toward the fire. "*Tata* Rubie will do it later. You can't touch anything anyway."

She examined her hands. How odd. Luke had touched her though. How had he done that? There had been a flash of light and an electrical jolt when they'd touched.

She frowned. Something had happened when she'd met Luke – not only to her, but to him too. Something had flowed from her spirit into his, and now she knew that there existed an invisible but strong bond linking them. Luke. Even just saying his name seemed to pierce through her strange apathy. When would she see him again?

Please, let it be soon.

Chapter Two

The paper was yellowed with age and so brittle that Luke was afraid to touch it. Carefully, he smoothed it on the table. His granny poured tea into their mugs, and they sat, side by side, and studied the old document. It was a local newspaper clipping. The photo showed a young woman staring at the camera with a serious expression. It was a high school photo, but Luke recognized Jesse. How could it be possible? Dead! The woman of his dreams had been killed twenty-five years ago. His throat tightened as he read on.

The Mystery – Five Years Later

Jessica Dubois. Disappeared in nineteen seventy-seven, presumed dead. Last seen at the Saturday night dance with Simon Braquesmar, who was also spotted accompanying Jesse from the bastringue. Several witnesses saw them leave the dance together. Traces of a violent struggle were found on the path leading to her shanty. A shoe was discovered in the underbrush as well as her underwear, torn in two. There was some blood, but no body was ever found.

Although it is nearly impossible to prosecute without a body, Simon Braquesmar, a widower, and only son and heir of Léon Braquesmar, was accused of murdering her. The police arrested him on a count of manslaughter. In the weeks that followed, the police tried to put together a case while the Braquesmar fortune was spent on defense lawyers and private investigators, all of whom turned up nothing. Debts the Braquesmars owed were called in, and the bank declared Simon Braquesmar bankrupt. He hanged himself in his attic three months after Jesse disappeared. His son Luke and his mother Mrs. Léon Braquesmar survived him. The mystery of Jesse's murder was never cleared, but in Simon's last letter, written to his mother, he tells of his innocence.

If anyone has any information about Jesse, contact the editor at The Daily Gazette.

Luke's granny cleared her throat. "You sure that's the girl you saw?" Her hands trembled on her teacup, rattling it.

"*Oui, j'en suis sûr.*" Of course he was sure! How could he forget that beautiful face? Entirely sure, certain. "*Sûr et certain.*"

There was a deep silence between them. The night birds called to each other across the bayou. Finally his granny stirred. "You best go see *Tata.*"

"Now?" Luke glanced at the clock. It was three a.m.

"Best go now." His granny folded the paper and tucked it back in her photo album. "Tell *Tata* I say *bonjour*, and don't forget to flatter Charlotte."

Luke rubbed his chest. The pain had gone, but the anxiety remained. And now he was heading to another daunting place. *Tata* was his granny's friend, but he'd always been terrified of the tall black woman whose eyes seemed to look right through him.

When he was younger, he'd been sure she knew about every single time he jacked off or did something bad. And Luke had been bad.

When he was a kid, the worst trouble he'd even been into was at *Tata's* place when he set loose her snakes. She'd caught him, nearly flayed him alive. Then he'd spent seven days in the bayou at night catching each and every one of the poisonous copperheads he'd released into the wild. It was a wonder he was still alive. He'd been bitten twice. Each time *Tata* had fixed him up. The second time his arm had swelled up like a watermelon.

As a teenager, he'd been the worst of the bayou's hoodlums—stealing cars, breaking windows, selling dope or whatever he could get his hands on, and generally getting into trouble. He'd gotten caught, and the judge had sentenced him to social services. He'd somehow managed to keep out of prison because he was a minor. Except for once. Just once. That one time nearly killed him. Afterward, he'd spent three weeks lying in *Tata's* house between life and death while she nursed him and somehow convinced him to go on living.

His granny had just about despaired of him, and then, for some reason, he'd grown up. "Some reason? Hell," he muttered. "Got your ass raped in jail and decided that wasn't the life for you." His voice sounded loud in the dark and he clamped his lips shut, steering the pirogue up the narrow creek leading to *Tata's* house. He'd gotten a job with the Fish and Wildlife Department and since then had kept his nose clean. So why did he always feel as if he were seven years old when he went to see *Tata*?

Because she knew all his secrets, that's why.

* * * * *

He docked his boat on *Daemon Swath* and rubbed his face nervously. It was three thirty by his watch. There was a light in the *oum'phor* though. As Luke stepped onto the rickety dock, a cool breeze caressed the back of his neck, sending gooseflesh down his arms.

"*Merde,*" he said under his breath. He hefted the burlap bag in his hands and from it an angry hissing sound came. On the way he'd spotted a water moccasin and he'd caught it. *Tata* liked presents. "Don't worry, you're going to like it here." The snake just hissed.

"Hurry up, boy. You plannin' to stay there all night?" *Tata* called to him, her hands on her hips, her eyes flashing in the dark.

Luke winced. She sounded pissed, almost as if she'd been expecting him. How would she—no, best not wonder how she knew things. Well, he was here now. He held the bag out in front of him. "*Bonjour, Tata.* Here's a gift for you. I know how much you like snakes."

"If I didn't like snakes, I wouldn't like you." She snatched the bag from him. But her voice was teasing and she reached up to ruffle his dark hair. "Luke Braquesmar. My favorite hood. So what brings you out here tonight?"

"A ghost. Hey! Careful with that, you don't want to stick your hand in that bag."

She ignored him, reaching in and drawing out the snake. She held it just behind the head. It twisted its long body around her arm. "What kind of ghost?" she crooned to the snake.

Luke stepped back, his eyes on the serpent. "Jesse Dubois." He slapped at a mosquito sting on his forearm.

"Jesse Dubois? The woman your daddy was accused of murderin'?" *Tata's* eyes sharpened with interest. "So that's what Charlotte tried to tell me. She showed up all in a fuss complainin' that Pishou was givin' her orders again and that Sir Quentin had insulted her because of a woman with a missing shoe..."

"She didn't make any sense at all, and when I questioned her she looked strange all of a sudden. Almost like she wanted to cry. 'She'll come if you call,' she said, and then she vanished.

"Well, come inside, boy, the mosquitoes gonna eat you up alive." She led him into her house, not the *oum'phor*, and she put the snake in a wicker basket, verifying the lid was on tight. Then she put some water in a kettle and set it on the stove. "Sit down, Luke. I'm making some tea."

"Oh, granny says *bonjour*." Luke sat on a wooden chair at the kitchen table. His eyes picked out the nicks and scratches he'd made as a child. How many hours had he sat here while his granny talked with *Tata*? He used to feel as at home here as in his own house, as long as *Tata* wasn't looking at him. He sighed, fidgeting in his seat. If only he hadn't been such a crazy, stupid teenager.

"Luke, the past is the past," said *Tata*, as if reading his mind. She put some herbs in the hot water and then poured it into three mugs. "Here, this will help you relax. I swear, watchin' you is like watchin' a June bug in a henhouse." She sat down with her mug in front of her, and put the third mug between them in front of an empty chair.

"Which *loa* will come?" His skin was prickling again. "Is it Charlotte? Sir Quentin?" *Tata's* eyes were closing and she was breathing deeply. The light flickered and went out. "Wonderful," Luke muttered.

“Jesse Dubois, I summon you,” said *Tata*. “Come now or leave my *fiston* Luke alone.”

“*Tata*, I...” Luke’s heart was hammering in his chest. Oh great, he thought, *I’m going to die of a heart attack. Tata can cure snakebite, but I bet she’s never had to revive someone from a heart attack –*

A white figure appeared in the third chair. “What the fuck!” In his hurry to get up, he tipped his chair over. The figure shivered, wavered and then solidified into a person. Luke jumped backward, his feet caught in the chair and he hit the floor with a crash.

The lights went back on, but the white figure didn’t disappear. She leaned over and looked at Luke. “Hello again.”

Luke’s mouth was so dry he couldn’t speak. His legs were trembling so hard his heels drummed the floor. *Merde! Triple merde!*

“Luke’s a bit shy,” said *Tata*, patting the girl’s hand. “Here is some tea, *chère*. Drink up, it will give you strength. Luke, get up and sit down properly. You’d think you never saw a ghost before.”

“Charlotte never shows herself to me, and besides, I didn’t know *she* would show up.” He didn’t want to look at her, but at the same time he longed to grab her and hold her tightly. His heart pounded frantically and waves of heat washed over him. A ghost! Seeing her face in an old, faded newspaper hadn’t brought that fact home. Seeing her appear from thin air sure did.

It figured. He finally met a woman he wanted to get to know and she was dead. His whole life was a fuck-up, why not his love life too? Well, he wouldn’t have long to feel sorry for himself. His heart would give out any minute now.

“Luke, *fiston*, we have to talk now.” *Tata’s* voice was gentle and she took his hand in hers. She took Jesse’s hand too, and then Jesse took Luke’s hand, joining them in a triangle. A soft light flowed from Jesse and surrounded them. It didn’t feel like the same violent shock as when Luke had first touched her. This was a quiet, slow seepage of energy.

"That's right," *Tata's* voice was soothing. "Ghosts ain't nothin' but troubled energy. Too much disturbance and everything all knotted up. Got to sort all that out. Got to settle it down." She closed her eyes. "You're back for a reason, child. Got to find somethin', that right?"

"Yes." Jesse sighed deeply. "Something is lost and I must find it. But what?"

Tata nodded, her whole body moving like one of her snakes. "Bones. You have to find your bones."

"Why?" Luke couldn't help blurting out. Damn, *Tata* didn't like it when he interrupted.

Tata frowned but kept her eyes closed. She seemed to listen to a tiny voice in her head. She nodded slowly. "You have to find your body, Jesse child. When you find your bones, you'll have solved the mystery."

But, no one knew what happened to her body. Was that the mystery? Or would that solve the murder? "And then what?" Luke asked.

"That's not clear." *Tata* opened her eyes and peered at Jesse. "You have to hurry. Someone else be searchin' for your bones."

"Someone else? How do you know?"

Tata turned her gaze to Luke. "He came to see me an' asked about her, that's how I know."

"Who was it?" Luke's voice was hard.

"Jacques Lesnoire." *Tata* let go of their hands and leaned back in her chair.

"But..." Luke sputtered. "Jacques Lesnoire? What the hell he be wanting with Jesse's bones?" Lord, he must be tired. He was starting to sound Cajun.

Tata's eyes narrowed. "I be wondering the same thing, *fiston*. If you want to know, I think maybe he has somethin' to do with this whole story. Maybe this is the time to set things right."

Luke frowned. "If Jacques had something to do with this, can't we just call the cops?"

"And say what? You don't know where her body is, so the police can't do anything. You have to help Jesse, Luke. She came back for you."

He looked at the woman—no, ghost. His fists tightened as fear churned his stomach. "I have a job to do, I can't do this. I can't help a ghost. I'm..." His thoughts flew like leaves in the wind, fluttering madly.

"Your job takes you into the bayou, into the swamp. Chances are her body is nearby where you found her. You'll have to go back and seek out her bones." *Tata's* voice was stern. "You have to help her Luke. You were chosen. It's time you cleared your father's name."

"How?" Clear his father's name? Was it possible?

"First, you have to make Miss Jesse stay." *Tata* looked up at the clock ticking on the wall. "The sun will be up in an hour. You'll have to hurry, boy. In an hour, she'll fade and she won't be able to come back. It may be too late. She needs to be here in flesh and blood, and only you can do that. Give her your seed, she'll be fixed here. Your seed or your blood. It's up to you."

Luke stared at *Tata*. His body trembled. "You don't know what you're asking of me," he whispered. He would not panic, he would not. But did she mean what he thought?

"Please?" Jesse had been silent until then, but now her voice broke past his defenses. Her eyes were pleading. "I need you, Luke."

Images of another night flashed in his mind. He winced. Why did Jesse have to look at him so hopefully? How could he ever tell her?

"I'm going to the *oum'phor*. I won't be back before full daylight." *Tata* chortled then patted Jesse's shoulder. "My *fiston* will help you. I give my word."

"Tata!" A feverish heat coursed through his body and his cock stiffened almost painfully. A sweet yet spicy taste clung to his lips. "What was in that tea?"

"Somethin' to make your task easier for you, *fiston*." For once *Tata's* voice was soft when she spoke to him. "Don't think I don't remember what happened to you. I remember everything, boy. If I could have somehow stopped what happened to you that night, I would have. But the past is the past. It's time to put that behind you. I healed your body. She will heal your mind. Go with Jesse. She needs you."

"What if she doesn't want me?" hissed Luke. Lights were dancing in front of his eyes. He blinked, trying to clear his vision, but *Tata* was gone. The door swung closed and he was alone with Jesse. He tried to fight the waves of arousal washing over him but it was impossible. His cock, aching with need, strained against the fabric of his jeans. His heart pounded in his chest and his breath came in quick gasps.

No, it's all right. They won't get me. It's over, finished. But somehow, since that night in prison, his body equated arousal with rape. He'd never dated because of that. He had to tell Jesse. He'd tell her now. He gripped the table with his hands and looked up, expecting to meet her sad stare. Instead, her chair was empty.

He blinked and looked around. She'd vanished. "Jesse? Where are you?"

"Don't fight it," said a voice at his ear. Fight it? Of course he would. The last time someone touched him, he nearly died.

Calm down, Luke. This is not the same. But where had Jesse gone? Who had spoken? "Charlotte, is that you?" Damn, as if one ghost weren't enough.

Something touched him on the jaw. A hand. An invisible hand. He leapt out of his chair and spun around, but nobody was there. "Who are you?"

"It's me, Jesse. I'm right here. Can't you see me?" She sounded surprised.

Luke strained his eyes. Nothing. "No." His senses were heightened. Each touch, each sound seemed amplified a hundredfold. His shirt scratched roughly against his skin and sweat popped out on his forehead and upper lip when another wave of heat

submerged him. He groaned as invisible fingers undid the buttons on his pants, setting free his erection.

“Don’t—” he started to say, but an invisible hand covered his mouth.

“Do you choose to help me?” Her voice seemed to come from far away.

Did he? What would that mean? Giving up a part of him, but could he do it? Yes, he wanted to clear his father’s name. He’d been living with the shadow of a murderer hanging over his head for too long.

No, he didn’t want to get involved with a ghost. Just the thought made him shiver with fear.

Or was it something else? His cock swelled, grew heavy, and suddenly he longed for release. Release from his memories and release from fear. The fear he could control, but the memories...they hurt him. So far, he’d been good about suppressing them. But Jesse needed him. He pictured her standing before him, her dark, soulful eyes full of hope.

“Yes,” he breathed. “I will help you.” There, he’d said it. A quiver ran over him, and another wave of desire, brought on by *Tata’s* damn potion no doubt, made his buttocks clench. He gritted his teeth. “I have to tell you something though.”

“Hush. Whatever it is, it will keep.”

“But I want to—”

“Later.”

Maybe she was right. Later he would think. Right now, he had the impression he stood alone in the kitchen and talked to a wall. He reached over and turned off the light. A candle still glowed from the counter, casting a flickering, orange light over the sturdy wooden table and chairs.

“That’s better,” Jesse said. She ran her finger over his cock, and he could hear her practically purring.

Trembling, he stood still while sensations assailed him. Lips as light as a butterfly's wings touched his mouth and a slender body pressed close to him. No warmth emanated from her, but he touched cool, smooth skin and his hands brushed against soft, full breasts. His hips thrust of their own accord, and he uttered a strangled moan of frustration. In a second he was going to come. It was building just behind his balls, a tidal wave of passion waiting to unfurl.

Damn potion. Damn *Tata! Merde!* He tried to hold on, and slowly gained control of his body.

Curiosity warred with his fear, and the curiosity won. He ran his hands over the invisible body. His palms slid up her slim waist, over her delicate shoulders, touched soft hair he could not see. He tangled his hands in it and leaned into her embrace, eyes closed, seeing her with his body. Jesse. Her name stirred his heart, or was it her touch? His own heartbeats nearly deafened him. His erection pressed into her belly, and she shifted, catching it between her thighs.

No. He stepped back, his heart pounding. Other memories kept intruding, violent, hurtful memories.

Let me. Please? Jesse's words were like a light touch on his mind.

Eyes still shut against the terrors of his recollections, he reached up. Blindly he traced the delicate contours of her face. Her sweeping eyebrows, narrow nose, full lips. She caught his fingertip in her teeth and bit gently. There came the sound of the chair moving and he sensed her rise and sit on the table. Claspings his hips, she pulled him to her. He slid between her open thighs then slick heat covered his cock. Tight, slick and faintly pulsing, it clasped him closely. Panic welled then subsided just as quickly. Her mouth was on his now, lips open, tongue seeking his. Hands guided his hard cock into her close-fitting, slippery cunt that grew warmer as he thrust.

"It's all right. Doesn't that feel good?" Her soft voice tickled in his ear, no more than a whisper.

The hurt and the panic that had seized him before faded. In its place grew a throbbing urgency. His cock had no problem forgetting what had happened to him. Instead, blinding waves of passion washed over him, leaving his body quivering with lust.

“Wait!” he cried, shuddering with the need to explode. He didn’t want it to end. He wanted to—

The body he couldn’t see bucked against him. Breasts rubbed his chest; a leg wrapped around his waist. The table moved as he thrust forward. Now he opened his eyes and looked down. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected to see.

His cock stuck straight out in front of him. Even though he felt it surrounded by throbbing, hot flesh he saw his cock as he sheathed himself in her, saw the way it twitched in her invisible body. She moved her hips back and forth, and his cock bent to follow her movements. Hard yet supple, it slid into her flesh and bobbed up and down as she rose and fell. Her leg hooked around him to give her leverage, her slim calf pressing against his. She slid deeper.

He grabbed her by her invisible hips, pushing his body into hers. There came the sensation of heat as he entered her flesh, and cool as he pulled out. Slowly— now what would it feel like really slow? He felt little spasms shaking his balls, like he was just about to come, but he gritted his teeth and struggled to hang on. Slow and easy now.

“Harder,” she cried. She mewed and writhed against him, her fingers digging into his shoulders. Faster now. He dragged the air into his lungs and plunged into her body, as hard and fast as he could. Friction heated his cock like a blow torch. He thrust harder, his cockhead hitting her womb at every long, hard stroke.

Good, no, good didn’t describe it. Heaven, he’d died and gone to heaven. A laugh escaped him. Who had died? Not him. His blood sang in his ears, his cock twitched and throbbed. The need to fill Jesse with his cock, with his seed, grew stronger with each passing second.

Little moans and kitten cries sounded in his ears. Her lips brushed against his mouth, and then he shattered.

He reached down and grabbed her ass, holding her close, a harsh cry torn out of his throat as he emptied himself into her. His milky seed left his cock and it grew into a cloud, spreading through her body and giving it form. It swelled up and down like a mist, until her body once more became visible.

Luke shook uncontrollably. He still held Jesse in his arms—he couldn't let go if his life depended on it. He'd brought her back; he'd done it. His whole body wrapped around her and held on.

Jesse uttered a muffled sob and buried her face in the crook of his neck. His scent, musky and male, soothed and excited her at the same time. Hot tears ran down her cheeks and this time she could feel them. She could cry. Emotions battered her, but she welcomed them. She felt so alive. She was alive! And Luke had made this happen.

“Why are you crying?”

“I'm finally here.” Her lips brushed against his ear as she spoke and she stopped to run her mouth over his ear, reveling in the shell-like curves.

He stroked her back, quieting her. His warm hands rubbed the tension out of her back and neck, but at the same time, made prickles of delight run down her spine. Then, to her regret, he stepped away, holding her at arm's length. “What is happening?”

She wished she knew. For a minute, she tried to sort out her thoughts. Questions jumbled in her head. Had that been the first time she'd made love? Did it always feel so good, and leave her so sticky, satisfied afterwards? Did he feel the same? “I'm not a ghost anymore,” she finally managed to say. It sounded so silly.

He didn't seem to think so. His eyes softened and he smiled at her. Relief flooded her as she saw that all traces of fear had left his gaze. “Can you recall what happened now?”

She tried, but she had no memories of before, just a frightening blankness that her mind shied away from. “I think *Tata Rubie* is right. I came back to set things right and

you are supposed to help me. From what I understand, your father was accused of murdering me." She paused. That sounded so odd. She was dead, or was she alive? She poked herself in the arm. The strange cold numbness that surrounded her as a ghost had disappeared.

"That's right, my father supposedly murdered you." Luke's voice sounded cool and she shivered.

Please, don't let him hate me, I can't survive without him. I need him in order to stay alive. No, that's not the only reason. Tata said I would need him and I do, but not how she meant, at least, I don't think so. It has to do with him and me, not just me. Luke is the one I need, it couldn't have been just any man.

He stopped to help me, and he grew upset when he saw my wounds. He cares. I can sense the good in him. Is that why I need him?

"What are you thinking about?" He put his finger under her chin and turned her face to his. His eyes were questioning. "Why do you look so sad?"

"I...I don't know. Perhaps it's the shock of knowing I caused your family so much pain."

"No, not you." His eyes were cold splinters of ice now. "Jacques Lesnoire is responsible, not you. Never say that again." He pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

Her heart raced. Could he tell how much she needed him?

Warmth enveloped her now. A knife of sheer passion stabbed her in the belly. More, her body ordered.

I obey, she told it, as her blood seemed to reach the boiling point and her nipples stiffened into painful peaks.

She ran her lips down the side of his jaw, her mouth coming to rest on his. Her lips were soft, sensual and warm. As her kiss deepened, she used her tongue to tickle his upper lip, begging him silently to open his mouth.

A groan left his throat as he met her tongue with his, teeth clicking together. He tightened his arms around her, grinding his hips to hers. Her leg, still wrapped firmly around his waist, flexed and drew him even closer. His cock hardened so fast his head spun. He staggered and would have fallen, but Jesse held him upright. Her arms were strong now. Her face, turned up to his, was glowing.

A vibrant, living woman stood before him. Now warmth emanated from her smooth skin. Warmth...and the scent of aroused pussy. His head spun as he caught a whiff of her. Desire surged into his groin, and his balls pulled tight.

Exhaustion made rational thought impossible. He wanted to stop, to analyze his feelings. But Jesse's face shone like a new penny. With his heightened senses he could almost hear her heart beating and feel the new blood rush through her veins. Her hands massaged his shoulders, sending waves of pleasure right to his toes. His cock grew even harder, if possible. Could it explode?

Okay, so we think about this later. He grabbed hold of her hips and nudged his cockhead against her inner thighs. She opened them wide, and he groaned again, louder, as she speared herself slowly onto his cock. The angle didn't allow for much penetration. Luke bent his knees a bit, trying for some thrust.

His head swam and he had to stop for a minute.

"Let's go into the bedroom." Her voice sounded loud in the quiet kitchen. She pulled away from him, his cock slipping from her wet cunt with a sucking sound. The cool, night air struck him as she left him.

She slid off the table and strode to the doorway. He stepped after Jesse, nearly falling because of his pants wrapped around his ankles. Cursing in impatience, he kicked his pants off. His body still burned with unspent desire, so he hastened to follow the sexy spirit into the bedroom.

How had Jesse slipped past his defenses so easily? Could it be because she was dead and he pitied her? No, don't think that. She wasn't dead, not now. His steps

faltered. How long would she be able to stay with him? Would she have to go back? God, no! Pain tightened his throat into a knot. *Jesse! What have you done to me?*

He shook his head to clear it. He would think of that later. *Or not at all*, said a tiny whisper in his mind.

Candles flickered in the darkened room, casting mysterious shadows on the wall. Jesse lay on the white sheets, her raven-colored hair spread on the pillow, a smile playing about her full lips. As Luke watched, mesmerized, she stroked her breasts, pinching her taut nipples. Electric shocks burst in his nipples as he saw this, and his hands fumbled at his buttons. He tore his shirt off and threw it across the room. The air seemed too thick to breathe. Panting, he threw himself on the bed and rolled onto Jesse's willowy body. Holding her in his arms would chase away the last demons hiding in the corners of his mind. Fucking her made him whole, made her whole, and somehow made them one. A shiver of excitement made his cock stiffen and twitch. The passion that grabbed him was nearly supernatural.

Her legs parted and she lifted her hips higher, her hand coming down to seek his cock and guide it into her wet cunt. Without faltering, he plunged into her, gasping as his cock slid its whole length into her snug sheath.

"Mon Dieu!" Luke cried raggedly, trying desperately to regain control of his body. But his body wasn't his to control. Fire coursed through his veins instead of blood, and it pooled and concentrated in his loins. His cock throbbed with each rapid heartbeat and he thrust his hips faster, trying to outpace the pressure building in his groin.

She twisted beneath him and the sting of her nails as she raked her fingers across his back urged him on. Her stiff nipples pressed into his chest like pebbles, and her strong legs wrapped around his waist, her heels drumming against his ass. He imagined himself a wild colt, being driven by its rider. Her heels spurred him on. His balls slapped against her wet flesh in time to the beat of her heels on his ass.

Black spots danced before his eyes as another orgasm grabbed him by the belly and shook him from head to toe. He cried out, his body convulsing as he shot his seed deep

within Jesse's tight cunt. His body drained itself into hers. Gasping, he poured everything he had into her throbbing flesh. *Oh Lord, there's no more of me, I've given her everything.* He collapsed onto her stomach. A deep satisfaction stole over him.

"More!" she begged, rubbing her naked body against his.

"I can't," he gasped. Part of him wanted to laugh, but he could hardly open his eyes. "You're insatiable." He grinned down at her.

She pushed him off her and he rolled onto his back. "Is that bad?" she asked, straddling him. Legs wide, she leaned backwards, offering herself to his view. Luke swallowed hard and his cock stirred, even though his eyelids seemed to weigh three tons. Her cunt was inflamed, swollen with desire, and as he watched, she reached down and touched her clit. Her finger rubbed it, circled it, and teased it.

"I don't know." Could he get drunk on sex? In another minute, his head would fly right off his shoulders.

"Give me your hand."

Luke did, and she rubbed her glistening cunt against it. She gave a harsh groan and pushed hard against his hand. Hot liquid gushed onto his palm, and his fingers slid right through her labia, past her outer lips, and into her tight vagina. His cock, hard again, pressed against her soft thigh. With a ragged moan, he thrust his fingers deep into her cunt, loving the slippery, tight wetness. He could get used to doing this three or four times a night. His stomach contracted as a stab of pure lust hit him. "Jesse," he moaned.

"You like it?"

You're incredible. He wanted to say it. He wanted to say more, but she bent her head down and kissed him, her mouth covering his. He kissed her back, tasting her lips, her tongue, the sweetness of her mouth awaking a fierce hunger. More, he wanted more. More of her slow, sweet kisses, her slick pussy. More of Jesse. His mind shied away from the eventuality of losing her. Instead, he would lose himself in her body.

She seemed to read his thoughts. Her kiss became soft, tender, her lips barely brushing his. "I don't want to leave you. I don't want this night to end." She spoke softly, her mouth still touching his.

"Me neither." There, he'd admitted it. He needed her. A knot pulled tight in his throat and he pressed his hand harder against her cunt, his fingers reaching deeper into her tight passage, trying to chase away the thought that she could not stay.

"Then let's make it last forever." A tear slid down her cheek. He kissed it away, licking the salty tear from her lips.

Now his cock was so stiff it hurt. Little spurts of liquid shot from its head. Luke withdrew his hand and grabbed Jesse's hips. Roughly, he pulled her onto his cock and thrust.

Knees spread wide, Jesse impaled herself on his cock. Luke watched as it disappeared into her cunt. Fully sheathed now, her black, curly pubic hair hid his shaft from view. He could just make out his thick root as she slid back and forth. The silky friction drove him crazy, so he grabbed the bedcovers with both hands, holding tight while she rode him. Her hips slammed back and forth, and her fingers dug into his shoulders as she held on to his body, urging him on, calling his name with a voice that made his hair stand on end.

Then Jesse threw her head back and uttered a raucous cry. Her cunt gripped Luke's cock, massaging it with pulsing contractions. All at once, something deep inside his body unraveled; his whole being shuddered and emptied his seed into Jesse's body. Long, hard spurts shot out of his cock, and he dug his heels into the bed and drove his hips upwards.

His body jackknifed, and he rolled over Jesse, pouring the last of his sperm, the last of his soul, it felt like, into her. Over and over his body convulsed, the hot spurts finally dying away, the flood becoming a trickle. His hoarse panting quieted, breathing evened out, and his eyes closed.

Make the night last forever, he thought, desperately trying to stay awake. But blackness swirled around him. As sleep claimed him, he lay splayed on the bed like the victim of a shipwreck.

Chapter Three

Jesse propped her elbows on the window and watched as the sun rose. Behind her, sleeping deeply, was the man who'd saved her. She held her hand up to the pale pink light and marvelled as her skin glowed. She didn't become transparent and vanish; instead she seemed to become more solid as each minute passed.

Turning, she gazed at the man on the bed. "Luke," she murmured. Just the sight of him made her whole body burn with a fierce heat. She wanted to wake him up and stroke his cock hard again. She needed it buried deep inside her. A stab of desire made her pussy clench and she slid her hand between her legs. Her fingers found her clit and she rubbed it, trying to still the twinges inside her cunt. But the ache was too deep; she needed a cock, a long, thick cock to stretch her out and pump her full of life. And yet, she didn't just want any cock. She only wanted Luke. Nobody else, just Luke.

Was it just the effects of *Tata Rubie's* potion making her so desperate? Whatever it was, it made her like a cat in heat. She needed cock and she needed it bad. Had it been the same when she was alive? She didn't know; she didn't remember anything but vague shadows, hushed whispers and Zydeco music. Her memories started with Luke. The first time she'd looked up into his angular face with its blade-like nose, sensual mouth and black, burning eyes she'd been lost. He'd stepped out of his boat, his expression wary, suspicious, yet ready to be of assistance if he could. When he'd set eyes on her all his reticence had vanished and he'd focused on helping her.

The good within him seemed to shine out of him like a beacon. She couldn't believe others didn't see it as well. A man lay asleep behind her, someone she could depend on, someone who would protect her with his life, if need be. It was the sexiest feeling in the world to know that. And speaking of sexy...his body was long and muscular. His cock matched the rest of him—bowed slightly towards his flat stomach and made to fit her

body perfectly. Just thinking about it made her achy; slick moisture spilled over her fingers.

She thrummed her fingers against her clit, pressing hard to bring herself to climax, but it didn't help. She couldn't reach orgasm. Only frustration grew as her fingers slid into her slippery flesh. Her cunt swelled as desire grabbed her by the throat. Prickles of electricity tingled in her belly. With a muffled groan she crawled onto the bed next to Luke. He stirred, but didn't waken. Under the light covers, he was naked. She reached down, her hand sliding over his smooth skin, until she reached his cock.

"Wake up." She prayed he'd forgive her for waking him from his sound sleep.

He groaned, throwing his arm over his eyes. "What time is it?"

"Time to make love to me." She pumped his cock with her hand. It hardened, sending another thrill of desire streaking through her. She lay on top of him, and his cock, fully-erect now, was like an iron brand on her thighs. She opened her legs and pressed her cunt to him. When the tip of his cock parted her sensitive flesh, she groaned in satisfaction.

Taking a deep breath, she sat up, balancing on her knees. Now his cock was upright, the tip nestled in the folds of her labia, poised at the entrance of her cunt. She sat down fast, a guttural cry welling up from what seemed like the depths of her soul as his hard shaft penetrated her, stretched and rubbed against textured flesh. Sharp tingles of delight filled her belly, and she rocked her hips forward, glorying in the pleasurable sensations.

She threw her head back and thrust down harder. His hands came up and grabbed her hips, holding her even closer to him. Eyes still closed, she reached for his hands, clasping them to her waist. Without sight, her sense of touch was heightened. She felt the whole length of his cock as it slid into her body. Tensing her thighs, she rose above him. The glorious fullness lessened, withdrew, and there was just the slippery, hard tip to tease her with the promise of satisfaction and bliss. The flared head paused as it caught in her tight entrance. She lowered herself again, this time slowly, eyes squeezed

shut. Inch by incredible inch, his cock filled her, searing her cunt with its throbbing heat.

“Look at me,” ordered Luke. His voice came out harsher than she’d ever heard it. “I want to see your eyes when you come, look at your beautiful face. I want you to see me, and know that it’s me, my cock, giving you this pleasure.”

Jesse’s eyes fluttered open.

Her cunt was throbbing and burning. It was like being on the top of a volcano about to erupt. In a minute, she would be swept over the edge. Desire was the current pulling her along. Luke’s coal-black eyes were fixed on her face. He pumped his hips faster, and then froze. His body shook, and Jesse felt his cock spasm inside her. spurts hit the back of her womb, exploding from his body in a burning stream. He uttered a harsh cry, his fingers digging into her flesh.

She gasped as she was swept over the edge, falling into the molten lava. Her body seemed consumed by searing rushes of heat, carrying her in a mad, headlong rush into blinding ecstasy.

* * * * *

“We have to find your bones.” Luke gently touched her face. He sat on the side of the bed, fully-dressed.

Jesse blinked. “Was I sleeping?”

“You looked so peaceful, I didn’t want to wake you. But we have to go now. *Tata’s* day-time clients will start coming, and I don’t want them to see us.”

Jesse sat up, groggy. For a minute, she didn’t remember where she was, or what had happened. Then memories of the night rushed in. Heat rose into her cheeks and she ducked her head. What must Luke think of her? A bitch in heat couldn’t have been worse! Then another thought struck her. Was she still solid, flesh and blood? Hesitantly, she touched her face, running her hands over her cheeks and hair.

“Yes, you’re still here.” Luke’s voice held a note of tenderness in it. “Hey, I really enjoyed last night.” He tipped her chin back with his hand, forcing her to meet his eyes. “Don’t hide from me. We know each other too well now.”

“Are you glad I...I stayed?” She had to know.

His eyebrows rose. “Of course I am.” He hesitated. “We have to go soon. Are you still tired?”

“No, I’m fine. Just let me get washed up. Where’s the bathroom?”

Luke pointed. “Over there.”

Everything seemed strange and new; the sting of the water in the shower, the towel against her skin, slipping the cotton dress over her head. She moved clumsily and it was as if she were doing everything for the first time again. In a way, it was true. Her hands were hypersensitive and she smelled and tasted everything as if experiencing it for the first time.

However, her memories remained stubbornly hidden. Even her face in the mirror didn’t stir anything but a whisper of disquiet. Who was she? *What* was she? Was she really alive? Fear crouched stubbornly in the back of her mind. What if she turned back into a ghost?

No, don’t even think about that!

Her stomach growled loudly. She jumped at the unexpected sound. At least her appetite had returned.

When she stepped out of the bedroom, dressed and ready, Luke had stripped the bed and piled the sheets and towels in the hamper.

“Are we just going to leave?”

“Don’t worry, *Tata* won’t mind if we leave without saying good-bye.” He took her hand and pulled her out the bedroom door, through the dark, silent kitchen and outside. A rooster crowed not far away. The sun shone over the treetops, but there was

still dew on the ground, and gray mist rose off the river. Their footsteps sounded loud on the wooden dock.

Luke helped Jesse into the boat and cast off. Silently, he poled into the middle of the river, and then he let the current pull them along.

The sun had fully risen now, and it soon burned away the mist. Jesse sat in the boat and looked at the quiet beauty of the scene.

“Do you recognize anything?”

She shook her head, frustration bubbling in her chest. “Nothing. I can’t remember anything.”

“Let’s have breakfast, and we’ll look at a map. Might as well do this the right way.” Luke gave another push to the pole, then set it inside the boat and started the motor. Water curled in froth at the bow as he steered the boat up the river branch leading to his house. As before, the mansion on the hill caught his eyes and he looked upwards.

Jesse followed his gaze and her skin prickled. She shook her head. Jacques Lesnoire? The name meant nothing to her, but somehow he was mixed up in her story and Luke’s past. But she didn’t know how. Only shadows were in her mind, only shadows. A sigh left her and she rubbed her forehead tiredly. All her hopes were pinned on Luke. She looked at him again. Strong, yet somehow fragile. He looked able to wrestle an alligator, but when she touched him, he trembled.

Something had happened, something bad. She was positive. “What happened to you? What was *Tata* talking about when she said she wanted to stop what had happened that night?”

A muscle jumped in his jaw. “I got into some trouble a few years ago. Hung out with the wrong crowd, listened to the wrong people, and did stupid things. I got caught.” He stopped speaking. The outboard engine purred, then he cut it, drifting to a stop at the dock.

“Go on.” Jesse took his hand before he could get out of the boat and held it tightly.

"You don't want to hear it."

"I do."

His face was bleak. "They threw me in jail. There were a few guys in there who thought I needed a lesson."

Jesse nodded. "Did they hurt you?"

He wouldn't meet her eyes. He looked away, across the river, and his mouth twisted. "You could say that. Yeah, they hurt me bad."

"What happened?"

"Three held me down while the others took their pleasure with me. Then they beat me senseless. *Tata* bailed me out. She and my granny came to get me. *Tata* took care of me afterwards. I don't remember too much. It's probably better this way."

"I'm sorry." Jesse's heart contracted with a sharp pain. He wouldn't accept her pity, she knew this. But what about her love? Could he tell she was falling in love with him? She shivered as the futility of her situation struck her. In a day, a week maybe, she would be gone.

He looked so angry. How could she wipe those bitter lines from his face? A thought struck her. She would help him, as he helped her. Together they could do anything.

He shrugged and pulled his hand away. "No big deal. I was just another statistic, that's all."

"Like me. We're both statistics."

He looked at her then, and his dark eyes filled with a strange sorrow. "I'm still alive, and I'm fine now. You were killed. It's not the same thing at all."

Jesse's mouth trembled. His words hurt. She knew she was dead, damn it, but she loved him anyway and had since the first second she'd seen him!

Well, her torture wouldn't last much longer. "I'm sorry anyway."

"Don't be. It's over now. *Tata* nursed me back to health." He got out of the boat and held it steady while she stepped onto the dock.

“So I was your first woman.” She stepped closer to him.

He looked away, a flush staining his cheeks. “Yes.”

She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Were all men so proud? Her memories stayed securely locked away, so she had no idea if she’d ever made love before. “Well, if it makes you feel better, you’re the first lover I’ve been able to remember.” Her own flippancy surprised her, and she was glad when he turned to her, a grin on his face.

“You can stop feeling sorry for me,” he said, tying the boat to the pier. “I got over it last night, thanks to you. Now it’s my turn to help you, and I hope I can do more than just make you scream with pleasure.” He looked at her with a hooded gaze, giving her goose-bumps. “For whatever time you’re here, you’re my woman, Jesse.”

He’d said she was his woman! Joy swelled her heart. When she passed near him the heat of his body touched her, she caught a whiff of his spicy scent. She swayed towards him. He took her in his arms, and she marvelled again at how strong they were. He grabbed her and gave her a hard kiss on the mouth.

She kissed him back, hungrily, their bodies pressed together. Through the light cotton of her dress, she felt his cock stiffen against her thigh. A stab of pure desire rushed through her. She imagined him pushing her against the oak tree, lifting her dress, and taking her right there by the river. She could almost feel the rough bark pressing into her skin and his cock driving into her hot cunt.

Instead, he drew back, a clouded look in his eyes.

“What’s the matter?”

He shook his head. “Let’s go have some breakfast. My granny must be waiting for me.”

His Granny lived here—so that’s why he pulled away. He must be worried about shocking her, and he must think she might terrify the old woman. She darted a glance up at the porch, jutting out over the river. “Is she up there?”

“Of course.”

Jesse held back. "I don't think I should go up there. What if she sees me? Won't I scare her?"

"Frighten my granny? I don't think so. You don't look anything like a ghost." He gave her a reassuring smile, and her heart grew lighter.

He led her across the dock and past the old oak tree leaning over the dock as if it were sheltering it. Jesse walked up the old stone stairs after him, her body curiously tense. Just the sight of him made her blood boil. It was hard not to touch him when she was near. Was it because he was part of her? His seed had gone into her making. A shiver ran down her spine. All she wanted was to run her hands over his flat chest, down his taut belly, and over his –

"Careful, this step is loose." Luke held the screen door open for her and pointed downwards at the same time. "I haven't got around to fixing it," he added apologetically.

Jesse stepped inside the house and looked around. It was a comfortable house, with crocheted rag rugs and wooden furniture that gleamed from years of use and polish. The porch had a daybed and two rocking chairs. A bookcase stood in the far corner of the porch, next to a bench covered with plants. In the living room, a cast-iron pot-bellied stove faced the threadbare sofa and two armchairs. The kitchen was large and surprisingly modern. Jesse blinked as she

stepped into it.

"My granny likes to cook." Luke turned on the coffee machine.

Jesse looked at the black and white tiled floor, the glass fronted cabinets and the state of the art oven and fridge. "It's very nice." She ran her hands over the smooth granite-topped counters. The chrome sink caught her eye, and she tilted her head. "Where are the hot and cold faucets?"

"You lift this lever and push it right or left." Luke grinned. "In twenty-five years, some things have changed. I bet you didn't have a computer."

“A computer? Why would I need one of those?” Jesse lifted the sink lever and washed her hands. She had to think of something besides fucking Luke. Even though that’s all she wanted. Had she been wanton when she was alive? No. She knew, somehow, that wasn’t right. She shook her head, trying to clear it. *Think of other things.* “Can I set the table?” She wondered what else had changed in a quarter of a century. The appliances didn’t look that different, except for the sink.

“Of course, dishes are in that cupboard, silverware in this drawer. Granny will be in soon.”

Jesse laid the table then sat down, her hands in her lap. Luke fried eggs, put bread in the toaster, and made fresh orange juice. His movements were spare and precise. She loved the way he frowned as he concentrated on a task. She tried to tear her eyes from his face but couldn’t. His tousled black hair framed his angular face, accentuating his eyes which never lost their eagle-fierce intensity. What had he looked like as a child? Thin, with scraped knees and eyes too big for his face, she bet.

A woman’s voice startled her out of her reverie. “Hello Luke, I didn’t hear you come in. And...*Mon Dieu!*” The woman in the doorway turned deathly pale.

Luke was at her side in an instant. “Granny, let me explain.”

“I’m sorry, I was startled, that’s all. You can’t be Jesse Dubois. You gave me such a scare. But it’s uncanny how much you resemble her.” The woman took Luke’s arm and patted it. “It’s all right, I’m just being fanciful. Of course it’s not...”

“Grandmère,” said Luke, his voice grave. “I went to see *Tata* last night. She said I might have the chance to clear papa’s name.” He stopped and glanced at Jesse. “This is Jesse Dubois, grandmère. She came back to help us, and *Tata*, well, *Tata* found a way to make her real for a while.”

For a while! The words stung, though Jesse tried not to show it. “I’m sorry about all this.” Why was she apologizing? She hadn’t gotten killed on purpose.

The old woman blinked, then shook her head. “*Tata*. I should have known.” She fixed Jesse with a bright gaze. “No, no, don’t be absurd. None of this is your problem. It

was brought upon us by *le mal*, and we will overcome it. Here, I'll sit with you, and you can tell me what happened."

"You're not afraid of me?" Worry gnawed at Jesse's heart.

"No, heavens child! I lived in the bayou all my life. You aren't the first ghost I've seen. Some days I catch sight of an old black man sitting at the end of my pier. When I go down to say 'hey', he vanishes. And I see Charlotte too. She likes to try to startle me, but *Tata* always scolds her." She gave a chuckle.

Jesse sighed, relief washing over her. Luke's granny wasn't horrified, and she didn't blame her for what happened. "I wish I could tell you what happened, but the last thing I remember is music. Then I woke up beneath a tree. I had to dig, for some reason, but I must have been in the wrong place. I was about to go somewhere else when Luke came by. He found me, and saw I'd been hurt. I rode in his boat, but when I wanted to get out, I couldn't. It was like going to sleep—I was so tired and everything grew dark.

"The next thing I knew, I was standing all alone on the dock. I met someone called Pishou and he took me to see Charlotte. It's all sort of jumbled in my head now. The next clear thing I recall is sitting at the table with Luke and a big, black woman with fierce eyes."

"That would be *Tata*." Luke's granny settled her crocheted shawl around her shoulders, the white wool almost matching the short curls on her head.

"Luke...helped me stay here." Jesse frowned. She was afraid to look at Luke. Just thinking about him made her dizzy with need. She clenched her thighs together beneath the table. Now was not the time to get distracted. But she wanted nothing more than to touch him, to kiss him, to run her hands over his strong shoulders and—

"Here's some coffee," said Luke loudly, setting a mug in front of her.

She sipped it gratefully and turned back to Luke's granny. "Mrs. ..."

"You call me Granny, child, like everyone around here." She hesitated, and then patted Jesse's hand. "You're nothing like that flighty Charlotte, are you?" She smiled.

A knot of tension dissolved in her chest. For some reason, the woman's kindness made her want to cry. She sipped her coffee. Her emotions were new and raw, she decided. She was...what had *Tata* called her? A jumble of energy, that's it. And yet, she was human and she felt alive, especially when Luke held her in his arms. She looked at him and their eyes met. His were black as night and smoldered like a barely banked fire. A frisson ran down her back.

He blinked and looked away. "Let's eat and then study the map. Granny, can you go get that old map we had of the bayou? It may help us find Jesse's bones."

"Of course, poor child."

Jesse was ravenous. When Luke put her plate in front of her, she had a hard time not scooping up all the eggs and toast at once. "So good!" she exclaimed around a mouthful of eggs. "Everything is delicious."

"It's like you haven't eaten in years." Luke cleared his throat and looked embarrassed. "Sorry."

Jesse put her fork down and sighed. "You're right. I haven't. Everything feels, tastes, so strong to me. It's as if I've been scraped raw and all my nerves exposed."

Luke's granny nodded. "It's to be expected, I suppose. Maybe it's like waking up after a long sleep."

"Maybe." Jesse watched as Luke's granny rummaged in a drawer. Abruptly, the fear of disappearing again tied knots in her stomach. If Jacques found her bones first, Luke would not be able to clear his father's name, and she... She couldn't eat another bite. She had no idea what would happen if Jacques found her bones first, but the thought frightened her.

"Here, I've found the map. Shall we clear the table and look at it?"

They peered at the map. Jesse recognized some things, but most of her memories stayed locked inside of her. Frustration welled in her throat. "This isn't working."

"The name Jacques Lesnoire doesn't mean anything to you?" Luke asked.

“No, not at all!”

“Jacques? What does that scoundrel have to do with Jesse?” Luke’s granny frowned.

“*Tata* said he came to her asking about Jesse. She thinks he had something to do with her, maybe he even killed her. We don’t know.”

Granny shook her head. “That bastard. He always wanted the Braquesmar mansion and our land. I’ll never sell to him, and he knows it. But to stoop as low as murder —”

“We don’t know. He could be searching for her bones for another reason altogether, but I have no idea why.” Luke sounded as frustrated as she did.

“If he can prove your father killed her, he might think I’ll sell him the land.” Granny shook her head doubtfully. “More likely he needs her bones for something else. *Tata* didn’t know?”

“No, and this talk isn’t helping us. Let’s try something different. This is where your shoe was found.” Luke grimaced as he pointed to a spot on the map. “Here is the path leading to the *guinguette* where there used to be the *bastringue*, dances and...” his voice trailed off. “You were at the *bastringue*. That must be the music you keep hearing in your mind.”

Jesse nodded and hummed a few bars of a song. “I keep hearing that music over and over.”

“Is it loud?” Luke’s granny leaned over the table and took her hand. “Close your eyes and listen carefully. How close is it?”

She tilted her head, eyes closed. An accordion played a slow tune. “It’s faint, but I can hear it still.”

“Hear any voices? Maybe one you can identify?” Luke asked hopefully.

“No, it’s too far to hear voices. But the music carries over the water...” Jesse’s voice cracked and she shivered as fear stabbed her. “Why did I say that?”

Luke's granny tapped on the map. "He carried you over water and buried you. Over here is out of sight of the crowd at the *guinguette* but still within hearing of the loud music. There were speakers at the time, set up on the roof. Most folk danced outside under the live oaks. I remember going there on Saturday nights. From May 'til October, there were dances."

"We should look around here then." Luke pointed to a bend in the river. "Look here. It's across the river from the dance. You could still hear the music, I bet. But there aren't any houses around."

"It's on state property," mused Luke's granny. "That's a pretty smart move on the murderer's part. No one would dig up a body by accident there. Yet I seem to recall they searched damn carefully thereabouts, with dogs too."

"I can guess why it never got found. If the murderer knew the area and knew of a deep hole, it could remain hidden. A strong scent could throw off the search dogs," Luke added.

"A strong scent?" What did he mean?

"Muskrats. If the murderer shoved the body up into a muskrat hollow beneath the water level, it would have been impossible to find." Luke heaved a sigh. "I better bring my wetsuit and diving gear. We'll head out as soon as you're ready, Jesse."

"Where to?"

"It must be somewhere around here." His finger pointed to the curve in the river. But instead of a solid line, the map looked like it had been cut up in a lacy pattern, reaching far inland.

"What is that?"

"Swamp. There's only one way into this place, a single path through the forest. Otherwise, you can get there by boat. We'll take my boat. Afterward, I'll swim along the river while you go by the path. That way we'll be sure to find the muskrat den. I'm convinced that's where he hid your...body." He grimaced. "Sorry."

"I'm ready." Her heart beat painfully. The map had stirred something, or maybe it was all the talk about her body. Horror prickled along her backbone.

"What is it, child? You're as pale as a —"

"A ghost. I know Granny. I think I finally realized what happened to me, that's all." Jesse gave a faint smile. "I'm frightened."

"Everything will be fine," said Luke. "I have confidence in *Tata*. She wouldn't have brought you back if there wasn't a chance we'd succeed. Come on, Jesse. Someone else is looking for those bones too, you know. Seems you're mighty popular, Miss Dubois."

Jesse gave a start. "I think I would have rather not been so popular," she murmured. "There are things I'm starting to recall. Music and men, lots of men asking me to dance. If only I could see their faces!"

Luke's granny looked at her with narrowed eyes. "Hang on to your memories, girl. They might save us yet."

"I'll try my best." Jesse shivered. Everything depended on her memories. *Please don't let me fail.*

* * * * *

Luke hustled to get his gear. *Hurry!* urged the voice in his head. *If he finds her bones first, Jesse will be lost to you forever.*

"She already is lost," he muttered as he tapped the valve on the back of his tank. Sorrow as sharp as a knife cut into his heart. The pain nearly made him double over. "Jesse," he moaned.

Why did she have to be a ghost? Last night had been the most incredible experience of his life. Just thinking about it made his cock hard as a rock. He rubbed it, trying to ease the sudden tightness of his jeans. He unzipped his bag, wishing he could unzip his jeans and get himself off while dreaming about last night, about Jesse's sweet lips kissing his, her hot cunt wrapped tight around his —

His cock gave a strong twinge, but he shook his head sharply. No, he had to hurry.

Swearing under his breath, he checked the bag, making sure his goggles and flippers were there. Then he unhooked his wetsuit from the wall. He wanted to remember each second of the night before, never forget a single one. But all he could think of, staring at the wetsuit clutched in his hand, was how much it was going to hurt when she was gone. "*Et merde,*" he groaned, tossing the wetsuit into his bag and pulling savagely at the zipper.

Wouldn't you know? He'd fallen in love with a ghost.

Chapter Four

Jesse admired the way Luke steered his boat through the narrow channel. He cut the motor, and now he poled the boat between the cypress trees, gliding it around exposed roots and sandbars. Jesse sat in the front, sitting with her back to the sun, her face in shadow.

“Are you all right?”

“Shhh.” She raised her hand and pointed toward the shore. Through the trees, Luke could see a deer. The animal raised its head, ears pricked toward them. Then, with a graceful bound, it sprang into the underbrush and disappeared.

“You’ve got keen sight.” He gave another push to the long pole and angled the boat toward a low bank. “We’ll go ashore here. The park’s land starts just up the river.”

Jesse nodded, and when the boat ran ashore, she leapt out lightly and grasped the bow, holding the boat steady as Luke took his gear and lifted it ashore. To her dismay, she found she could hardly hold the boat. It kept slipping from her grasp, although she tightened her fingers.

Horror iced her spine as she realized that her body had started to revert to a ghostlike state. She uttered a little cry of distress. Not now! She had to help Luke. He needed her! What could she do?

A glance at Luke gave her the answer. As soon as she set eyes on him, her cunt gave a twinge of desire. Well, why not? No noise came from the forest. Nobody could see them. She shivered with delight and a welcome flood of desire dampened her underwear. She gave a last look at Luke then darted behind a tree and slipped off her dress. As soon as her skin was bared, the breeze tickled her nipples, hardening them.

“Luke!”

Luke wasted no time shucking down to his shorts, but before he could step into his wet suit, Jesse called him.

He raised his head, but couldn't see her. Where had she gone? He ducked under a branch and stood, transfixed. Jesse had taken her dress off and stood, naked, on a sandy patch of ground in front of a tall tree. "What are you doing?" His mouth went dry at the sight of her. *Mon Dieu!*

Her eyes held his as she slowly turned her back to him and bent over, her hands pressing against the tree trunk. Her buttocks turned toward him, she glanced back at him. "I think I'm about to vanish," she whispered. "Come help me." Standing like that, her body brazenly displayed, she looked like a sexy wood nymph. He caught a glimpse of her shiny, pink labia within her dark pubic hair. That sight and her words ignited the fire smoldering in his blood. A flame of desire leapt to his groin and his cock hardened painfully. In two strides he was beside her, his hands running up and down her smooth flanks.

"Come on, baby, give it to me." She turned around, her breasts now brushing against his chest.

He had to get inside her. Now. But first he put one hand on her chin, turning her to face him. "I want you to know I'm not just doing this to keep you from vanishing."

Surprise and a smile lit her face, as tears filled her eyes. "Thank you." Her voice was rough with emotion. She blinked and a tear slid down her cheek.

Without thinking, he bent down and licked it away. Salty sweet, it tingled on his tongue. Jesse, his Jesse. God, why couldn't it be forever?

He slid one hand between her thighs and she rubbed against him wantonly. Her slick juices gathered on his fingers. He couldn't suppress an excited hiss when she reached for his hand and pressed it harder against her hot pussy. His finger slid into her tight flesh and she writhed on him, holding tightly to his wrist. Rapid contractions massaged his finger and Jesse groaned. His cock flexed against her firm thighs. His legs

shook. He took a deep breath and dipped another finger into her hot folds. That felt so good. His engorged cock gave another jerk. *Easy, not so fast.*

He wanted this to last forever, and he wanted to hurry, to find her bones. *But if I find her bones, she'll vanish.*

So I stay here and make love to her. I'll keep her as long as possible.

No, hurry! It'll be too late!

Why couldn't he find a compromise? Both ideas jumbled in his head – keeping Jesse and losing her. It hurt too much to think of losing her.

Velvety-smooth skin hugged his fingers, scattering his thoughts. He imagined his cock sunk deep inside that slick heat. At that, his cock gave another twitch and he had to lean his head against her shoulder so as not to fall down. He still wore his shorts, but he opened the fly and freed his stiff cock. It throbbed in time to his heartbeat, getting harder every second.

Her chest jutted just in front of his eyes, and he lowered his head, his lips following the curving lines of her body, over the gentle swell of her breast. Then he found her nipple and he pulled it into his mouth, sucking greedily. She tasted so good, her skin so sweet it made his head spin. Her breast throbbed in his mouth and he swirled his tongue around her now stiff nipple.

He was hard as a rock, his cock pushing into her leg, his hand pressed to her cunt. His fingers snaked into her tight passage and twitched. "Yes," she cried, panting in sharp gasps.

His cock nudged against her cunt and she opened her thighs. When his cock head lodged in between her labia, her silken heat seared him, urging him on. With a deep groan, he pushed slowly into her. He would keep her a little while longer.

"More!" Her whole body was throbbing with lust. His arms around her and his cock buried in her body made her feel so vibrant and alive. His body pressed against hers intoxicated her senses. Rough tree bark rubbed against her back and beneath her feet the sand was cool and soft.

“What do you want?” His voice sounded thick. He pulled out of her body, teasing her with his cock, pushing it against her cunt then withdrawing it when she tried to press closer.

“I’m turning around.” Her breath came in sharp gasps. Now, she needed him inside her now! She braced her hand on the tree and spread her legs.

He took her from behind, slid his cock into her slick sheath. He eased into her, slowly taking possession of her body. “Please,” she moaned.

Grabbing her waist with both hands, he obliged and thrust into her. The tip of his cock reached her womb.

“Faster, Luke, faster!” Was that her voice? She didn’t recognize the raw need she heard coming from her throat, sounding almost like a sob.

His balls hit her clit with each stroke, taking her even higher. She was so wet her juices slid down her thigh. His cock filled her and stretched her, eliciting little whimpers from her throat each time he pounded home. With each strong, long stroke her head just about left her shoulders. A quiver started in her belly and spread toward her cunt. The burning sensation inside her grew immense as she found herself tottering on the edge of orgasm. Her heart raced and her cunt clenched with need for release. Any second now –

A branch broke nearby. Then, a man’s voice said, “Why, if it isn’t a free girlie show.”

Luke jerked out of her cunt, and to her horror, his hot seed spurted onto her leg. “No!” she gasped. Shame and fear turned her knees to water. Without Luke’s seed, she would surely vanish for good.

“Well, well, well.” The voice, coming from behind them froze Jesse’s blood. It was a sly voice with a note of evil triumph in it.

“What the hell?” Luke flung his arms around her protectively and pressed himself to her. His body sheltered hers from the view of the man stepping out of the undergrowth. His cock, soft now, rested in the crack of her ass. She glanced down. He

still had his shorts on. Maybe she could help him – after all, this was all her fault. With her hand, she tucked his cock back into his fly, her hand lingering on his strong thigh, seeking reassurance. She trembled like a leaf in a high wind.

“Well.” There was a pause and then the man came into the clearing. Jesse couldn’t see him, but she heard his heavy footsteps. “I don’t need to ask what you’re doing, Luke Braquesmar. So those stories I heard about you weren’t true. I thought that you couldn’t get it up with no girl, that since your little trip to jail, you prefer men. Seems they was wrong. Just goes to show you can’t listen to rumors, eh? So, step aside, boy, and show me who you got cornered.”

“What are you doing here?” Luke’s voice was flat.

“Me? Looking for something I lost. I guess I don’t have to ask what you’re doing.” He gave a raucous laugh.

Jesse gave a shuddering moan. That voice! In an instant, her world shook violently right off its foundations. Flickering pictures came back into her head. *A white path. Running. A strong shove between her shoulder blades and landing on her knees.* She looked down. Blood ran from fresh scrapes on her legs as if she’d just fallen down.

“Come on, boy, don’t I deserve a little fun?”

“Get the hell out of here.” Around her, Luke’s body tensed with fury. She couldn’t say anything. Her neck hurt. Hands were around her neck, squeezing, and that horrible voice was whispering in her ear. Air, she needed air!

“Fine. You asked for it, boy.” The man called Lesnoire gave a mean laugh. Then Jesse heard a metallic click. “Now I’m asking you nicely to step aside.”

Jesse couldn’t breathe anymore. Rushes of scenes flashed in front of her eyes. In her visions, she saw the *guinguette* now – the little dance hall on the waterfront. It was too far away from her though. She could see it, but it was on the other side of the river now and the music drowned out her frantic cries. *Oh Lord, help me! It hurts so much!*

Luke grabbed her tightly, bringing her back to the present. “Put that gun down and get out of here.” His voice was tight.

“Hell no, I’m too curious. Let’s see who you got there.”

Jesse uttered a strangled gasp. “That voice! It’s the man with his hands around my neck. It’s him! He killed me!” She pushed Luke aside and came face-to-face with her nightmare. “Jacques Lesnoire.” The name fell from numb lips. How could she have forgotten?

He stared at her, all color fading from his face. “Impossible.” His gun wavered, but he held it trained on Luke. That sight made Jesse stop a second and reconsider. Maybe she could get him talking and Luke could escape. *Please, Luke, run away!*

“Why did you do it?” Jesse had to know. She recognized the voice and the man now, but she still didn’t know why he’d killed her. “We hardly knew each other!”

Jacques still looked shaken, but he answered easily enough. “No, I didn’t know you. But you danced with Simon all night long, and I, well, I needed a way to get something I’d been wanting for a while. Something Simon wouldn’t give me.”

“The mansion,” Luke breathed. He stood next to Jesse and his arm quivered where it touched her side. “You bastard!”

Jacques stiffened, then his face relaxed and he sneered. “Well, if fate don’t play tricks on us all. Here I am, trying for years to get my hands on your land, and tonight I walk right to the answer to my prayers. Just think. I burn Jesse’s bones so she can’t come back and haunt me, and I shoot *fiston* Braquesmar here and stuff him in Jesse’s grave. Why, I believe I’m on a lucky streak tonight.” He chuckled meanly.

Luke gave an enraged bellow and lunged past her toward the man, and then there was a loud popping sound. Luke’s body dropped to the ground.

“Luke!” She whirled around. Lesnoire pointed his gun at her and pulled the trigger.

Jesse noticed several things at once. Luke was wounded but not dead. He groaned as he lay on the ground and tried to hitch himself onto his forearms. When Jacques shot at her, the bullets went through her body and hit the tree behind her with loud thwacks, but she didn’t feel anything. She looked downward, but there were no wounds. Her body was rapidly fading away.

Jacques uttered a loud, raucous laugh. "It's too late, *ma belle*. I'm going to find your bones and I'm going to burn them. Then you won't ever come back to haunt my dreams, like you been doing these past weeks. That's why I went to see the *mam'bo*, and seems she gave me some good advice. Goodbye and good riddance. I'm off to dig me up a muskrat den."

He turned and walked out of the clearing, his laugh echoing in her ears.

To Luke, it seemed as if a tree had fallen on him, he couldn't move. Were his legs broken? Nothing made sense, his head was whirling and thoughts churned as his hands scrambled for purchase on the sandy ground.

Why was there blood? A thin stream of it wet the ground and he groaned again as a sharp pain darted through his shoulder. A black veil lowered slowly over his vision. As the light grew dim, he saw Jesse standing in front of him. She was nearly transparent, but as he watched she began to gain substance even as the light all around him faded. She stared at him urgently and her lips moved. What was she trying to say? Lassitude filled his body. He wanted to sleep, just to lie down and sleep. But Jesse stood over him, her eyes blazing, and she wouldn't let him slide into that peaceful oblivion.

He tried to make out what she was saying. *Your father*, she mouthed. Why couldn't he hear her?

Father? His heart gave a lurch. He was supposed to be saving Jesse and finding out who had framed his father. Now he knew. Jacques Lesnoire!

The veil over his eyes lifted as he remembered the shot ringing out and the shock of the bullet striking his shoulder. Would he be able to find Jesse's bones before Jacques did? That bastard must be out there searching right now. And he had been right here. That meant he wasn't far. He was getting dizzy again, but Jesse, nearly transparent now, was waving to him frantically.

Get up, get up! she seemed to be saying.

He drew himself to his knees, and then got slowly to his feet. The ground swayed, but he caught himself before he fell.

Jesse was pointing at the wet suit, still in his boat. *Muskrat*.

That helped. He knew where to find the old muskrat den. The water level had risen these past years, flooding had changed some of the landmarks, and maybe he would find her body before Jacques. The path through the forest was overgrown and wound back and forth. The river would lead straight to it, if he could get there. At the thought of the man who'd killed Jesse and framed his father for murder, his blood boiled. He would do anything to get revenge now.

Putting on the wet suit proved to be hellish. Pain lanced through his body when he tried to move his left arm. Blood still seeped from a hole in his shoulder and trickled down his arm. Finally he managed to slide his arm into the sleeve, though his knees buckled from a fresh onslaught of pain. It took all his concentration not to pass out. All the time Jesse grew dimmer, so that when he finished putting on his suit, she was hardly visible.

"All right, I'm ready." He tried to keep her in sight. She'd faded into mist. "Can you guide me?"

She nodded, her face worried.

Her body had nearly vanished. Luke knew he had little time left. He adjusted his mask one-handed and awkwardly swung the air tanks onto his back. He winced as the weight pulled on his shoulder, but at least the pain kept his head clear. He slipped into the water.

The current kept the river fairly clear, and visibility was good. He had dived here before. Part of his job was checking for illegal trapping and keeping the park waterways clear. He knew the river, and he also knew the path. With luck Jacques did not, and would take a long time to get through the forest. Optimism spurred him on.

A branch loomed out of the dark water. He pushed it away and regretted it when his shoulder cramped. He paused to catch his breath. The water was deeper here and the riverbank rose steeply. Muskrat had hollowed out part of the bank. Their burrows ran deep. If Jacques had stuffed her body into a muskrat den that night, he must have

dug into one from the shore, and after finding the cavern, pushed her in and covered her up. Now it would be a toss up as to whether her bones lay underwater or in the dry burrow.

Please, let me find the bones before Jacques. Are you there, Jesse? He reached out with his mind, trying to contact her. Faint warmth filled his heart. She was still there, but her presence was so frail.

Luke swam with the current, his hands gliding along the silt at the bottom of the river, his eyes searching for clues. Cypress trees hampered his progress, their roots formed a labyrinth. But he swam through the underwater forest without losing sight of the riverbank.

A dark hole caught his eye. He checked his air, but he had another thirty minutes left. His heart beating with anticipation, he swam to the hole and looked in. It seemed to widen beneath an overhanging ledge. It was just the place he'd been searching for, the ledge he'd been trying to find.

Since the river had risen and covered the ledge, maybe Jacques couldn't find it! Using his right hand, Luke started the painstaking job of digging into the bank. Luckily, the waterlogged earth crumbled easily.

After a few minutes he grew exhausted and had to rest. But Jesse's disembodied voice sounded in his ears. *Hurry, Luke, Hurry!*

Yes, hurry. Don't let Jacques find Jesse first.

He redoubled his efforts and a huge portion of the ledge sank into the water. For a moment, swirling mud and silt blinded him. Then the current pulled it away and he found himself looking into a vast cavern.

Muskrats had dug it, but someone had enlarged it. There was light gaping from the top—the ceiling of the den had caved in. No, someone had excavated it. A vast, empty hole gaped now.

Urgency prodded him into action. This must be where her bones had been hidden, and Jacques had certainly taken them away. He had to be quiet, not make any noise. He

drew long, deep breaths, calming his racing heart. *Now slowly, pull up by the roots. There, that's right.* His hand slipped and he gasped, pain stabbing his shoulder, but his feet had gained purchase in the soft riverbank, and he stayed upright. Where was that bastard? The trees grew densely here, and he was not in the perfect position to look around. Carefully, as silently as possible, he crawled up to the top of the bank and stood, his knees shaking under his weight. Something hot ran down his arm. Blood. Don't think about that. Look. *Look!*

A flicker of light caught his eyes. Jacques crouched near a canister, a cigarette lighter in his hands. He flicked at it again, but the flame refused to work.

Oh my God. Luke's eyes fell on a pile of gleaming bones at Jacques' feet. The acrid scent of kerosene assailed his nostrils. Damn him!

Luke launched himself through the underbrush. No time to think about not making noise. As he broke through the branches, Jacques whirled around, his face a mask of surprise. He hadn't counted on anyone coming from the river. The grim satisfaction Luke felt faded as Jacques sprang to his feet and faced him.

"Don't give up, do you?" he snarled.

"You bastard!" Luke bellowed. "You killed her and framed my father."

"Prove it." Jacques suddenly lunged at him and punched him hard in the side. Searing pain nearly made him lose consciousness, but white-hot rage kept Luke on his feet.

Luke jumped at Jacques again, but Jacques had picked up a branch now and waved it threateningly. Luke tried to grab it, but the branch came down on his arm. He heard a sharp crack, and a blinding pain seared from his wrist to his shoulder. His arm dangled at his side. He feinted left then kicked at Jacques' legs, knocking him backward.

Jacques dropped the branch and rolled out of Luke's way, knocking over the canister of kerosene and scattering the bones. He got to his feet and reached into his jacket, grabbing for his gun.

Luke froze. He wondered when his life would start to flash before his eyes. Did it go slowly, or like lightning, he wondered. Would he meet Jesse on the other side? That would be all right. He closed his eyes.

"No, boy. Watch." Jacques, with his other hand, grabbed his lighter. He kicked the bones into a pile with his foot, then, still holding the gun trained on Luke, he bent to light the fire.

"Bastard," Luke hissed. "Just get it over with." He steeled himself, waiting for the burst of flame and the gunshot that would kill him.

Jacques flicked the lighter and fire leapt from it. As he bent to hold it to the bones, Luke caught sight of a nearly transparent figure.

Jesse! She wavered then took shadowy form.

"Come to save yourself?" Jacques laughed meanly. "You're nothing but mist."

She appeared next to Jacques and pushed her hand at the lighter. Nothing happened.

"Ha, told you so." He held the lighter toward her now and jeered. "Let's see if ghosts burn, shall we?"

A look of terror twisted her face.

Jesse, I'm sorry, Luke mouthed. Pain blinded him as he thought of her vanishing from his life forever. *Goodbye, my love.*

She nodded and the terror faded some from her face. *I'll see you again, Luke.* Then she shoved again. Suddenly the flame blew backward and licked Jacques' sleeve. With a loud *Whoom!* his jacket burst into flame. In the inferno, Jesse's diaphanous figure disappeared from Luke's sight.

Jacques screamed, reeling backward, his arms windmilling frantically.

"Get down you fool! Roll in the sand!" Luke cried.

Jacques must have heard him. He threw himself to the ground. But he landed in a puddle of kerosene. Horrified, Luke watched as a fireball enveloped Jacques. Jacques

uttered an inhuman scream. His skin crackled, intense heat radiated off him as he turned black and a dreadful smell arose with the smoke. His body thrashed and the screams continued nonstop. There was no time to save him, it happened too fast.

Luke staggered backward, shock turning his blood to ice. And then he saw a stream of flame start toward the pile of bones.

“No!” He dashed forward and kicked at the flame, putting it out the best he could. Then he began dousing the bones with dirt. He tried to dig, but only one arm worked. Heedless of the agonizing pain, he dug until he found himself on his knees instead of standing.

How did I get here? A spell of dizziness made coherent thought impossible. As he leaned over the bones, something caught his eye.

He frowned then blinked, trying to see better. What was that bright spot?

The spot grew brighter, turned into a gold medallion, and suddenly he heard sirens wailing. Someone must have seen the fire and called the police. About time. He slumped over, his head coming to rest near the bones. About bloody time the police got here. *Thank God.*

Chapter Five

The hospital bed hurt his back, his cast itched, if he saw one more serving of Jell-O he would throw up, and he couldn't get to sleep without the familiar sound of the bayou night. The sound of cars, trucks, sirens and footsteps kept him awake. He needed the hum of mosquitoes, the quiet slap of water and frog song.

"When can I go home?" He didn't mean to sound so peevish. The nurse was only doing her job. But his limit had been reached. He couldn't take any more coddling. And after five days of no sleep, he was about to go mad.

"Relax. Try to get some sleep. You're a hero now." The nurse gave him a smile. She closed the door behind her, after turning off his reading light. Luke turned it back on again.

Okay, so he was a hero now. Luke had cleared his father's name, recovered Braquesmar mansion and solved the mystery of Jesse's death. His picture stared from the front page of no less than six local newspapers and even two or three national papers picked up the story. Reporters came to interview him, and his granny cried tears of sheer joy for three days straight. So fucking what? He felt like shit. He felt like...like a kicked puppy, that's what. No matter that the nurses vied for his attention, no matter he now had money in the bank, his father's honor restored, and his granny's gratitude. It wasn't enough. All he wanted was Jesse. *Jesse*. Even her name hurt him.

He looked despondently at the newspaper on the bedside table. *Bizarre Twist in Murder Case!* Yeah, bizarre all right. Luke knew the story by heart. Murderer burned near his victim's bones. A gold medallion found with the bones identified Jacques Lesnoire as Jessica Dubois' killer. While making a routine check of the shoreline, ranger Luke Braquesmar stumbled upon Jacques Lesnoire about to burn a pile of old bones. In

the resulting scuffle, Mr. Braquesmar received a bullet wound and Mr. Lesnoire met his death in a bizarre accident.

Well, the bullet wound happened before the scuffle, but saying he'd been shot while trysting with a ghost hadn't seemed the right answer to "When did you get shot?" The tricky thing to explain had been the lack of a bullet hole in the diving suit, but he said he'd been shrugging out of it when the gun went off.

Moonlight streamed into the window. Outside came the sounds of traffic on the thruway, some voices arguing in the parking lot, a siren wailing. How could anyone sleep in the city?

Luke took a deep breath. Well, only one way out of here.

Climbing out the window with a cast would be a new experience for him, and one he would not be looking forward to repeating. What he really hated was pulling his I.V. out. Now that hurt. And the damn tape pulled all his arm hair off. Nothing wrong with his legs though.

He headed for the thruway and stuck his thumb out. Surely someone would give a wounded hero a lift back home?

* * * * *

"I had a feeling you'd be comin' here, Luke *chère*." *Tata* leaned back in her chair and fanned herself with a folded-up magazine. Moths blundered into the candles' flames, their wings sizzling.

"Then you know why I'm here." Luke sipped the tea *Tata* had given him as he'd stumbled into her house. Maybe being a hero wasn't so bad after all. But now his arm throbbed, his head ached, and he had a nagging suspicion he was starting a fever. Great.

"I can't call her back." *Tata* leaned over the table.

Luke's heart cracked in his chest like broken marble. Tears blurred his vision and he turned away, a bitter taste in his mouth.

“Luke.” Her hand covered his but he didn’t want comfort. He pulled away. She held on tight though. “Luke! I can’t call her back. Only you can do that.”

He shook his head. “I’ve tried. Every minute, every second, I call her back. I’ve begged. I got down on my knees and begged, but she didn’t come back. I don’t know how.” He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. Damn, he definitely had a fever. His cheeks were burning.

“You know how.” *Tata’s* voice held a note of teasing in it. He flashed her an irritated look.

“I do?”

“*Oui*. How did you get her to stay the last time?” *Tata* leaned back in her chair and peered at him, a flicker of amusement in her eyes. “Dawn is coming soon. I’m off to check my traps. Go lie down in my room. You need some rest.” She heaved her body out of her chair and tossed the magazine onto the table. “Blow out the candles.” She walked into the night, humming softly.

Luke snuffed the candles and lay in the bed. Mosquitoes whined, frogs croaked, the river gurgled softly and the night owls hooted. A raccoon chattered, the breeze rustled the Spanish moss, and peace stole over his body.

“Jesse,” he whispered. “I’m home.”

He kept his eyes closed and imagined her. Stepping out of the bayou. Walking lightly on the sandy path winding through the cypress grove. Hair dark as night swirling around her bare shoulders. A slip of a white dress moving in the breeze.

“Come closer,” he whispered.

Eyes as deep as wells, starlight sparkling in their depths. Her chin down, her mouth curved in a shy smile. *Jesse!* Her arms outstretched.

Come get me. Please. Her voice! Shaking, he reached for her.

I love you. He hoped she heard him. Hoped she believed him. “With all my heart, I love you,” he said fervently. “Why didn’t I tell you before?”

Warmth flowing over him in a golden cloud. A smile, and tears like stars in dark eyes. Soft hands clasping his own. Pulling her close, as if pulling her through thick water. Then her face next to his. *Kiss me*. Her voice just a sigh in his ear.

Lips soft against his mouth. Arms wrapped around his shoulders. Her lithe body settling by his side... His cock twitched restlessly.

Yes, that's it. Running his hands down her sides, down her long thighs. Inside her thighs. Such soft skin, like satin. She moaned softly, but Luke kept his eyes closed. He could almost feel the weight of her lying next to him on the bed. The breeze stirred the curtains and he heard them rustle. Or could it be soft breathing? He didn't dare hope. *Focus*.

Parting her legs, stroking the soft hair between them. Beneath his touch she sighed and moved her hips suggestively, opening her legs wider. His fingers slipped along her cleft, teasing it open. Moisture made her flesh slippery and he leaned over, careful of his arm, and pressed his mouth to her sex. Eyes tightly shut, he kissed her sex, teased it with his tongue, seeking the hard nub of her clit. Sweet and musky, salty and tart, her taste intoxicated him. His tongue slid along the inside of her labia, nuzzled her clit, lapped at it until it swelled and quivered.

"Oh yes." Had she said that, or he?

Waves of desire made his cock as stiff and heavy as if it were carved from granite. His hips moved of their own accord, humping against the bed, bunching the covers next to his thigh.

"Take me," said her soft voice. Or was it the wind? He dared not open his eyes. He buried his face in her cunt. This had to be real. He could never have imagined anything so good. He moaned, thrusting his tongue deep into her cunt. She grew wetter, and his cheeks and chin grew wet too. It might just be tears. He eased his hand upward, skimming along her hip then to her stomach. Her body quivered beneath his touch, when he slid his hand up to her ribs and breasts. God, could it be Jesse?

He pinched her nipple gently, rolling it between thumb and forefinger. It hardened, and another rush of liquid filled his mouth. He lapped greedily. He wanted to tease her breast some more, but he was propped on his bad arm and it hurt too much. He let go with regret, and then ran his tongue along the sensitive flesh inside her labia.

His cock was about to explode, but he wanted to taste her, experience her contractions with his tongue and his mouth. He prodded her clit hard with his tongue and was rewarded with a quick pulsing. It nearly set him off though. He groaned aloud, and then something grasped his cock.

His eyes nearly flew open. He kept them closed just in time. He would never be able to take the disappointment of losing her again. "Jesse?"

No answer, but something pushed him over onto his back. He caught the scent of her aroused pussy, and then her lips surrounded his cock. She went down slowly on his cock, licking and sucking, swirling her tongue back and forth over the hypersensitive head.

"Open your eyes."

He did, but darkness, like blackest velvet, surrounded him. He couldn't see anything but the faint outline of the doorway and the window. Swallowing hard, he stared into the obscurity at his erect cock. It throbbed as invisible hands stroked it, and then a hot mouth took possession of it again. He saw a tiny spurt of milky sperm shoot into the air and disappear.

His heart was racing madly, and he clutched at the covers with his good hand. He was about to come. Oh Lord, he was about to come. His arms and legs didn't exist, only his cock. His cock existed alone, and it was about to explode. His stomach tingled and his hips jerked.

"Jesse!" Her name tore from his throat. His cock grew suddenly cool as the night air hit it then incredible heat enveloped it tightly. Slowly, a tight, hot sheath sank onto his hard-on. It slid all the way down then it started to rock. Friction sent the temperature soaring. His cock was buried in fire. He gasped, pressed his heels into the bed, and

uttered a wild cry. No way could he control himself another second. His seed shot out of his cock. As before, it seemed to coalesce in thin air, swirling into a shadowy form.

“Yes!” Luke thrust upward, watching in amazement as his cock jerked and shuddered then disappeared. Black curls nestled against his pubic hair, two long thighs spread like wings on each side of his hips. Then a slim waist, high, round breasts, long graceful arms, and at last, a pale face surrounded by tangled black hair appeared.

“Jesse!” She slumped onto his chest, her hair spilling over his shoulders and face. Sweat made her body gleam in the darkness. Her body convulsed against his, and he held her tightly. Her breath was hot on his neck, her tears scorched his cheek.

“You called me back.”

“I had to.” He cupped her chin in his hands and kissed her hard. “Stay now. Promise you’ll stay.”

“I’m real now.” She looked deeply into his eyes. “You called me and ordered me to stay. I’m yours now, yours until we both die.”

“And then we’ll still be together, won’t we?”

“Yes.” Laughter bubbled from her mouth. “You’re going to have some trouble explaining me to the authorities.”

“We’ll think of something.” Luke sighed and stretched. *Mon Dieu*, he felt good. “*Tata* will have an idea. She always does.”

“What happened to my bones?”

“Buried in the cemetery next to my father’s grave.”

She wrinkled her nose. “They’re not mine anymore, are they? They belong to another woman, one who lived a quarter of a century ago.”

“Do you recall anything about her?” Luke stroked her cheek and her eyes clouded.

“I still don’t remember much.” She shrugged. She didn’t look too worried, and neither was he. She’d remember eventually. Until then, they would live day to day, here in the bayou where they belonged.

Luke kissed her. "It's over. Now we start planning our wedding, all right?" His heart was so light he thought maybe helium filled his chest. His fever was gone. Except for his arm, he felt perfect.

Rose-colored streaks tinted the sky. A breeze moved the curtains, and Jesse snuggled next to him, her arms wrapped firmly around him. They'd fix up the Braquesmar mansion and they'd live in the bayou. They would raise a flock of black-haired, bright-eyed kids with their mother's sweet smile.

"I love you, Luke," she murmured as she drifted off to sleep.

Luke didn't dare close his eyes until the sun rose fully and cast its golden light over his lover's sleeping face. Then, reassured that she was with him for good, he finally drifted off, the sounds of the bayou in his ears.

About the Author

Samantha Winston is the pen name for Jennifer Macaire, an American freelance writer/illustrator. She was born in Kingston, NY, and lived in Samoa, California, and the Virgin Islands before moving to France. She attended Parsons The New School for Design for fine art, and Palm Beach Junior College for art and English literature. She worked for five years as a model for Elite. Married to a professional polo player, she has three children.

After settling in France, she started writing full time and published short stories in such magazines as *Polo Magazine*, *PKA's Advocate*, *The Bear Deluxe*, *Nuketown*, *The Eclipse*, *Anotherrealm*, *Linnaean Street*, *Inkspin*, *Literary Potpourri*, *Mind Caviar* and the *Vestal Review*. One of her short stories was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. In June 2002 she won the 3am/Harper Collins flash fiction contest for her story "There are Geckos".

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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