

# **That Old Spankin' Magic**

**By  
Brandy Golden**

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## Chapter One

The morning mist hung low and heavy like a white shroud over the piece of Louisiana Bayou that Cork Renoir had carved out for himself. The stocky, sunburned, ex-jazz player leaned back and stared broodingly into the shifting mists, feeling the spirit of the Bayou enveloping him as it always did, healing and soothing.

As he lifted the steaming mug of Bayou mud to his lips, a literal cacophony of sound erupted, shattering the eerie morning stillness and sending birds screeching from the trees in a mass exodus of feather flapping fiends.

Cork's sandaled feet hit the deck as he leaped from the rusted metal chair, sending it crashing backwards and sliding off the small dock into the Bayou. With a muttered curse, he spared it an angry glare, making a mental note that someone was going to go fishing for that chair. It was his favorite and had been his Dad's favorite, and his Dad before him. Someone was going to pay all right, and that someone was now drifting out of the mist, bringing the heavy metal racket that modern artists pawned off as music closer to him. It was a poor substitute for the rhythmic cadences of jazz, and Cork lifted his rifle and aimed it at the offending box with the loud speakers.

"Step aside," he bellowed at the obviously feminine figure kneeling in front of the boom box, holding a knob in her fingers as if she were puzzled as to how it came off.

The tall black man with the pole in his hand that Cork vaguely recognized as Augustus, yelled out, "he's got a gun," and grabbed the woman and threw her to the floor.

Cork fired one shot into the middle of the enormous boom box and the harsh, strident cords ceased instantly, leaving his ears in the blissful silence of the soothing Bayou once again.

The small aluminum skiff bobbed wildly as the two humans on board lifted their heads and peered over the twelve inch edge of it, their eyes wide with fright as the current brought them into the dock. Cork found himself staring into the most fetching light blue eyes he had ever seen...eyes that were quickly darkening with anger as the fear that had swamped them slowly receded.

Remy Broussard stared up at one of the biggest men she had ever seen. The man had biceps as big as her thighs! His powerfully muscled legs were not as sun burned as the broad shoulders and bare arms in the blue tank top he wore, but his face was darkly red as if he had spent many hours in the sun. And he was covered with so much blonde hair that he looked like a golden fuzzy bear! The expression on his square jawed face was anything but a warm fuzzy, but her impetuous nature overcame her reticence in the face of danger.

"You...you shot my stereo...how dare you shoot my stereo! That stereo cost me over three hundred dollars you imitation of a Neanderthal! This is going to cost you mister, just wait and see!" She scrabbled to get to her feet in the moving craft and shot a glare at the cowering Augustus that was supposed to be protecting her.

"Be careful, Miz Remy," he whispered, his eyes sliding back to Cork. "Dat man done look dangerous!"

Of course, the man above them certainly was intimidating with that rifle in his hand, but Remy figured if he wanted to shoot them, he would have

already. As it was, the only casualty they had was her stereo.

She had brought it along hoping to intrigue some of the swamp animals into coming closer out of curiosity, so she could photograph them. She wondered if she had been gullible when the shop had sold her the CD, promising her she would have all kinds of wonderful wildlife photos if she set this up and lay in wait for them.

Somehow, the station must have gotten changed when they loaded the stereo and when she had jumped and grabbed the volume button after turning it on, it had come off in her hand. She had been in the process of trying to put it back on to turn off that horrendous racket when Augustus had thrown her to the floor. Now her poor stereo lay in pieces on the bottom of the boat...and someone was going to pay for this indignity!

As the skiff bobbed against the end of the dock, Cork reached down with his powerful right arm, covered in so many freckles they blended as one, and lifted the small, indignant figure by the back of her jeans and dropped her down onto the wooden planks.

"Let go of me, how dare you," came the strident protest, her arms and legs flailing as she scrabbled for something to hold onto until she landed on the dock, sprawling unceremoniously at his feet. "Ummph," she grunted when she hit the wooden planks. Quick as a wink she was on her feet, her riveting eyes spitting lightning bolts as she faced him down, albeit from her diminutive height.

Cork stared belligerently down at the irascible female, his jaw set in his famous "bulldog" imitation, his sandy hair lifting gently in the early morning breeze. Soon, the combination of the rising

sun and the bayou breezes would burn off and blow away the hanging shroud of mist he enjoyed waking up too, thereby revealing the bayou in all its humid glory. And this slip of a woman was the cause of him missing his daily ritual with nature.

"I dare what I please in my home," he growled at her. "And right now, you are interrupting my commune with nature with that insane imitation of music. The music world should be collectively ashamed to put up with that hideous racket, let alone allow it to be labeled music." He leaned over and grabbed the back of her jeans again and spun her around. "And further more, you caused my favorite chair to land in the bayou. Now you are going to go get it for me!" With that, he propelled her off the side of the dock and down into the greenish water that lapped against the pilings, ignoring her screams of outrage. He folded his massive golden haired arms and watched as she flailed and sputtered in the water.

"I can't swim," she screamed helplessly, trying valiantly to stay on top of the water. The man had caught her completely off guard! What kind of a beast threw a lady into the bayou? Besides, she only knew how to float a little bit, never having learned how to swim. He was going to kill her for sure, and no one would even know what happened to her! She sputtered on murky green water; sure she was going under any second as her arms began to get tired. This is it, she thought, I'm going to die...right here...right at the dock of my great grandmother's old voodoo grounds. Now I'll never find out if there really is a treasure. A sharp command penetrated the fog of fear that surrounded her, causing her to stop thrashing abruptly.

"Stand up!" Cork rolled his eyes and shook his head at the panicking young woman.

She stood up then, her dark brown hair hanging in strings around her face and a piece of moss clinging to her cheek in the breast deep water. She looked fearfully around and tried to hoist herself up on the dock, but he stood in front of her, blocking her progress. "Oh no, you don't. You're not getting out of there until you get my chair." He pointed at a spot next to her.

Remy felt incredible gauche and stupid as her feet hit the mud on the bottom and her anger at this brute of a man increased ten fold. "I don't see any stupid chair and I'm not looking for it either." She turned and began to wade out of the water, headed for the shore about four yards away. She wasn't going to put up with this kind of treatment; she didn't care if he shot her! That is, if an alligator or a swamp moccasin didn't get her first! He certainly wouldn't care, she was sure of that, the beast!

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," he said silkily, enjoying her unease when she turned to glare at him. He kept a sharp eye out to make sure there were no gators around.

"Why not?"

He gave a sharp whistle and a huge dog appeared out of the mist and stood staring at her with baleful eyes. "Because Old Joe guards my dock and no one gets on land that I don't approve first." Old Joe must have been half Doberman; half God knows what, because he was the ugliest dog Cork had ever seen. He seemed to have adopted Cork however, so he fed him regularly and let him stay. No one got near the shore without Cork hearing the bay of Old Joe resounding across the bayou.

Remy gasped in fright, turning pale at the sight of the monstrous dog. Legend in her family had it that Argonaut still existed, that he had never died. That his immortality was born of an ancient voodoo ritual given him by her great grandmother, and he was there to guard her treasure.

She girl eyed the dog warily and then she turned back to Cork, a decided gleam in her eye. For now, she would keep her secret, but soon...soon she would come back and play her grandmother's flute for Argonaut. It had always soothed the giant beast...or so it said in her great grandmother's diary. "Okay, so where's this dumb chair?"

"That's better," he replied smugly. "Once you return my chair, I'll let you up." He pointed once again to the spot where the chair had slid off the dock.

Shading her eyes, Remy peered down into the murky water in front of her. Seeing nothing, she kicked her leg out, feeling for something with her foot. When it touched something solid, she took a deep breath and bent her knees, lowering herself into the water and reaching down with her hands. Finding the back of the chair, she grasped hold of it and brought it to the surface. Holding onto it with one hand, she wiped the water from her face and stared doubtfully at it. "Is this what you wanted?" She asked scornfully, glaring at him. "I can't imagine anyone wanting to rescue this piece of junk!"

"Don't insult my chair," he ground out, taking it from her. He sat the chair on the dock and then bent down to grab her hands and pulled her slickly straight up and onto the dock. Her weight was nothing compared to some of the alligators he had wrestled. His eyes narrowed as the water sluiced off



her body, revealing the rounded contours of her breasts, even the dark aureoles of her nipples through the white, cotton, button down shirt she wore. Muttering a silent oath, he hustled her into the skiff the black man was holding against the dock as he surveyed the proceedings with a watchful eye. "Now you can get the hell out of here and quit bothering me," he said gruffly. He shoved the craft away from his dock and stood up, ignoring the outraged protests from his unwanted visitor.

He had picked up his gun and nestled it beneath his arm when he heard her call him.

"Hey you...you'll be hearing from me," she yelled as the boat moved out of reach. She shook her fist at him. "I'll be back, and in the meantime...kiss my ass!" She turned and dropped her jeans, revealing a deeply creamy bottom outlined in red briefs.

Cork laughed mirthlessly at her audacity. "If you come back here, I'll blister that ass until it's the same color as those panties," he yelled back. He turned and headed up the dock, patting Old Joe on the head as he passed him.

The dog was stiff as a board and didn't respond to the caress in his normal fashion and Cork looked down curiously. The black animal's gaze was steady on the spot where the skiff had disappeared, his ears cocked intently as he seemed to listen to the departure of the young girl and her guide. He growled when he heard the strident tones of the female drift back through the mist, and Cork nodded in assent. "I feel like growling too, boy, I'm with you on that one. That is one noisy, bothersome specimen of the female persuasion." He patted the dog's head again and chuckled as he turned toward

his cabin. "She did have a nice ass though, not to mention other parts."

Cork threw off the tank top, picked up an ax and began to work on the dead tree that had fallen during the last storm. Nothing like a little hard work to keep bitter thoughts at bay...and he had a few. Mostly though, he was just plain tired. Tired of the rat race that had been the music business. As much as he had loved being a jazz musician, he had abandoned his dream last year and bought this overrun piece of bayou, intending to retire permanently. He felt as if parts of him that had grown numb with the commercialization of his trade were finally beginning to unthaw. Here in the healing isolation of the bayou, Cork Renoir was slowly coming back to life.

A few hours later, he was sitting on his dock once again, enjoying a cold beer when he heard the sound of a boat making its way into the labyrinth that led to his place. He watched, grinning as the gray-haired man with powerful arms so like his own appeared, handling his boat with all the experience of a life spent shrimping on the bayou.

"Hello, Dad...what brings you over here today?" He took the rope his father threw him and tied it off on the piling as his father nimbly jumped onto the wooden planks.

A lazy grin spread across the features that were not unlike his own, just older. Piercing blue eyes gazed at his son as Pierre slowly drawled, "Heard you had a visitor this morning."

"News travels fast." Cork shook his head with a grin. Nothing was a secret in the bayou...not between the people anyway. The bayou herself never gave up her secrets though, and that made her all the more mysterious.

"You know who she is?" Pierre took the proffered beer that his son retrieved from a bent up cooler of ice and took a long drink, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He sat down in one of the other chairs Cork had on the deck.

"Nope...don't know, don't care."

Pierre eyed the old chair Cork was sitting in. "I see you managed to steal my favorite chair again."

Cork grinned. It was a long standing joke between father and son. The chair made its way back and forth between the two homes, but neither one ever saw the other take it. How it got back and forth, neither one was willing to reveal. He leaned back in the old chair, eyeing his father as it creaked beneath his weight. "That visitor you mentioned sent it into the bayou this morning, but she was kind enough to retrieve it."

Pierre took a long swig of his beer and stared skeptically at his son. "Yeah, I heard about how accommodating she was." A grin twitched at the corner of his lips. "You always was a hellion, Cork."

"Seemed fair," Cork replied with a chuckle.

His father stared into the swirling green waters off the deck, seemingly far away.

Cork knew his father well enough to know something was on his mind. He also knew he wouldn't tell him until he was ready. There was no rushing the folks in the bayou...they did things in their own good time. It was this slow methodical approach to life that had been sucked out of Cork when he left.

The hectic role of life on the road, a different bar or concert hall every night, and women who wanted to rip the shirt off his back had wrung the life right out of him. It felt good to sit here in the sunshine with nothing more to do than sip a cold beer, enjoy

his sparse company, and work on his cabin. He had all the money he would ever need, invested well. He had slowly begun to heal.

"Got something to discuss with you," began his father, reaching for another beer. He took his time opening the can and dropping the tab in a tin can on the dock.

Cork nodded. "Figured as much."

After a few more minutes of swamp staring, Pierre turned to Cork. "That little gal that was here...she's Roberta's granddaughter."

Cork's ears perked up with interest. "Do tell. That little slip of a thing? I thought she and Perly lived in Chicago."

"They did...they do. But Remy is here visiting her grandmother for the summer. She's never even been in the bayou before, so this is all new to her."

Pierre looked uneasy and Cork knew he wasn't finished. He waited, a little more impatiently this time. His Dad was leading up to something, and he was sure it had to do his little piece of paradise, but just what it was, he didn't know. No one had lived on this property since Roberta's mother had died. Rheims Renquist, bayou voodoo priestess, had owned this land and died on this land. The property had stayed in the family, but no one had dared to live here...that is...until Cork bought it. Before him, no one had wanted to touch it. When he had approached Roberta with an idea to buy the property, she had agreed. The remoteness had appealed to the inner core of Cork and his need to get away from the mainstream of society.

He had ignored all warnings concerning the land and spent last summer clearing the area and working on building a cabin. The old shanty that Rheims had lived in was back in the woods away,

and Cork had left it alone. Not that he believed in black magic, per se, but coming from the bayou himself, he had a healthy respect for those who did. Old Joe had appeared the day after he completed his cabin enough to move in.

"It appears that young Remy has found something in Rheims's old diary, something the rest of the family missed."

Cork leaned forward in interest, his vivid blue eyes watching his father. "What might that be?"

"A treasure map," replied Pierre, then went on, "and it appears that Rheims cast a spell on her dog. A spell that would make the animal immortal so he could guard her treasure."

Cork looked skeptical. "That old rumor about treasure being out here has been floating around for years. People have looked all over the place and never found anything."

"There has never been a dog around either...until now." Pierre looked pointedly at the big black dog sleeping in the sun. "Where did he come from?"

As if aware he was being discussed, Old Joe lifted his huge head and stared at Pierre with a disconcerting gaze, his eyes never leaving his face. When a low growl sounded in the dog's throat, Cork and his father glanced at each other, and Cork felt the hair on the back of his neck raise up.

"And what about Mad John's tale?" Pierre studied the dog who was studying him.

Cork shifted uneasily. "That old ghost story has been floating around for ages too. Most likely Old John had had one beer too many when he was treasure hunting."

"Well, drunk or not, he still swears he saw the ghost of Rheims Renquist out here." Pierre took out

his pipe and a bag of tobacco and tamped some into the end of it. Lighting a match, he puffed on the pipe as he lit it, the scent of cherry flavored tobacco surrounding them. He pinned Cork in his gaze, his eyes the same blue as his sons. "Anyway, I told Roberta you would keep an eye on Remy while she's here."

Cork mentally shifted gears, trying to fill in the gaps between treasure and ghost dogs to babysitting. His father had a disconcerting habit of expecting you to know what he was winding up to without ever filling in the gaps in between.

"Wait a minute...are you saying this Remy wants to treasure hunt?" At his father's nod, Cork expelled a breath of exasperation. "NO...she is not coming on my land to treasure hunt! That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. I'm not having my now peaceful existence disrupted by a sassy, not spanked often enough, little rabble rouser that loves heavy metal!"

Pierre chuckled and drew a drag on his pipe. "There's more, son."

"Don't tell me it gets worse!" Cork groaned at his father's nod.

"Roberta is worried because there are rumors floating around now that there really is a treasure and that Remy has come back to claim it. This dog here seems to substantiate that rumor, and you know what happens if people believe there might actually be something here."

"No, enlighten me," Cork replied sarcastically, envisioning his summer going up in flames as he spent his time guarding his land and trying to keep shovel happy treasure hunters from tearing it up! He knew full well what greed did to people! This was getting worse by the minute!

"That's not all," Pierre said succinctly, ignoring his son's obvious distress and frustration.

"What now?" Cork yelled the question and ran his hand distractedly through his sun bleached, sandy hair.

"Roberta asked if you would accompany Remy around your land and protect her from any unscrupulous people who might try to take advantage of her, not to mention the dangers of the bayou itself. She is worried for Remy's safety, her being new to the bayou and all. She doesn't want anything to happen to her while she is in her care."

Cork stared at his father, his frustration complete. "And I'm supposed to do this because the land used to belong to Roberta, and because she's your friend and you want to do her a favor, right?"

His father nodded, his eyes gleaming with amusement. "Can I count on you, son?"

"Who's gonna protect me?" Cork muttered, even as he nodded his head in exasperation. He couldn't turn his father down, though he badly wanted to. "But I'm warning you, and Roberta too. That little brat has obviously missed some much needed spankings, and if she gives me any trouble, I'll remedy that situation in a heartbeat."

"Fair enough, I'd say," chuckled Pierre, standing up. "What's for lunch? You got anything good?" He sniffed the air appreciatively as the smell of fresh boiling crayfish wafted from the open door of the cabin. With a hearty slap on his son's shoulders, the two men headed up the dock.

It was well after 1:00pm when Cork decided to lay down for a nap. His father had helped him devour the pot of crayfish, red from the boiling water, and then taken his leave. Pierre had still been chuckling at Cork's complaints of the

bombshells he had dropped in his lap when he climbed in his pirogue and pushed away from the dock.

It was a lazy afternoon, and a buzzing fly droned above Cork's head as his eyes drifted slowly closed. He was just slipping into a nice dream where he had a creamy set of red, satin covered buttocks over his broad lap when a shrill scream pierced the calm afternoon air. With a muttered oath and a sinking feeling in his stomach, he grabbed his rifle and headed out the door.



## Chapter Two

Cork sped out the back doorway of his cabin and followed the screams coming from behind the house. They were coming from the north dock; the one nobody ever used anymore, not even Old Joe. He had a sneaking suspicion what he was going to find there.

Sure enough, he stopped dead in his tracks when the screaming apparition appeared in front of him, and he tried valiantly to quell the mirth that set his broad shoulders shaking and his lips twitching.

There was Remy, his own personal nemesis to be, jumping and screeching like a million red ants were crawling inside her drawers. Old Joe was circling her and barking like crazy, a doggy laugh on his canine mouth, his tongue lolling out.

It was just too much, Cork couldn't help it. The shout of laughter erupted from his barrel chest, and he bent over to slap his knee, tickled beyond words at the sight before him...not to mention the satisfaction that welled up inside him as his trespasser got her just dues.

"Do something," she shrieked in mindless panic, "get them off me...get them off me!" Remy was helplessly wringing her hands and hopping from foot to foot in an effort to shake off the leeches that were all over her body.

She was unwilling to touch them herself, hence the hand wringing, a sight that Cork found immensely humorous. Finally he took a bit of pity on the panicking woman and strode forward to calm her, still chuckling. Her lack of exposure to the bayou was blatantly obvious by her reaction to the creatures clinging to her smooth skin.

"I see you found the leech bed," he said, his eyes mocking her. "Come on, we have to get them off you before they suck all your blood out." They wouldn't, but she didn't have to know that. Nothing like twisting the knife a little once it was in your opponent, though, and this particular opponent was giving him a headache for the second time today.

"Oh my god," squealed Remy, her face going paler than before. "Can they do that? Are they poisonous too?"

"Of course not," replied Cork, scanning her lithe figure. "But you gave them plenty of skin to attach to with those thin cotton shorts and a tank top."

"I...I didn't want to wear jeans...the weight," she stammered, her eyes huge as she allowed him to hustle her towards the cabin.

"Uh huh, you wanted to sneak onto the island without me knowing it."

She nodded miserably, but Cork had little sympathy for her. He dug the knife in a little. "The leeches won't hurt you under normal circumstances, but doctors used them to bleed patients in the not so long ago. They believed they sucked the bad blood out. But with as many as you have on you, it would be better to get them off as quickly as possible."

Remy watched as he dropped her arm and hauled a hug wooden vat out from behind the cabin and drug it down to the dock. Then he ducked inside the cabin and came back with a gallon tin beneath his arm.

"Okay, we're ready," he said cheerfully.

He was much too cheerful for Remy's liking, and she watched him suspiciously.

"Take off your clothes."

Remy gasped at his casual order, given as if he did this every day. He must be crazy if he thought she was going to take off her clothes in front him! She ignored the command as she watched him open the tin and pour a goodly amount of something white into the bottom of the vat and then pick up a bucket off the dock. He jumped down into knee deep water on the side of the dock and scooped up a couple of buckets of water and dumped them in the vat, and then he looked at her.

"Are you going to stand there all day," he growled. "Get those clothes off and get into the salt water. That is...if you want those things off you anytime soon."

"But...but...I...you," she stammered, blushing furiously. Undressing in front of this man was unthinkable. "Is...isn't there another way?"

"Look, you have to get in the salt water so the leeches will loose their grip and I can pull them off. Otherwise, with the number of them you have on your body, it's going to cause a lot of pain before I'm through. They don't like to let go once they have their suckers in place," he informed her as kindly as he could. Cork wasn't known for his patience when he was aggravated, and this little bit of a girl had raised his hackles from the very beginning.

Remy stared defiantly at him, but she moved to the vat and swung her leg over the side. She would get in it, but she had no intention of taking her clothes off! The scowl on his face made her quickly pull her other leg into the vat and she began scooping up salt water all over her legs in an attempt to loosen the sluggish looking creatures that were all over her.

With a muttered oath, Cork stepped back up on the dock, moved forward and grabbed the bottom of her tank top and slid it up over her head in one smooth motion.

"Stop it...stop it," yelled Remy, covering her breasts with her arms. The thin wispy bra didn't do much to cover her small, full breasts, not even the dark aureoles that were showing glaringly through the material.

Unsympathetically, Cork pulled her arms away and inspected her front, and then spun her around to check the back, her protests like a mouse beating against a cat's breast. He could do as he willed with her, and she couldn't do a damn thing about it! That infuriated her even more, and her fear of the leeches turned to anger at his highhandedness. When he grabbed the waistband of her blue cotton shorts, she shrieked and grabbed at them, trying to keep them up. It was a useless cause.

"Stop fighting me, pipsqueak," he growled, his bushy blonde brows drawing together, "or I'm going to tan your hide." He put both her small wrists in his huge palm and slipped his thumb in the waistband of her shorts once again, slipping them down, along with the red bikinis. "You can keep the bra on; the leeches are at your waist and below. But these have to come off."

"You can't...no...stop," she spluttered, her face turning a deep red. "Let go of me!"

He ignored her and spun her around, and her fear turned in another direction. Her memory of his threat when she mooned him rang in her ears, prompting her sudden outburst. "What are you doing...no...don't spank me," she yelled, trying to draw her buttocks in and away from him.

"I'm not spanking...yet," he replied menacingly. "Right now, there are leeches on your cute little ass, and they have to come off so you can sit in the salt water."

"Oh no," moaned Remy, horrified. She wondered if anyone had ever died of embarrassment before. If not, she figured she would be the first. She stiffened when she felt his fingers probing her lower right buttock, just below the high cut panty line.

"Stop clenching," he ordered gruffly. She did indeed have a cute ass, one just begging to be spanked, but that would come in due time. She wasn't going to be off the hook for this escapade just because of the leeches. There are worse things in the bayou than leeches, and he shuddered at the thought of what she might have encountered. She had no business in the bayou alone. Just why it bothered him, he wasn't sure, but he supposed it was the normal concern any human being would have for another in these circumstances.

Remy tried to relax. It wasn't as if she could do anything else! She wasn't strong enough to fight him successfully, but she resented his method of helping her. She couldn't think of another one though since she didn't intend to touch the horrible creatures. So that left him to do it...and she had to endure his touch on her sensitive skin.

She clenched her teeth and tried to think of something else besides the awful predicament she found herself in. She couldn't help yelping though, when the leech finally let go of her buttock.

"There's one down, only about fifty more to go," Cork said, as he threw the leech into an old coffee can on the dock. His fingers dug beneath another one in the middle of her lower left buttock and Remy trembled at his touch. She prayed there

weren't anymore on her sitting area, this was humiliating beyond words. He had let go of her wrists and her small hands gripped his burly forearm in a death grip while she closed her eyes, willing this to be over quickly.

If he wasn't such a grouchy monster, Remy might have been attracted to him. Her body was certainly reacting to his strong touch in a way that was unfamiliar to her. As if the few boys she had dated in her twenty three years were pallid compared to the touch of a real man. And Cork was certainly all man! As aggravated as she was with him, she had to give him that. His fingers were gentle in spite of his gruff exterior, and she was undeniably grateful, even if she didn't want to be.

He had pulled about 6 leeches off various parts of her upper and lower buttocks, leaving a blank space right across the middle where her bikini panties had been when he told her to sit down. She did so gratefully, trying to shield herself as much as possible from his gaze by drawing her knees up and folding her arms in front of her breasts. She needn't have bothered though, because he merely jumped back into the water and began dumping buckets of it into the vat.

While she sat in the salt water, Remy remembered Old Joe's reaction when he had spied her sneaking through the water, and she had stopped to play the flute. Argonaut, as her great grandmother had called him, hadn't let out a single yip as he had watched her advance. She had played softly to him, and he had perked his ears as if he recognized his name when she called to him, but he hadn't so much as growled at her. Remy wasn't sure how much of this voodoo magic she believed in, but she knew that dogs liked her, so she couldn't

be sure why he didn't howl to alert Cork of her presence. She was just glad that he hadn't! Not that it had mattered in the long run; her screams had alerted him anyway.

If it hadn't been for the broken section in the middle of the old dock, she would have been able to walk to the shore, but as it was, she had tied the skiff off at the end and dropped over the side. She had known she would have to wade water because she had scoped out the dock already, intending to sneak ashore and check out her great grandmother's old shanty. That was why she hadn't worn jeans, but now she wished she had! At least then she wouldn't have so many leeches on her, and definitely not in such sensitive places. She could tell there were some on the inside of her upper thighs and she knew she should take them off herself, but she couldn't bring herself to touch the horrible creatures.

Her reverie was interrupted when a pair of piercing blue eyes came level with hers, and she stared into them, her heart sinking. It was time for the rest of the leeches to come off.

"Hold still," he ordered, pulling her foot up out of the water. "We might as well start at the bottom and work our way up."

Remy winced at his choice of words. Her backside already stung from the salt in the open pores where the leeches had been pulled off. Soon, she was going to be one burning mass from her waist down! She took a deep breath and waited for him to begin, never taking her eyes off his set face.

They came off much easier now, but each removal of a hungry creature left Remy stinging and burning. When Cork's huge hands had gotten everything off the outside of her legs and across her

stomach and back, she knew the worst was yet to come. If it was any consolation, though, Cork seemed as uncomfortable as she was when he put both hands on her knees and tried to gently part them.

"Open for me, Remy, He said brusquely as his blue eyes glittered into hers. "Unless you can get the last few off yourself."

Remy gulped. God help her, she couldn't do it! She slowly slid her thighs slightly open and scrunched her eyes shut. This was so humiliating. Someone should just shoot me, she thought. She was trembling so badly that she couldn't keep her legs still.

Cork wasn't doing a whole lot better. In spite of his gruff ways, he knew this would hurt more in those sensitive areas near that apex of dark curls he could see. The inside of her thighs would be extra sensitive, and that's why he had saved that area for last, hoping the leeches would be easier to remove. Not to mention the effect the touch of her soft skin was having on his libido. She was the color of milky hot chocolate and as smooth as silk. Sweat broke out on his upper lip as his fingers found one of the bloodsuckers and dug beneath it. His knuckles brushed against the nest of soft curls, and he swore softly. "Damn, how old are you, woman? Old enough to know better, that's for sure."

Remy's eyes sprang open at his harsh tones, and her hackles rose. "I'm twenty two," she replied shortly, wincing as the hideous creature finally let go.

"Yes, definitely old enough to know better," growled Cork, trying to diffuse the rising desire he felt with righteous anger. "And if you don't, then the long end of a switch ought to teach you."



"You're not laying a hand on me," snarled Remy, close to tears. This situation was bad enough without him threatening her like that. How dare he?

"Don't bet on it, pipsqueak. You've got a damned good thrashing coming for this stunt, and I'll make sure you get it...one way or another."

Remy bit her lip as the last leech gave up, and she locked her legs together when Cork stood up and threw it in the coffee can.

"All right, you can put your panties on and come up to the cabin. I'm going to rinse you off with fresh water and soap to kill the germs." He stalked towards the cabin, leaving Remy fishing for her red briefs in the murky water. She slipped into them as she watched his broad back and then she grabbed her shorts and tank top to follow him up the slight incline and around back of the cabin. There he was, opening a rain barrel.

"Why didn't you just fill the vat with the fresh water?" She asked acidly.

He glared at her. "My God, how selfish can you get? Fresh water is at a premium here in case you didn't know." He dipped a huge ladle into the barrel and began sluicing water across her body, rinsing off the swamp water mixed with blood. As he soaped and rinsed her, his mouth was tight, his jaw clenched, and Remy had the grace to blush.

"I...I didn't know," she stammered and then trailed off, feeling foolish. It was obvious there was a lot she didn't know about the bayou.

When he took her arm and steered her in the back door of his cabin, she held back. "Wha...what are you doing?" She asked fearfully, his threat of a switching flashing into her mind once again.

"I'm going to put some antibiotic ointment on those bites," he replied impatiently.

"I can do it."

"You can't reach them all," he replied curtly, taking her wet clothing out of her hands and laying it on the table inside the door. "Stay here."

He went into another room in the cabin, and Remy looked around apprehensively, shivering from trepidation and something else. Not fear, but a strange sort of excitement. She scanned the room, noting the huge fireplace that covered one wall and the tools that hung above it. There was a wicker loveseat along one wall and two rocking chairs along the other, a broad beamed coffee table in the middle of the room. It was cozy and comfortable looking, decorated with what looked like handmade quilts on the chairs and pillows on the loveseat. There was a braided oval rug that lay in the middle of the room, and the mahogany coffee table sat in the middle of it.

She looked up as he came back carrying a tube of antibiotic cream and a t-shirt. "Put this on," he said gruffly.

Remy obeyed, wondering if the man ever smiled a genuine smile. The raucous laughter she had already experienced at her expense wasn't the same thing. The gray t-shirt came to her knees and was miles too big, but she felt braver inside it and less vulnerable.

That feeling was short-lived, however, when he took the hem of the shirt and wadded it up beneath her breasts. "Hold this and turn around," he ordered.

Reluctantly, she did so, trying to keep from trembling as he applied the cream liberally to the spots on her waist and back, then moving down to her buttocks and thighs. The feels of his strong

fingers on her skin made her heart race with excitement.

"There, you can do the rest," he said, handing her the tube. "When you're finished, I want you to lay down for awhile so any residual bleeding will stop." He opened a wooden chest by the loveseat and took out a blanket and spread it out on the wicker loveseat.

It was about this time Remy happened to wonder how she was going to get back to her grandmother's, but she obediently took the tube and sat down to apply the ointment to the rest of the spots. She watched him out of the corner of her eye as he picked up her wet clothes and took them out back, presumably to rinse them off and lay them to dry in the sun.

"What about my skiff," she yelled at the back door, and then shrank against the loveseat when he stuck his huge head in the door and pinned her with a steely glare. Subsiding against the loveseat, she tucked her feet up beneath her and stared sheepishly at her toes. When she looked up again, he was gone.

"Why me," muttered Cork as he made his way to the front dock and climbed aboard his pirogue. He began making his way to the north side of the island to retrieve her boat. "What the hell am I going to do with her?" He continued to talk to himself. "If I let her go, she'll just be back." He pulled in along side her skiff and reached over to untie the rope. "At least she had enough sense to tie the boat off," he grouched. Then he tied the rope to the stern of his own boat and started back.

Cork hated to admit it, but he was curious himself about the old voodoo woman that had owned the island for all those years...that is, until

he had bought it from her daughter, Roberta. He pondered the eerie lights he had seen coming from the old shanty area now and then. When they appeared, Old Joe would whine and stare, his tail wagging and goose bumps would raise on Cork's skin. But when he would get a lantern and take the dog to investigate, they never found anything. A few times, he had felt cold air brush past him, setting his nerve endings on edge, but he had put it down to the cool night breezes from the bayou. What else would it be, he reasoned. A ghost? He didn't believe in ghosts!

He grunted as he tied off both boats to his dock and stepped off. He was no closer to a solution than he had been concerning what to do with Remy, but he had to do something. He couldn't keep rescuing the little pipsqueak; he'd never have any peace!

He grumbled as he made his way to the cabin and looked in, expecting her to be asleep on the loveseat, but he was doomed to disappointment. The loveseat was bare! At that moment, the air was rent by a bloodcurdling scream and Cork sprang into action once again, cursing a blue streak.

He grabbed a machete and a rope off the fireplace and ran towards the shanty, fearing the worst. "The little fool must have gone for the shanty and most likely, she has found the quicksand," he exclaimed to Old Joe. "I swear, I'm gonna whale the tar out of that girl," he growled as he sprinted down the path, following the direction of the screams.

Remy was sinking fast! Desperately, she tried staying still to avoid sinking faster, trying to remember all the movies and information she has seen about quicksand. She didn't dare try to lay flat in case all those things she had heard were lies. If she lay flat, there would only be a few inches to go

before her mouth was filled up with the sucking sand, and she was in no hurry to die! Oh Lord, why hadn't she stayed on the loveseat like Cork had told her to do? She hadn't been able to resist the lure of her grandmother's old hut, that's why! She had felt like Rheims Renquist was calling to her somehow.

Suddenly, an old woman appeared before her, stilling her screams, and she stared in disbelief at the floating wisp. Was it really a woman...or a figment of her imagination?

"Hush, child, your man is on his way...you won't die today." Remy blinked when the apparition vanished as quickly as it had appeared, leaving her wondering if she was hallucinating. She shrieked in terror when the rope circle appeared in front her, then sighed in relief as Cork's harsh tones sounded behind her.

"Put the rope over your head and under your arms," came the strident demand and Remy did as he instructed, her hands shaking. She glanced behind her as she began to come out of the quicksand, and her innards began to quake even worse! If Cork had been angry before, it was a mild snit compared to the thunderous expression on his face this time.

Once she was free of the treacherous sands, he pulled the rope over her head and began to march her back to the cabin, his face grim and foreboding.

On the way, he stopped at a tree and took out his pocket knife. "Stand still, don't you dare move," he instructed as he reached forward and cut off a small branch as thick as his little finger. Taking her elbow, he began marching her once again, coming to a halt beside the rain barrel.

"Th...thank you," she said breathlessly as he lifted the lid and filled the ladle.

"Oh, don't thank me yet," he said silkily, his voice tinged with harshness. "Here, you rinse yourself off while I get this ready." He picked up the limb he had dropped and began to peel the leaves off it.

With a sinking heart, Remy started to shake, her hands trembling violently as she tried to rinse herself off with the water. He was going to switch her this time, she just knew it! She tried hard to swallow past the dry lump in her throat as she watched him purposefully smooth the bumps and hitches out of the switch with his knife, then swish it experimentally through the air. She had never felt the bite of a switch before...heck...she had never felt the sting of anything against her virgin derrière!

"Now then," he said, his eyes never leaving her pale face. "I believe we have some business to take care of, pipsqueak."

### Chapter Three

Remy began to back away, holding her left hand out as if to fend him off. "No...don't...please." She held the ladle in her right hand like a weapon, brandishing it in front of her. "Please!"

"Please what, Remy," he asked grimly, advancing on her. He grabbed the ladle from her hand and threw it in the rain barrel, and then he grabbed her left arm that was still outstretched.

"No, you can't do this," she squeaked as he spun her around. She felt his hand lift the long t-shirt and pin it under his thumb.

"Oh, yes I can," he replied. In one smooth stroke, he brought the switch down across the seat of her sassy red bikinis, causing her to jump and yelp. She danced away from him, but she couldn't go far, not with him holding her arm, and he brought it down again, catching her lower buttocks this time.

"Owww," wailed Remy, trying desperately to twist away from the burning punishment. This was worse than the leech bites in salt water...a lot worse! Regardless of which way she jumped and danced, the switch still caught her, leaving burning stripes in its wake as he methodically switched her from the top of her pert buttocks down to the middle of her slender thighs, leaving her sobbing and desperately crying her apologies. She had never felt such burning pain in all her young life!

Just when Remy thought her butt would surely go up in flames, he stopped and threw the hateful switch away. Turning her to face him, he lifted the t-shirt and took it off over her head. Grimly he set about rinsing and soaping her once again, ignoring her distress. He stripped off her panties despite her

protests and took her bra off too. "The sand has to be rinsed off or you'll be itching," was his brief explanation.

Remy was so upset she didn't have the breath to argue, she just sobbed and endured his ministrations, her mind dwelling on the intense pain coming from her buttocks and thighs. The cool water felt soothing, and she missed it when he finally stopped rinsing.

He took her hand and led her into the cabin and into his bedroom. He opened a drawer in his oak dresser and took out another t-shirt and dropped it over her head, and then he turned her towards the bed. "Get in," he ordered quietly and waited for her to obey. When she did, he covered her up. "Stay there and take a nap...you'll feel better when you wake up."

Cork stopped at the bedroom door, hesitating. He could see the small figure curled into a ball on her side, but he fought down the urge to go back and comfort her. She needed to learn a strong lesson. It wouldn't do to baby her too much yet. She needed time to think about it. Resolutely, he closed the bedroom door and went to see about cleaning up her undergarments.

As Cork rinsed out the filmy garments in the ladle of water and soap, he couldn't help remembering the feel of her soft skin beneath his hands, the brush of her nipples against his palm as he had washed her. It just made him crankier! The last thing he needed in his peaceful haven was this under-spanked brat! It was plain to him that she was going to be trouble in more ways than one. He didn't want to be attracted to her, he didn't need a woman in his life...didn't want one either. But the image of those beautiful slender thighs with the



dark curly crown wouldn't leave him alone, not to mention the deep rose aureoles of her breasts and nipples. She was made for loving. Despite her small size, she was as perfect as he'd ever seen...and he'd seen a few. He'd just never bought into any of them, and he didn't want to start now!

He wondered what her story really was, why Perly had allowed her daughter to return to the swamp although she wouldn't set foot in it herself. Not even to visit her mother, Roberta. They always met in New Orleans for their visits and as far as he knew, Perly hadn't been back since her fiancée had been killed in that shrimping accident all those years ago.

The rumors that went around were that Perly had married the first man that agreed to take her out of the bayou, and that man had been Raymond Broussard. Ugly rumors had surfaced, stories that Raymond had arranged the accident so he could have Perly for himself, but no one had ever substantiated that. Even his own father was as tightlipped as a clam about Roberta's affairs, although they had been friends for years. At one time, people had thought Roberta and Pierre might make a go of it after Roberta's husband died, but nothing had come of it.

Cork couldn't remember his mother all that well, but she had instilled in him a love of music, especially jazz. She had died when he was nine years old, and he had vowed to make it big in the music business, and he had...for her sake. It hadn't brought his mother back, though, and now, at the age of thirty, he was tired and feeling old himself. All he wanted now was the peace and comfort of the bayou...a return to his roots.

Cork couldn't help swearing out loud, "Damn, I don't need this woman here; she's going to be nothing but a headache all summer long!"

"She belongs to you, Cork Renoir, care for her well."

Cork froze, his head cocked and his attention riveted, the wind blowing gently in his ears like a whispering angel floating by. Had he heard that for real? He shook his great head and looked around him suspiciously. Was someone playing a trick on him? He strode into the cabin and gently eased the door to his room open. Remy was still in a ball in the middle of the bed, her brown hair splayed against his pillow, obviously asleep. He closed the door and went out the front door of his cabin and looked around.

The first thing he actually noticed was that his chair was gone. He scratched his head trying to remember if it had been there when he was taking the leeches off Remy, but he couldn't remember. It looked like his father had hornswoggled him again, and he couldn't help a grin. A slight movement to his right caught his attention and he spun to stare at the woods edge. Was that a figure moving? He walked slowly that way, but what seemed like a wispy caricature of a woman faded away as he got closer. What was going on here? He felt the skin crawl on the back of his neck. Cork didn't believe in ghosts, but there was sure something screwy going on!

He stopped when Old Joe wandered out of the brush where the image had been and sat on his haunches to stare expectantly at him. "What is it, boy? You see something too?" He walked forward to scratch behind the dog's silky ears, but Old Joe whined and looked over his shoulder. Once again,

Cork felt the hair on the back of his neck raise, and he stared uneasily in the direction of the old hut, searching for clues to this mystery.

When Old Joe growled low in his throat and started down the path, Cork watched him. When the dog stopped and looked back at him, he realized that he wanted him to follow him. "Just a minute, boy," he muttered, returning to his cabin for his rifle. Then he set out after the dog.

They carefully skirted the quicksand that Remy had fallen into unaware and continued on down the overgrown trail. The rain the night before had made the trail soft and moist, not that it ever really got that dry in the bayou, but there were puddles to avoid anyway. About a half mile down, they came to the old hut and Old Joe stopped and growled low in his throat, the ruff on the back of his neck standing up. He began to circle, sniffing the ground, working his way around the perimeter of the area. Out back of the shanty he stopped and growled again, then looked expectantly back at Cork.

"What is it, boy? What have you found?" Asked Cork as he came up beside the dog and knelt by his head. It was then he saw the tracks in the mud...about size 11 tracks if he had to guess...and not all that old. Someone had been here! He held his gun at the ready and scanned the trees hanging low with swamp moss and slowly walked around, checking to determine if there was more than one set of footprints. There were...there were two. The other set slightly smaller than the first, and he knew it had been two men. The footprints came up to the point where Old Joe had stopped, but no closer to the hut than that.

Uneasily, Cork stared at the shanty, its walls overgrown with moss and vines, its contents

apparently undisturbed. If the men had planned on getting in, Old Joe must have scared them off. It looked like his father and Roberta had been right, people believed the rumors of the treasure might be real and were already trespassing on his land.

He looked back at the swamp behind him. Although everyone around called it an island, his property was not actually an island at all. True, it was surrounded by water on three sides, but you could get into it from the back...from the bayou...if you knew how. The average person would never make it, but someone who had lived on the bayous all their lives would know how to do it, the pitfalls to avoid. That meant Remy could be in danger after all, and that left Cork little choice but to do something about it. He groaned as he stared back at the old hut once again, wondering if there really was anything to the treasure story and seeing his summer haven gone for sure.

Carefully, he picked his way through the brush that led up to the dilapidated door, keeping a sharp eye out for snakes. He really needed his machete if they were going to be coming in and out of this place, but for the moment, his curiosity had finally gotten the best of him.

Old Joe stuck right to the side of his leg, his ears flicking back and forth as they made their way in, and Cork hated to admit it, but he was glad for the dog's company.

There was an old rusted kettle laying in the front yard, the few flowers that bravely dared to come back in it almost choked out by the weeds. What was left of a rotting pirogue sat on equally rotten sawhorses, left to deteriorate in the humid climate, no longer needed by its human counterpart. But it was the trio of skulls hanging on the door that got

Cork's attention, the grisly evidence of its previous voodoo occupant glaringly obvious.

Cork took hold of the metal handle on the door and lifted it, trying to disengage it from the rusty latch. Once it was free, he gently swung it open and peered inside, reluctant to cross the threshold. Old Joe seemed to hold no such qualms, and he trotted on in and began to sniff around, his tail high in the air and wagging as if he did this every day.

Cork followed him, carefully surveying the inside of the small shanty. Dust particles danced in the light shaft from the dirty glass window pane where a table sat. The wooden table had an earthenware bowl on it, covered in heavy dust. The fireplace still had ashes and a partially burned log in it, probably rotted by this time.

Cork's gaze swung on around the room, noting the dirt floor, packed hard by years of bare feet walking on it and the remains of a shredded old blanket hanging in a doorway to separate a room from this main room. There were some huge black kettles, turned upside down and bottles and jars stuffed into various wooden racks, all covered in dust. There were a couple of wooden chests in the corner, but Cork didn't intend to look in them yet. This was Remy's ancestor, after all. He would bring her here and let her look when they had some flashlights or lanterns. The old lantern hanging on the hook inside the door didn't have any oil in it so it was unusable.

There was a door off to the right side of the fireplace and Cork approached it cautiously. From the outside, the cabin looked to be one or possibly two rooms, the pointed roof rising above the entire structure, but he didn't remember seeing a door in the back wall. Lifting the wooden latch, he pulled

the door open, coughing when the dust flew into the air. It didn't open to the outside as he had expected, but instead, there were wooden steps leading down into darkness and he realized there must be a cellar of sorts down there.

He started when Old Joe stuck his head down into the hole and growled, the ruff on the back of his neck standing up. "What is it, boy?" He asked uneasily, and then realized how stupid he must sound. Why did people always talk to animals as if they had every confidence that the animal would answer them? Old Joe backed up with a whine and Cork closed the door. If it was good enough for Old Joe to leave alone, then it was good enough for him. He'd check it out later, when he had a lantern and maybe Remy for company. Not for the world would he admit to anything like being scared...but it did make him uneasy.

The books caught his eye when he swung around and he approached the fireplace, intending to see if there was anything of any value there. He picked up one of the old tomes and blew the dust off, trying to make out the title. It looked like a book about medicinal herbs and how to use them, but it was so old the pages were crumbling and falling apart. He decided to take it back to Remy; she might want to salvage what she could from it. The other book was about a snake god called Zamballa. He put that one in his pocket too, trying to remember anything he might have heard about voodoo.

Old Joe growled low in his throat and stared out the door towards his own cabin and Cork decided to call it a day. Shutting the door behind him, he followed the black dog back along the trail towards home and the girl who was waiting there for him.

He knew what he had to do...and he knew she wasn't going to like it.

Remy woke up with a start and was disoriented for a moment until she stretched out. The stripes on her buttocks and legs protested this movement, and she hissed an indrawn breath and moved more gingerly, instantly remembering the reason they were there. Cork had switched her, damn the man!

She got up slowly and walked to the front door of the cabin, realizing it was getting late in the afternoon by the angle of the reddened sun and that Cork had brought her boat back. It was time to be getting back to her Grandmothers!

She walked back through the cabin and out back to retrieve her clothing. It was partially dry and she dressed quickly, wondering where Cork had gone, but not particularly caring. In fact, she didn't care if she never saw him again! The memory of his probing fingers and his hands on her body when he washed her down the second time made her cheeks flare in humiliation and embarrassment, and she vowed things would be different next time they met. So far, he had had all the advantages and she had had none, but that was going to change. She would hire a guide, a good guide, not old Augustus who was scared of his own shadow. She would hire someone who would stand up to Cork! And her Grandmother could gain her admittance to the property that used to belong to Rheims' Renquist, she was sure of it. No, if Cork Renoir thought he had cowed Remy Broussard, he was in for a big shock.

Angrily she clamored aboard her skiff and untied the rope from the dock. At least, she knew the way back to her Grandmother's, that wasn't a problem. She'd show Cork Renoir!

As she poled her way along the bayou, she shuddered at the huge alligator that stared at her from the bank, its cold reptilian eyes seeming to be assessing her prowess and how experienced she was. She stuck her tongue out at the hideous creature and was rewarded when it thrashed its huge tail. Thankfully, it didn't enter the water, and her heart rate slowed to normal when she was finally well past it.

When she docked her skiff at the boat dock of the small town of Lafayette and picked up her bicycle, it occurred to her that she would have a hard time riding it to her Grandmother's house. Grumbling about monstrous men and their switches, she set off at a walk, pushing the useless bicycle along in front of her for the six blocks it took to get to Roberta's home in the small village.

Roberta was sitting on her front porch, wondering why Remy was pushing the bicycle instead of riding it and also wondering if she should forbid Remy to go alone into the bayou anymore. She had worried about the girl all afternoon and had come close to sending Augustus after her, but the old man was reluctant to come in contact with Pierre's son, Cork. She was very relieved to see that her granddaughter was safe, and she smiled her welcome, her faded brown eyes twinkling with pleasure.

Her soft Creole accent was husky in the fading twilight as she gently rocked the swing back and forth. "There you are, child, I was about to send out a search party for you."

"No need for that, I can take care of myself," replied Remy, walking stiffly up the stairs. She didn't intend to tell her Gramma about the leeches



or the quicksand...she worried enough about her as it was.

"Are you hungry?" Roberta rose and followed Remy into the house.

"Starved!"

Roberta's eyebrows shot up when she spied the welts on the back of Remy's thighs, but she didn't say anything. It looked like the deal Pierre had made with his son was already having an effect. She wondered what Remy had done to make Cork spank her already. Shaking her head she went to the stove and turned the gas burner on beneath the pot of gumbo she had left out for her granddaughter. She supposed she would find out in due course, but Remy's daughter was a reticent sort, and Roberta wasn't much of a pryer.

"Did you have a good afternoon?" She asked politely, eyeing the disgruntled face of the young woman. Remy hadn't been here very long, and they were still getting used to one another. She had only arrived day before yesterday, as a matter of fact. They had a lot of years to reconnoiter on because Remy had never come back to the bayou, and visits to New Orleans hadn't been near often enough.

"It was all right," Remy replied grudgingly, as if hating to give out any information.

She squirmed on her chair, and Roberta smiled to herself, knowing she must still be feeling the effects of the obvious switching. She inspected her granddaughter as the gumbo heated and noticed the little red marks all over the front of her legs. Frowning, she moved closer, leaning over to look. "What are those bites on your legs, child? You've got them all over you!"

Flushing, Remy moved her legs beneath the table. "It's...it's nothing, just mosquito bites," she

said, biting her lip. She hated the lie even as it came out, but she didn't want her grandmother to know how stupid she had been!

"You need to wear long pants and long sleeves when you go into the bayou, Remy. You'll be eat up with mosquitoes if you don't."

"I know that now," Remy replied wryly. "Don't worry, I will!" She leaned her chin into her hand as she watched Roberta dish up a bowl of the gumbo. Her stomach rumbled appreciatively as the steam rose from the thick soup, and she began to eat with relish. A dish of cheese chunks and biscuits appeared at her elbow, and she smiled gratefully at the older woman.

"Say, Gramma, do you know any good guides around here? I mean someone that's tough as nails and knows how to use a gun?"

Roberta's eyebrows shot up. "Guides? What do you need a guide for? You already know where Mama's place is. And why would he need a gun?"

"Oh, just because I would feel safer with a gun," replied Remy, taking a bite of cheese. "You know, for alligators and snakes. And so someone can help me if I need help with anything...that kind of thing."

"What about Cork?"

"Ha...what about him?" Scoffed Remy. "That man is nothing but a stereo shooting brute, and I don't want anything to do with him except to get on his land. If I never see him again, it will be too soon!"

Both women were startled when a loud, impatient sounding knock landed on the front door, shattering the quiet of the evening twilight. Now, who could that be?

Cork stared at the bed, anger coursing through him. She had done it again...she was gone! On top

of that, she hadn't even made up his bed...and the t-shirt he had given her to wear was lying in the middle of the rumpled mess!

Spinning on his heel, he strode out the front door, checking to see if the skiff was gone. Yes...it was gone all right! He quickly climbed aboard his pirogue and yanked on the engine starter cord. He wanted to make better time tonight than he did with his barge pole, and he was rewarded with the outboard engine sputtering to life. Tonight, it was the mudbug, as they called the pirogues with engines.

Backing away from the dock, he sent the boat speeding down the waterway and into the main water channel of the bayou. He'd catch up with Remy Broussard and lay down the law. There would be no more sneaking onto his land, and if she didn't like that, then a trip over his knee might just convince her that he meant business. He'd do it too, if that's what it took, but he hoped she would be reasonable and see the sense of his plan.

He gritted his teeth with impatience until he finally stalked up the front steps of Roberta's small, whitewashed home and pounded on the front door. When it finally opened, he eyed the Creole woman with the soft white hair and burst out, "Where's Remy? I need to talk to her, and she had damn well better listen!"

Remy's small indignant face appeared behind the older woman, and she spat back at him, "I don't have to listen to anything you say, Cork Renoir. I'm not on your property now, so shove off!"

"You will be shortly, that's what I'm here to tell you. I've decided you're going to stay with me at my place until we get to the bottom of this crazy treasure hunting scheme of yours, and I won't take

no for an answer. So get your things together; we're going back tonight. And if I get any lip from you, pipsqueak, I'll turn you over my knee and turn that ass redder than it already is!"

## Chapter Four

Remy gasped. "Are you insane? I'm not going to stay with you! I hate you!" Her eyes flashed indignantly.

Cork tried to reach around Roberta to get to Remy. "Oh yes you will, and I don't care if you hate me, in fact...I like it better that way!"

"NO!"

"Come *here*..."

"Hold it!" The command was sharply given and both combatants halted when Roberta held up her hand. "Calm down, both of you." She eyed the angry man in front of her, his expression set in the "bulldog" look she had come to know on the face of his father. It meant he was being exceptionally pigheaded and stubborn, whether he was right or not. "Cork, you might as well come in and let's discuss this rationally, maybe over a bowl of gumbo. Are you hungry? I know Remy was just eating hers, so you must not have had supper either."

"Yes, thank you, Roberta. I am hungry, and it's been hours since lunch," Cork replied in a disgruntled voice as he tried to remember his manners and get his frustration with Remy under control. He had known the brat wouldn't want to cooperate!

Remy's own face was almost as mulish looking as Cork's, but she sent him a killing glare before she turned her back on him and returned to the kitchen. She sat down and began eating again, although her dinner was being ruined by the bully sitting across the table from her. Pointedly, she ignored him, refusing to meet his eyes.

The trio was silent until Roberta sat a steaming dish of the gumbo in front of Cork and another plate of biscuits and cheese. "I'll put on a pot of coffee and then we can chat," she said, eyeing the two. The friction between them was astounding, and it was obvious from Cork's reluctant yet fascinated glances at the bent head across from him that he was besotted. It was also obvious that he didn't have a clue as to his condition. She smiled a secretive smile. It had been the same way for his father and mother. Pierre hadn't known what hit him either when Olivia Brouder had entered his life, and they had had a stormy and frustrating courtship until they had figured it out.

She sat down at the table and watched the two young people. "Now then, Cork...what makes you think Remy should stay at your place?"

"Because she's going to get into serious trouble again, and I won't be there to save her butt, that's why," growled Cork, taking a bite of the warm biscuit. "Especially if she persists in trying to sneak onto my land."

Remy lifted her head and protested, "But, that's not fair, I didn't know..."

"No, you didn't know," cut in Cork, pinning her in his sights. "And you still don't know all the dangers in the bayou. It's no place for an amateur on her own."

"But I don't need to stay at your place," argued Remy, "I can just come out there each day and go home at night."

"I don't want you traversing the waterways alone," He replied bluntly. "There are too many dangers you are unaware of."

"Like what?" She blustered, her face getting red with anger.

Cork stared at her, his spoon in midair. "Like the fact that it's mating season for gators, and they've been known to knock boats over when they get all...uh...excited," he finished delicately.

Remy blushed furiously. "So, I can avoid the alligators."

"Not when they come up under your skiff, and you don't even know they are there," he said bluntly. "Besides the obvious dangers of nature, there's the two legged variety of alligators," he said curtly.

"Who's going to bother me?" Remy asked in amazement. "This is a very small community, and everyone knows everyone else."

Roberta intervened at that point. "That's true, Remy, but there are outsiders who know their way around here as well...and the rumor of Mama's treasure may have spread. There could be...undesirables coming in to look for themselves."

"Exactly right, Roberta. I found footprints behind the old shanty today...fresh ones...two sets. It's started already."

Remy was confused. "But, I thought no one got on your island without Old Joe knowing about it?"

"They don't under normal circumstances, but it's not actually an island...and these intruders came from the swamp...from the back." He took another bite of gumbo and eyed the girl. "Beyond that, people find a way to do things if they really want to...and treasure hunters can be an enterprising lot."

Remy's chin came up. "Yes, we can."

Cork looked pointedly at her. "That's why I don't want you coming and going alone, or looking around alone. You stay at the cabin for as long as you need, and I'll help you."

Remy shook her head. "No way...the last thing I need is an incredible grouch looking over my shoulder. Besides, I have no intention of spending the night with you, alone in your cabin!"

"Don't worry; I won't attack you, if that's what you're worried about." He rolled his eyes in disgust and picked up a piece of cheese. "So stop being stubborn and just agree."

"No."

"All right, if you won't agree, then you can't have access to the hut or my land," he replied grimly.

"You can't do that! That hut belonged to my great grandmother!"

"And now it belongs to me!"

Remy threw her napkin on the table and stood up. "You're impossible...I hate you!"

"You've said that already, but it doesn't change anything. That's the deal, take it or leave it." He methodically ate the last bite of gumbo and stood up. "Thank you, Roberta; that was excellent. I'll be going now." He started towards the living room.

"Wait!" Remy fidgeted with the piece of cheese in her fingers. "All right, I'll take your deal, but I'm not going tonight, I'll meet you out there tomorrow."

"Why wait?"

"Because I need to get some things together, that's why," she replied stubbornly.

"All right, but I'll pick you up. I don't want you on the water alone."

"That's so retarded," muttered Remy resentfully.

"Pardon me?" Cork stared at her, warning glints dancing in his eyes as he dared her to speak aloud.

"I said that's retarded," she snapped. "I'm fully capable of getting to your place on my own."



Besides, I want my skiff there in case I need to come back for some....ah....reason."

"You mean you want the ability to run off whenever you choose. No dice, pipsqueak. You stay until I'm ready to bring you home; no matter how retarded it seems to you!"

Remy opened her mouth to retort, but Cork cut her off, his square jaw jutting forward.

"And furthermore, there will be NO heavy metal garbage played on my land, is that clear?"

"How am I suppose to play anything?" She asked acidly. "You shot my stereo, remember? For which you now owe me three hundred dollars!"

"You don't need it in the bayou. The sound of nature is loud enough."

Remy rolled her eyes. "Oh brother...Oscar the swamp grouch with a poetic bent....how quaint!"

"I take it you enjoyed your first spanking so much you are angling for another one?" Cork's vivid blue eyes glinted dangerously.

Remy gasped, her face flushing with embarrassment as she looked at her Gramma.

Roberta chose that moment to calmly pick up their bowls and take them to the sink, ignoring the combatants.

"Bite me," she muttered under her breath, but loud enough for him to hear.

He leaned forward and whispered into her ear. "Not on the first date, honey, although I could make an exception for you I think." Then he strode to the front door, leaving Remy blushing furiously and unable to think of a suitable retort in her Grandmother's hearing.

Cork turned at the door and looked back. "I'll be here at noon tomorrow, and I don't like to wait,

pipsqueak." He closed the door behind him with a soft click.

Remy exploded in a giant huff, stomping her foot against the hardwood floor so hard she set herself hopping about. "Damn, damn, I think I broke my foot, and it's all his fault," she moaned.

Her grandmother watched her, shaking her head. "That's what usually happens when one has a tantrum, my dear."

"I'm not having a tantrum; he just makes me so mad I could spit!"

Roberta chuckled. "If it's any consolation, you seem to have the same effect on him."

"I'm going to get a shower," Remy replied crossly, limping towards the bathroom.

Roberta just nodded as she chuckled and headed back to the kitchen. The sparks sure were flying between those two, and she wondered if was a wise idea after all to have Remy alone with Cork on the island. She had faith that he was like his father though, and Pierre was as trustworthy and honest as they came. No, he would protect her granddaughter without taking advantage of her, she was sure of it. If he wasn't, Pierre would never have agreed to ask Cork to watch out for Remy. Now all they had to do was figure out that they really liked each other instead of expending all that tension being angry. Sure seemed like true love always took a mighty crooked path!

Remy let the tension drain away beneath the hot shower, the leech bites and the welts burning as the water first washed over them, then feeling soothed as they absorbed the heat. She sighed and leaned against the side of the shower, closing her eyes and remembering the humiliating events of the day. She resented Cork's highhandedness, and she didn't

want to stay out there with him. Where would she sleep? Still, it looked like she didn't have any choice if she was going to get her chance to look around. She wondered if sneaking in the back way would be a viable option? Probably not. She had no desire to end up an alligator's dinner and or to get snake-bit! No, it looked like Cork had all the cards...for the moment.

Tomorrow she would have to run into town and get her a new boom box. Or at least something she could play while she was out there, and lots of batteries to keep it running. She didn't know if Cork had electricity or not, but she didn't think so. Oh....and a heavy metal CD. She smiled wickedly at the thought. It didn't matter that she didn't like heavy metal...that was beside the point. She'd teach him to shoot her three hundred dollar stereo!

Immensely cheered by her thoughts of revenge, Remy padded to her bedroom in her bath towel to get dressed. It didn't take her long to pack a bag either, because she didn't plan on staying all that long on the island. Heartened by her new plans she went to find her Gramma.

Roberta was in the living room, studying the map Remy had given her. She looked at it closely, trying to think of what her mother might have meant by some of the words and symbols. She had done a lot of thinking since Remy arrived, and she supposed her Mama might have squirreled away some gold here and there. Lord knows they had lived simply enough!

Roberta had been ecstatic to finally get married and move away from the island and Eustacious Lafayette had provided a good living for them. They had only had one child though, Perly...short for Pearline, Remy's mother. That had been her only

regret, she and Eusty had both wanted a houseful of children.

Perly had been fascinated with her Grandmother's voodoo practices and had visited the island often, spending long hours talking with her grandmother and getting gris-gris' for love potions and other nonsense that Roberta had never believed in. Many people did, though, and her mother had had her share of important people visiting her and requesting different things. It was always very secretive, and she had never been interested in the grisly accoutrements of voodoo worship. In fact, she hated snakes with a passion! But just before her mother had died, she had insisted that Perly have the small cedar chest that contained her diary and a few other mementos. Roberta had agreed to give it to her daughter and she had on one of her visits to New Orleans. Apparently, it was in this diary that Remy had found the map, hidden behind the back page of the book which had been glued to the back cover.

"Are you figuring anything out?"

She looked up to see Remy, fresh from her shower, and she smiled. "I'm trying to remember, child. Something about this is familiar, but I can't quite place it yet. It's been years since I was on the island, but I do remember the quicksand pit, and I'm sure that's what Mama has drawn here, at least it's part of the whole picture."

Remy shuddered. She would always remember the quicksand pit too!

"What do you suppose this poem can mean?" She pointed to the scratchy writing at the bottom of the map, the words already carefully stored in her memory banks. She had a photographic memory, which was why she didn't need to carry the map

around with her. She could see every detail perfectly in her mind's eye, from the location of the hut to the quicksand pit.

Weep not, my child the dawn will come,  
its lighted fingers point the way.

When Zamballa greets the morning sun,  
All will be revealed, I say.

"I don't know," replied Roberta thoughtfully. "It's rather cryptic, to say the least, but then, Mama was a very secretive person." She looked up into Remy's face, wondering how much, if anything, all this had to do with the death of Perly's fiancé, Charles. Try as she might, Roberta had never been as close to Perly as she would have liked, and the death of Charles Montaine had been deemed an accident, although many people thought that wasn't true.

Heartbroken, Perly had married Remy's father and left the bayou. She hadn't been back since, and she had never shared her reasons, simply leaving people to believe what they wanted. But Roberta knew there was more to it than that. Charles's family was of the old money kind, and they had not approved of his alliance with her, but Perly had been besotted with him from the time she set eyes on him. Charles Montaine Sr. had been so grief-stricken at his son's death that he had withdrawn from the senatorial race for congress. People had had all kinds of ideas about that too, but it was all rumors and hearsay.

"Did you ask your Mother about this?" She finally asked, looking up at Remy.

"Actually, I never showed it to her," replied Remy honestly. "Mother used to tell me all kinds of stories about great grandmother Remy, but she always said she never wanted to go there

again...and she didn't want me to either. But I'm old enough to make my own decisions, so I decided I'd look around and see if I could find this treasure Great Gramma is speaking of."

Remy looked anxiously at her grandmother. "To be perfectly honest, I think Mother would be very upset if she saw this. She didn't want me to even come here, let alone go out to the island. I don't know why, but it seems almost as if she is afraid of something."

Roberta spoke slowly, thoughtfully. "Sometimes it's best not to dredge up the past. Your mother was very much in love with a man named Charles Montaine all those years ago. When he was killed, she married your father and left."

Remy was intrigued. "I didn't know that, she never told me. What happened?"

"An accident on a shrimping boat."

"Oh!"

Roberta stared at her granddaughter uneasily. So many old stories, old rumors, what was she supposed to tell her? And what, if anything, did this map really mean? And why was Remy afraid? Finally, she spoke. "I don't suppose I could talk you out of looking for this treasure, could I?"

"But...why?" Remy asked, frowning. "What does this have to do with Mother?"

"I don't know," replied Roberta, tapping the map with her finger. "Maybe nothing. But I want you to be careful, Remy. Stay with Cork and don't go off on your own. I don't want to spoil your summer fun, but the bayou can be a very dangerous place."

Remy sighed deeply. "All right, Gramma, but I don't like it very well. That man is a major grouch, and I don't like him. But for you, I'll try. He better

not touch me with a switch again, or I'll put a snake in his bed!"

"Are you going to tell me why he spanked you?" Roberta's eyes twinkled.

Remy blushed shyly but grinned unrepentantly. "I found the quicksand, and he had to pull me out."

"Ah, I see," chuckled Roberta.

"And that was after I found the leech bed, and he had to pull those off me."

"Oh my, no wonder he was upset!"

"Yeah, well...I say he deserved it. If he wasn't such a trashcan dweller, I wouldn't have had to sneak around and then I wouldn't have gotten into those messes."

"Trashcan dweller?"

"Yeah, you know...Oscar the Grouch? From Sesame Street?"

"Oh...oh yes!" Roberta burst out laughing. "Now I see what you are getting at. Oh my...trashcan dweller."

"And all because he shot my stereo," Remy finished dramatically. "Crazy man...that's what he is. I don't see how any self respecting thief would want to get on his island, they might get shot!"

Roberta sobered quickly and placed a weathered hand on Remy's knee. "Do be careful, child, and stay with Cork. I know he's a bit gruff, but he has a big heart and means well. He can protect you."

Remy sighed and rolled her eyes, but she squeezed her Gramma's hand in agreement. They talked for a long time and at last, Remy sought her bed, leaving the map lying on the side table by the chair. She would take it with her in the morning to show to Oscar.

In the darkness beyond the house, a man dressed in black sat on the tree limb where he had

a good view of the library of Roberta's home. Flipping out his cell phone, he punched in a number. "They've gone to bed now; it's been quiet for the last hour. You want me to look around?"

"Of course, I want you to look around," snapped the voice through the phone. "It's what I'm paying you for."

"Right," replied the small slender man, and he flipped the phone shut and turned it off. Wouldn't want it to ring while he was in the house. Silently, he made his way to the French doors. A few minutes later, he was inside.

Cork stood staring in the direction of the old hut once again, the hair on the back of his neck standing up. There were lights winking through the trees, just little bits of light, like a small flashlight or lantern. Looking down, he could see the ruff on the back of Old Joe's neck standing up. A low growl rumbled in the dog's throat, and he wondered if he should go check things out again.

Making up his mind he took a lantern, and making no noise this time, he slipped silently into the brush along the side the path, intending to come up on the shanty from the side. If someone was out there, they would answer to him! Clutching his pistol in one hand, he used the other to carefully clear away any low hanging limbs as he made his way slowly towards the hut, pausing to listen for anything unusual.

Old Joe stuck right with him, the growling ceased for the moment as he sniffed the air, his ears cocked forward as if listening to something only he could hear. It took some time, but they worked their way slowly until Cork could see the shanty standing in the moonlight, quiet and eerie



looking. He stood and stared, his muscles tense as he waited for something...anything, to happen.

When all stayed still, he finally relaxed and stepped into the clearing. "Come on, boy, there's nothing here. Looks like another false alarm," he said quietly, walking around the outside of the hut. It was then he noticed something winking in the side yard, and he frowned. As he drew closer, he realized it was the moonlight glinting off something, and he opened the old gate and walked into the yard and around to the side.

Stopping in front of a vine covered conglomeration of some sort, he took a flashlight out of his pocket and shone it into the foliage. There was something under there. He began to pull the leaves and vines away, soon revealing some sort of statue made out of concrete. As he pulled the moss away from the top, he could see that the statue was of a snake entwined around a tree, all carved from granite, not concrete. For the life of him, Cork couldn't see anything that might have caused the glinting light that caught his attention and he frowned, trying to figure it out.

Corrkkkkkk.....

Cork tensed up. Was someone calling him? He looked around, the hair on the back of his neck shooting up again. He looked up at the snake's head in the moonlight, its gaping mouth seeming to mock and laugh at him. He felt the sudden cold breeze waft by him, and Old Joe growled low in his throat.

"Who's there?" He asked sharply, holding tightly to his pistol. "Show yourself if you know me!"

A slight movement inside the dirty window glass of the shanty caught his attention, and his head jerked around to stare, trying to see inside the dark interior. Was someone inside the hut? Someone

trying to play a trick on him? If they were, they would soon be sorry!

Striding to the front door, he flung it open, allowing moonlight to shine inside, and he pointed the flashlight inside the room, swirling it quickly around. "Is someone in here?" He demanded harshly.

There was no answer but when the door to the supposed cellar creaked in the still room, he clenched his jaw and stared hard at it, trying to see if someone was behind it. "You better show yourself, or I'll shoot," he threatened. "No one is allowed in here, so you better make it easy on yourself and get out here!"

A light mocking laughter, so light Cork couldn't tell if he was actually hearing something or not, floated through the room, causing him to strain to listen. Old Joe growled and froze, his nose pointing at the door, and Cork shone the light down, grimacing as a snake slithered out of it. Its forked tongue flicked lightly in the beam from the flashlight as it paused and stared back, then quickly slid out a small opening in the wall.

Cork hadn't realized he was holding his breath until he expelled it in a relieved whoosh. But where had the snake come from? He could have sworn he had closed that door this afternoon and latched it, but here it was open.

"I think I've had enough for one night, boy," he muttered to Old Joe. "I'm not tackling that cellar in the dark; it'll just have to wait until tomorrow."

As if in agreement, the dog turned and retreated out the door. Cork followed him, shutting the door behind him and latching it. He made one more trek around the perimeter, but other than the footprints that had been there earlier, there were no signs of

anyone coming in. He felt uneasy as he started down the path towards his cabin, and he paused to look back at the house.

There it was again....just like this afternoon! Staring, he tried to make out if the apparition was a woman or if there was even anything there. It moved from the door of the hut into the side yard, paused at the snake statue, and then disappeared.

A cold chill ran down Cork's spine, and his large frame shuddered as he walked quickly back to his place. Either his imagination was working overtime because of the ghostly atmosphere of the hut, or something awfully strange was going on. Either way, he didn't like it! He was almost home when it appeared in front of him on the path, and this time, there was no mistaking the womanly form!

## Chapter Five

Cork froze in place, his heart beating a rapid tattoo. He didn't believe in ghosts, yet here was one seemingly right here in the moonlight before him.

"Look to Zamballaaaa..." came the ghostly whisper as the long, dark hair floated around the pale face. It was the face of an old woman, yet the apparition was almost transparent as it floated a few feet above the grass.

The only thing Cork knew about Zamballa was that it was the snake god of voodoo worship. "What the hell does that mean," he growled, moving closer to the woman. As he moved, it dissipated, leaving Cork wondering if it had really been real.

Shaking his head, he quickly returned to his cabin and locked the door behind him. Once inside, he lit a lantern, infusing a warm glow around the small living room and kitchen and then went to his bedroom. Lighting another lantern, he turned it up bright so he could make up his bed. Picking up the t-shirt, he held it to his face, sniffing Remy's clean scent and then dropped it onto the chair. Moving efficiently, he soon had his bed ready, and he undressed and climbed into it, leaving the lanterns on and the pistol by his bed.

Old Joe turned around in a circle and then settled down on the braided rug by the bed with a sigh, his nose on his paws. After Cork felt the chill leave his body he felt rather foolish, and he got up and turned the lanterns off, then lay in the moonlight waiting for sleep to come. It took awhile, and as he waited, he thought of the little brown-haired pipsqueak that was causing him so much trouble. He finally drifted off, the feel of her soft skin and the memory of her beautiful, saucy breasts

chasing away the remnants of the ghostly apparition. This would probably be the last night of peaceful sleep he would be able to come by for awhile, and he intended to make the most of it. That is...if Remy Renquist left him alone in his dreams. Still, that was one place he'd rather see Rheims of the present than Rheims of the past!

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"That'll be \$53.46," said the store clerk. His dark mustache wiggled above his full upper lip, and his friendly brown eyes appraised Remy as she fished for her money in her wallet.

"That's highway robbery," grumbled Remy. "I can get this same stereo at Wal-Mart for 29.95."

The clerk ignored her comment except for a knowing grin. "Say, you're Perly's daughter, aren't you?"

Remy looked up. "Yes, Roberta is my grandmother."

"I knew you looked familiar. I'm Burt Jontier. I used to date your mother before she fell in love with Charlie Montaine. No one else had a chance after that."

Remy looked curiously at him. "Yes, I've heard that they were engaged once."

"Yeah," replied Burt, warming up to his subject. "Perly used to get love potions and gris-gris' from her grandmama." He winked at her as he bagged her purchases. "I guess they worked, 'cause he fell in love with her too."

Remy was fascinated with a stranger's peek into her mother's history. Her mother had been very evasive, and Roberta wasn't much better. "So what happened?" She asked eagerly.

"He was killed in a shrimping accident."

"Shrimping?"

"Sure! Lot's of people make a living shrimping, although Charlie didn't have to work on the boat. His family had plenty of money, but he wanted to anyway...said he enjoyed the physical work. You didn't know this?"

Remy shook her head. "No, Mother has never talked much about her past, and this is the first time I've been here for a visit."

"I hear you're hunting for old Rheim's treasure. A lot of people have wondered if there was anything to that old story." His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "Do you really have a map?"

Remy hesitated, unsure of what to say. If people were already sneaking onto the island, it might not be a good thing to gossip about the map.

"Well, uh..."

He cut her off with a flash of his hand, then leaned forward to speak in a low voice, "Be careful, young Remy. There are other old rumors floating around too, and there are people who think Rheim's treasure might be something else."

Remy was intrigued. "Like what?"

"Let's just say I've heard things that it's better to pretend you never heard, if you know what I mean."

Remy didn't have a clue what he was talking about, but a slender dark skinned man chose that moment to step out from behind a magazine rack. A dull red flush crept up Burt's neck as he blustered, "Hell, Quantraine, you do more sneaking around then anybody I ever seen. I didn't even know you was here!"

"That's how you learn things," purred Quantraine, a smug smile on his thin lips.

Remy thought he looked like a cruel man with his lips twisted in a lazy smile. She recoiled slightly when his black eyes pinned her in a cold stare. "Don't pay no attention to old Burt here," he said. "He's an incurable gossip. Always seeing intrigue and mystery behind every fire hydrant."

Burt flushed again, and Quantraine watched as Remy nodded and took her bag and left. Then he shot Burt a warning look as he followed her out.

Burt wiped the sweat on his forehead and went back to work feeling troubled. He wondered what was going to happen if the "treasure" came to light and if he should have a talk with Roberta.

Quantraine trailed Remy for awhile, making sure she went back to Roberta's instead of stopping anywhere else. There were too many new people in town for his liking. Too many tongues wagging with all this talk of a treasure map. There were plenty of people who didn't want the subject of Charles Montaine's death brought up again. The circumstances surrounding that had been covered up, glossed over, whatever you wanted to call it.

Maybe it was time he visited Sheriff Coleman, he mused as he set his steps wandering in the direction of the low whitewashed building that served as the jail. Might just be needing his services in the near future.

Remy hurried back to Roberta's, her skin crawling with the knowledge that the creepy little man was behind her. She finally glanced over her shoulder and sighed with relief when she realized he had turned off. Whoever he was, he had shut Burt up very quickly. She wondered what was going on and why her mother had never mentioned the man she had loved?

If it was true, then it explained a lot of things that she had thought odd about her Mom and Dad. Like the fact that they had bought twin beds several years ago. She had never really thought about their lack of physical affection, but now she saw it in a new light. They were polite and affectionate towards one another, but not in the mushy way of people in love. She wondered if they had ever been in love with each other and why they had gotten married if they hadn't. It sure looked like her trip to the Bayou was uncovering more than buried treasure!

She hurried to her room when she arrived at Roberta's and packed the boom box, CD, and batteries in her suitcase. She wouldn't put it past Cork to make her leave them behind, and she had no intention of doing that. He was going to pay for shooting her stereo...one way or the other! She refused to consider the possibility that he might spank her if she tried to annoy him on purpose. After all...it's not like she was falling into quicksand or anything. He could just grit his teeth and put up with her...just like she did him!

"Remy!" Called Roberta, as she knocked on the door.

Remy opened the door and smiled, "Yes, Gramma, is Cork here?"

Roberta frowned. "Not yet, but Remy...did you pack the map?"

The young girl shook her head. "No, I left it on the table in the library."

"It's not there."

"I'll help you look," offered Remy, lugging her suitcase out the door. "Maybe it fell down and got under the sofa or something."



The two women hunted all over the library and the rest of the small house, but the map was nowhere to be found.

"I don't understand it," said Remy, a frown creasing her smooth face. They were back in the library where they had started with no success.

"I'm sorry, dear," replied Roberta thoughtfully. "I hate for your trip to be ruined because of this. I can't imagine what could have happened to it."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," Remy assured her with a cheerful grin. "I have it perfectly memorized, as well as the piece I tore off...just in case something happened to it."

"What piece?"

"I tore a piece of the map off, an important clue," Remy replied proudly, "and it exists only in my memory. Good thing I've got a photographic memory."

Roberta laughed. "Well, whatever inspired you to do that, it was a good idea, although I can't imagine where it went." She looked at the French doors and then frowned, a sudden thought occurring to her. She swiftly crossed the room and checked the door...it was locked! "That's odd," she mused.

"What's odd?" Asked Remy, coming to stand beside her.

"This door is locked."

"So? Don't you always lock up?"

Roberta shook her head. "No, no one ever locks their doors around here."

"Maybe you should start," offered Remy, looking around uneasily. The idea that someone had been in the house and maybe stolen her map was just plain creepy!

"I believe I might," replied Roberta.

A loud knock on the front door interrupted them, and they went into the living room.

"That will be Cork," said Remy disgustedly. "I bet only he sounds like he's knocking the door down!"

Roberta looked amused as she went to the door and opened it. She was ushering Cork in when the phone rang, and she hastened to get it. "You two go on; I'll take this call," she said as she waved them out the door. "Take care of her, Cork!"

"Is this it?" Asked Cork as he grunted at the weight of Remy's bag. "I hope so, because any more weight and the pirogue will sink."

Remy gritted her teeth and stared daggers at his back. Not even a good morning or how are you from the man! He was the most insensitive brute she had ever met! She barely kept from slamming the door as she followed him out.

"I see you dressed properly this time," he said, glancing sideways at the snug jeans that lovingly caressed her small hips.

"Planning on dropping me in the leech bed?" She asked sarcastically.

"Stay away from the leech bed," he said with a scowl, sending her a scathing glance. "And that goes for the quicksand too."

"I must look stupid," Remy muttered rolling her eyes.

"No, but you do seem to have a penchant for getting into trouble." Cork yanked the cord for the mudbug engine and sent it speeding down the waterway. Conversation, if indeed there could have been any, would have been drowned out...not that Cork seemed indined.

"Slow down, Perly," said Roberta, trying to calm her daughter as she spoke into the telephone. "Start at the beginning."

Perly Broussard's hands shook as she held the phone to her ear and tried to slow down and speak more coherently. "I got a phone call a few minutes ago, Mama. It was a man...talking about Remy being there, looking for treasure. What is going on down there? What is Remy doing?"

What Perly was not telling her mother was what the man actually said. The words sent a chill through her. She had picked up the phone and a male voice had come on the line, one she didn't recognize. "If you don't want your husband indicted for murder, tell your daughter to call off her little treasure hunt. If old Rheims had a treasure, no one wants it found." Then the phone line had gone dead, leaving Perly shaking and frantic. She had thought they had left all that behind when they left the bayou and now it was following her...threatening Raymond and Remy.

"Well, she does have a map," replied Roberta.

"I didn't know...where did she get it from?" Perly's fingers were white knuckled where they gripped the phone.

"She said she found it beneath the back page of Mama's old diary," Roberta explained.

"I want her to come home!"

"Well, I can get the message to her, honey, if that's what you want. But why? What's going on?"

"What do you mean; get a message to her...isn't she there with you?"

"No, she just went with Cork Renoir out to the island. He is going to look after her while she looks around and tries to solve the map," Roberta explained.

"No," exploded Perly. "You have to get her out of there, Mama, tell her that her father and I want her to drop this nonsense and come home!"

"Why, Perly? What are you not telling me?" Roberta frowned uneasily.

"I don't know, Mama...maybe nothing...maybe everything. I just want Remy to come home. I knew this trip was a bad idea to start with. We should never have let her go!"

"I don't think you could have stopped her, Perly. She is twenty two years old after all and an adult. She has to make up her own mind, and it seems pretty made up. I don't think you are going to get her out of here until she has solved the mystery of this map Mama left you."

"Why in the world did she have to leave a map?" Asked Perly fretfully.

"I don't know...didn't you look at the diary? You know, she especially wanted you to have it. That's why I came to New Orleans to meet you after she died. She seemed adamant that you have that chest with the diary in it."

"I barely even looked at it," Perly confessed. "I knew Remy had been looking at it, but I never imagined it had anything in it. Gramma always told me what goes around, comes around, and not to worry."

"What did that mean?" Asked Roberta curiously.

"Never mind, Mama, just get a message to Remy. If I have to, her father and I will come down there and get her. I don't want her around that old place, it's too dangerous."

Roberta sighed. It seemed her own daughter would never trust her. "All right, Perly, I'll send Pierre out there."

"Why? Doesn't Cork have a phone?"

"No, he wanted solitude and peace when he bought that land and built his cabin out there. Right now, he wants no trappings of society, as he puts it, and that includes a phone."

"All right, but call me tonight. I need to know what she says." Perly rang off and dialed Raymond's phone number at Pacific Finance in Carpentersville, a suburb of Chicago. "We have a problem," she said shakily when he picked up the phone. "I need you to come home right away."

A few minutes later, Raymond walked into the small brick home in the cul-de-sac and took his still shaking wife in his arms. "What is it, honey, what's wrong?"

"Oh, Raymond...it's about Charlie," Perly whispered, her hands cold as she clutched Raymond's shirt front. "I think all that old stuff is about to be resurrected, and I've had a threatening phone call. They say you will be indicted for murder."

"But, why? What's going on?" Asked Raymond, a puzzled frown on his face.

"Remy has a map...she found it in Gramma's old diary. She didn't tell me that was why she wanted to visit Mama...she just took it and went. Now she is trying to find this treasure, and people are getting nervous." She went on to explain how Remy had gotten the map and about her Gramma's diary.

Raymond ran his hand through his thinning dark mane and stared at Perly. She was as lovely to him as the day he married her...even though she hadn't loved him. Her long chestnut curls still hung down her back despite the fact they were laced with gray and the corners of her beautiful, cocoa brown eyes had those small telltale signs of aging that all women hated. "Why do you persist in believing I

had anything to do with Charlie's death, Perly? You never have believed in my innocence, in spite of all we've been through together, have you?"

Perly saw the hurt in Raymond's gentle hazel eyes and felt a pang of regret. "Oh, Raymond...I'm so sorry. Maybe I didn't believe you at first, but now...now I know you could never have had anything to do with it. But that isn't the point. Whether you did or not, you could still be charged with it, if the right people want it to happen. You know as well as I do that even innocent people get judged falsely at times and condemned to prison. I don't want that to happen to you...and I don't want anything to happen to Remy if she refuses to give up this treasure hunt."

Raymond looked thoughtful. "Maybe it's time we went back to the bayou, Perly. Perhaps its time to put all this to rest. Besides, this map may have nothing at all to do with Charlie's death."

Perly gasped, her eyes frightened. "No...no, Raymond! The Montaines are too powerful, you can't fight them. Someone believes it does and there is no telling what they might do if they get desperate to protect their name and reputations. They might even try to take Remy from me."

Raymond's warm hands clasped hers tightly. "Hush, darling. Remy is twenty two years old now and well beyond the grasp of the Montaines. There is nothing they can do about it."

"But what if they try to hurt Remy in order to stop her?"

"That's why I want to go down there and see for myself what's going on. If I have to, I'll bring the police in on this."

"The police are crooked; you know that," Perly said, her voice shaking with tears. "They are all on the Montaine payroll."

"Not all of them," he replied gently. "I know my old buddy Sam Coleman isn't, and he is the local Sheriff now. I think it's time we stood up for ourselves, Perly. Time to stop hiding, if that's what this comes down to. But for the moment, I have a daughter to protect." He moved to the door. "Get packed, honey...I'll get the car serviced and ready to go and arrange time off work. We'll leave early in the morning, maybe even tonight."

Perly felt her stomach lurch, the old fears and memories clawing at her mind, but she nodded to her husband. "All right, Raymond, if this is what you want."

"So where is this map," asked Cork belligerently. He had followed Remy up to his cabin, lugging her heavy suitcase all the way. He deposited it inside the door and stood with his hands on his hips, his chin jutted out. He was ready for action. The sooner he got this over with, the sooner he could eject his houseguest.

"Gee, I think I'm going to swoon from your hospitality," Remy replied scornfully. "Aren't you even going to tell me where I'm supposed to sleep? Or do I just pull up a floorboard?"

His jaw tightening, Cork picked up the suitcase and strode to a door off the left side of the cabin. Opening it up, he deposited the suitcase inside and bowed low, his arm indicating she should come in. "Your boudoir awaits, madam," he said sarcastically. He waited as she sidled in past him, his eyes gleaming. She'd better hide that ass!

The room was not finished yet, but Cork had managed to set up a cot there. Not all the wallboard

was up and there was no other furniture, but it was a place to sleep. He hadn't planned on a guest quite this soon!

"Now then, where's the map?"

"It's gone," Remy replied, dragging her suitcase to the cot. At least it had a brightly colored quilt and a pillow with a clean white case on it. She could live out of her suitcase for awhile.

Cork's eyes flashed dangerously. "What do you mean...gone?"

"Someone stole it out of Gramma's library last night," she replied. "At least, we think it was stolen. The French doors were locked, and Gramma says she didn't lock them. And we looked all over the house, but it isn't there. I left it on the table in the library, and now it's totally gone."

Cork was nonplussed. "And you didn't see fit to tell me this before I hauled you out here?"

Remy looked up at him. "No, it doesn't change anything. I have an exact memory of the map; that's all I need to know."

"I want to see it...draw it," said Cork grimly, not liking this new development.

"All right...give me some paper and a pencil."

Cork ushered her to the kitchen table and plonked paper and a pencil in front of her. "Now...draw."

"Geez, you don't have to be so bossy," muttered Remy, scowling up at him. She tucked her smooth brown hair behind her small ear.

Cork took a seat on the other side of the table with a grunt and didn't reply. He just folded his massive golden arms and watched her, his jaw set rigidly as if he was impatient to be off.



Remy bent over the paper and diligently recreated the map, all the way down to the scribbly poem, just as she remembered it.

*Weep not, my child the dawn will come,  
Its lighted fingers point the way.  
When Zamballa greets the morning sun,  
All will be revealed, I say.*

Cork studied the map when she handed it to him, his hand rubbing his chin absentmindedly. "So...Zamballa is the snake God, right?"

"Yes," replied Remy, remembering the part she had committed to her memory. She hadn't drawn that part on the map and didn't intend to. It would be her secret until she chose to reveal it.

"Who is this child she is referring to?"

"I'm assuming that's my mother," Remy replied. "The diary was given to her by Great Gramma, so it stands to reason the map was supposed to go to her."

"Yeah, that would make sense." He thought about the statue he had uncovered the night before. "You know...there is a snake statue in the garden...I found it last night. I didn't have time to look at it real close, but I wonder if it has anything to do with this clue?"

Remy's heart beat fast with excitement. A snake statue had been the part of the map she had torn off. But it hadn't said where it was; just that it was the harbinger of dawn. She didn't tell Cork, though; she wanted to find it for herself!

"Well, let's go look around," she said excitedly, jumping up.

"Hold on there, we need to get a few things straight first." Cork stood up and frowned down at her.

"Like what?"

"Like the fact that you are never...and I repeat...never to go back there alone. Or anywhere alone for that matter, is that clear?" He glared at her, insisting on her compliance.

"Can I go to the bathroom alone?" She asked sarcastically.

"Don't be a moron...of course you can go to the privy," he said disgustedly. "It's right out back of the cabin."

"Is that all?" She asked impatiently, ready to be off.

"There is something else," he replied dryly. "There have been some strange goings on around here...things I'm not used to. Until I get to the bottom of it, we need to be really careful."

"Strange...as in how?" Remy asked curiously.

"Like voices...strange apparitions...weird stuff," he said uneasily, not sure if she was going to believe him. He was surprised when she nodded thoughtfully.

"I saw something too," she confessed. "When I was in the quicksand, something like an old woman appeared and told me it wasn't my day to die...that...that..." Remy flushed, remembering the specter had told her that her man was coming to get her.

"That what?"

Remy shifted to the other foot. "Just that you were coming to get me," she finished. "That's when the rope appeared. I figured I must have imagined it, but if you saw it too...maybe it was my Great Gramma."

"I don't believe in ghosts," growled Cork grimly.

"Well, what else could it be?"

"I don't know, but I don't believe in ghosts," he reiterated. "There must be some other explanation. Maybe someone is playing tricks on us."

Remy shifted back to the other foot, anxious to get going. "Why would anyone do that?"

"Again, I don't know," he replied impatiently. "But there is something funny going on around here, and I intend to get to the bottom of it." He strode to the fireplace and took down the machete. "Here, try not to cut your leg off with this," he snapped as he handed it to her. "Better yet, don't cut mine off!"

"Ha ha," replied Remy, glaring at him. "What do I need this for?"

"I saw a snake coming out of the old cellar." He took his pistol down, checked it and put it in the back of his belt. "Just to be on the safe side, I'm taking my gun too."

"What happened to your stereo shooting rifle?"

It was Cork's turn to glare at her. "We are going inside the hut...can't use a rifle in there very well."

"Are you scared of snakes?"

"Let's just say we don't like each other," Cork replied. "Oh, by the way, I found this the other day." He took the tattered old medicinal book off the fireplace and handed it to her.

"What is it?" Remy asked excitedly, taking the old tome.

"It's a book about herbs and medicines, I think."

"Oh, yeah...that's what Great Gramma used to do...create potions and medicines from herbs."

"Among other things."

Remy looked suspiciously at him. "I know...she was into voodoo as well. I've read up some on it. Did you know that Rheims stands for healer? Interesting, huh? And Mother named me after her." Remy's eyes brightened excitedly. "Do you suppose I should have been a doctor?"

"Why not just go for voodoo priestess?" Cork chuckled at her expression, his face warming up for the first time since Remy had known him. He was almost handsome with a devilish grin on his face! Her heart skipped a beat, and she forgot to breathe until the smile turned to a scowl, and she turned away, not liking the feelings that gushed to the surface. How could she possibly be interested in Oscar the swamp grouch? Besides, she had a debt to settle with that man!

Cork felt a quickening of his pulse just before she turned away, and he quickly tamped it down. Nothing but animal lust, he was sure of it. He'd been without a woman too long, and this little tidbit was a juicy one. She was, however, off limits...not his type! She was the marrying type, and Cork had no intention of getting married anytime soon! Still, as he followed her out he couldn't help but picture that luscious backside in those red bikinis...and without them. He licked his lips lasciviously and watched her as those lovely buttocks swayed up and down in front of him. Bite her? He'd love too!

His attention was distracted when Old Joe's baying rang out across the bayou. It was coming from the direction of the old shanty! "Stay here," he yelled to Remy as he sprinted towards the trail. "Sounds like Old Joe is hot on a trespassers tail!"

Stay here? Who was he kidding, thought Remy as she hurried after him. No way she was staying here!

## Chapter Six

Cork disappeared within a few minutes although Remy was running as fast as she could behind him. When a shot rang out, she gasped and froze, then sprinted on, hoping Cork hadn't been shot! She was breathing hard and was winded when she came upon the hut and saw him kneeling in the overgrown yard of an old shanty. Her great grandmother's place...she was finally here!

She stopped short when she saw he was kneeling over Old Joe, his fingers gently probing the dog's skull. Old Joe was whining and trying to lick his fingers.

"What happened?" She asked breathlessly, her machete at the ready.

Cork looked up with a hostile glare. "I told you to stay put!"

"I didn't want to stay there by myself," Remy protested.

Cork ignored that for the moment and looked at the crease across the dog's skull. It looked like he had gotten lucky...the bullet had just grazed him.

"Is he badly hurt?" Asked Remy, kneeling beside them.

"No, it just grazed his skull...and whoever did it seems to be gone." Cork looked grimly towards the door. "They've been in the hut though."

Remy stood up and started towards the door, but Cork pulled her back. "Stay here...let me check it out." Remy subsided and patted the dog's head while Cork walked cautiously towards the hut, his pistol in his hand. The door was standing ajar, but he kicked it further open. When nothing happened, he stepped up and looked inside. "Good lord," he muttered. The inside of the shanty was a mess!

Pots were turned over, bottles broken, the books from the fireplace strewn across the floor, the backs ripped off and so on. Someone had obviously been looking for something, and Old Joe had caught them.

"What in the world?" Remy asked, peering under his arm and looking into the room. "This place is a horrendous mess!"

"I thought I told you to stay put...again," gritted Cork, staring down at her. "Don't you know how to listen?"

"I wanted to see what was going on," she protested hotly. "Why should I stay behind?"

"Mostly because I said so," replied Cork, his jaw set in the bulldog imitation. "I'm the one in charge here, and it looks like you need a reminder of that!" He immediately pulled her into the room and beneath his big arm, positioning her butt right where his hard right hand could do the most good, and began to pound the seat of her jeans.

Remy yelped and dropped the machete, her hands grabbing at his back pocket and broad arm as she tried to keep herself from losing her balance. She needn't have worried, Cork had a tight hold around her middle, and she found herself lifting her feet clear off the ground as she tried to escape the sharp stinging slaps! She kicked up, trying to get him to release her, but he continued to splatter open handed smacks across her seat, setting her butt on fire.

"You going to listen to me or not?" He asked, never missing a beat.

Remy didn't have to be asked twice! "Yes...yes...I'll listen," she yelled, hating herself for her cowardice. After several more hideously stinging spanks, he stopped and set her on her feet.

Her hands flew to her punished cheeks as she danced around and yelped, trying to relieve the awful burning. "I hate you, Cork Renoir," she yelled, her face red with fury and tears stinging her eyes.

"You can hate me all you want, pipsqueak, but you will mind me when I tell you something...especially when it's for your own good."

"I don't need a protector," she fumed, rubbing furiously, "I can take care of myself!"

"Yeah, right...like you have so far?" He laughed scornfully and picked up the machete. Might be a good idea to hang onto this himself for the moment. Never trust an angry woman!

He strode to the cellar door and took the flashlight he had brought with him out of his pocket and shone it down the stairs. The room below him was small and looked like nothing more than a root cellar. There were dried herbs and roots hanging from the ceiling and pots of what looked like grasses and grains sitting around. Most of it was badly deteriorated. The ladder leading down the stairs looked like it was safe, and he tested the first step cautiously. "Keep an eye on Old Joe," he flung back over his shoulder, "and look around up here. I'm going to go down in the cellar and have a look."

When Remy didn't answer, he looked back at her and saw she was absorbed in a book, one hand still absently rubbing her small ass. Fine, that should keep her busy for awhile, he thought, and went gingerly down the old steps.

Once down, he shone the light at the back of the small room and searched the corners, sharply aware of the possibility of snakes. It looked like someone had been down here too, but it wasn't as big a mess as the upstairs. He was surprised to see a sagging wooden door in the back of the cellar, and he

approached it curiously. Using the machete, he carefully pushed it back to reveal a dark tunnel, shored up by rotting boards. Still, it looked safe enough, and he stepped inside and began to follow it, his flashlight lighting the way.

The tunnel was not all that long, maybe a few hundred yards, and he was surprised when he saw light ahead of him. When he reached it, he realized he was standing at the bottom of an old well and a set of what looked like iron rungs led to the surface about fifty feet up. Quickly, he climbed up and out and looked around. He was near the north side of the island, near the leech bed.

"Cork? You up there?" Remy's question floated up to him, and he looked back down into the well, his flashlight revealing her pale face and huge eyes.

"I'm up here," he called, "come on up."

"I didn't know there was a tunnel," she said breathlessly as she climbed out of the well. "Hey, it's the leech bed!"

"Yes, I'm sure this was how Rheims must have received some of her visitors." He pointed at the old dock. "That dock is in disrepair now, but it didn't use to be I'll bet."

"Why would anyone want to come in like that?" Remy was curious.

"Maybe she had clients who didn't want to be seen."

They heard the whining below and realized Old Joe was now at the bottom of the well. "Come on, let's get back. Something tells me some other people know about this entrance too."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because no one had been in the front door until I did, yet the cellar door was opened last night. And



someone was in the house last night, although there were no sets of footprints near the house but mine." He climbed back down the rungs and waited for her to join him. "Not only that, but maybe this is how our ghost gets in and out."

Remy looked at his face in the flashlight beam, his features looking dark and mysterious. "Ghost? You really think what we saw was a ghost?" She shivered in the dark tunnel and stayed close to Cork as he led the way back.

"Of course not, I don't believe in ghosts. But still, we saw something."

They spent the rest of the afternoon comparing the map to the layout of the area surrounding the shanty, and Cork studied it relentlessly, trying to make sense of it. Finally, he stuffed it in his pocket and went looking for Remy.

Remy was in the garden, looking at the snake statue. She knew it had to contain the clue, but how did it work? She had been thinking about it all afternoon, coming back to it each time they ventured to the other parts of the map and then back to the hut. She knew this was on the piece she had torn off the map and that Cork didn't know about it...she didn't intend to tell him either. If there really was a treasure, she wanted to be the one to find it! She looked up when Cork rounded the corner of the hut.

"Come on, let's go get some supper. I've had enough of this for today."

"All right, it's starting to get dark anyway," she muttered with a sigh.

"So you think this is Zamballa?" Cork looked at the statue again, a speculative gleam in his eye.

"Well...yes," she admitted grudgingly.

"The ghost told me to look to Zamballa."

Remy's eyes narrowed. "It did? You never told me that."

He nodded. "Yes, it did. Since this is the biggest snake around here, I'm assuming it must have something to do with this statue...just like you."

"Well, I'm coming out just before dawn," she replied with a yawn. "The poem says that the sun's fingers will light the way...so maybe something will happen when the sun hits the statue."

They fell in step together, each lost in their own thoughts as they started back until Old Joe took off at a dead run towards the north dock, baying at the top of his lungs.

"Doesn't look like the graze slowed him down much," muttered Remy as she followed closely behind Cork. She still had her suspicions about the flute and why the dog had allowed her on the island without raising a ruckus, but Cork didn't believe in ghosts. It stood to reason he would really think she was crazy if she started calling the dog Argonaut. Speaking of the flute, it was now in the leech bed where she had flung it when she stepped out of the water and saw the leeches attached to her skin. She wasn't going after it either!

They broke out of the trees and saw a slender figure in a pirogue on the other side of the dilapidated old dock. He was bending down among the reeds as if he was searching for something.

"Hey you...what are you doing?" Yelled Cork, pushing Remy behind him as he pointed his pistol towards the intruder.

When he raised his head, Remy could see beneath Cork's arm that it was the man she had met in the store that morning...the one Burt had called Quantraine.

"Just looking for the stepping stones," he drawled lazily as he stepped out of the tied off pirogue. "Thought I might take a look around Rheim's old place for a few minutes." He stepped into the reeds and walked among them, then jumped nimbly onto the shore as Remy gaped in astonishment.

Cork scowled. "It never occurred to you to stop at my dock and ask permission?"

"I did stop, no one was there." He grinned and tipped his black felt hat back, his graying mustache wiggling above his narrow lips. He was a swarthy looking man, tanned, lean and muscled as if used to an outdoor life. It was his eyes that Remy watched though...they were black and hard as obsidian. She didn't trust him.

"How did you know there was another way onto the shore?" She asked, stepping out from behind Cork.

He pinned her in his dark gaze, assessing her once again. "I've lived here all my life, little lady. I know about a lot of things, even met old Rheims when I was a youngster."

He didn't look all that old, but Remy knew looks could be deceiving. Besides, some people were just ageless, preserved as it were, by God knows what!

But she did envy him the knowledge of the stones. If she had known they were there, she might never have run into Cork yesterday and could be doing her own investigating, minus the embarrassing incident of the leeches. She didn't dwell on the quicksand; that was too painful a memory.

"I didn't figure you for a treasure hunter, Quantraine," Cork said evenly.

"I'm not...just looking for answers." He stared back at Cork, refusing to drop his eyes.

"Answers to what?" Remy asked suspiciously.

"To unanswered questions." His reply was short and succinct as he grinned lazily at them both.

Cork shifted his weight and put his pistol in his belt. "I take it you know about the tunnel through the well then?"

Quantraine's eyes narrowed, but he nodded. "Yes, Rheims used to get a lot of visitors that way." He stepped up further on the bank, ignoring the dog as it stared steadily at him. "Mind if I look around?"

"I don't know what you're looking for, but someone has already beat us to the punch," replied Cork. "The place was ransacked when I went into town to get Remy."

"Not looking for anything in particular, I just wanted to look around a little bit."

A thought flashed into Remy's mind and she asked, "You don't happen to have a treasure map, do you?"

He looked puzzled for a moment, then grinned slyly. "No, I heard you have one though. You want to let me look at it?"

"I would," lied Remy, "but I don't have it anymore. Someone stole it out of Grandma's library last night."

"Remy!" Cork shot her a warning glance.

Quantraine looked interested. "Is that right? Now, that is something I didn't know." He gestured towards the woods in the direction of the shanty. "May I?"

Cork hesitated, then nodded. "All right, just don't leave the doors unlatched, I don't want snakes inside."

He watched Quantraine broodingly as he ambled towards the path, seeming in no hurry. There wasn't much point in denying him permission, they had already done a thorough search of the hut and turned up nothing. Feeling disgruntled anyway, he took Remy's arm and ushered her to the cabin to get something to eat.

They were just sitting down to chicken sandwiches when they heard Old Joe baying once again. This time, though, it was at Cork's dock, and they looked outside to see Pierre tying off his pirogue.

"Evening, son." He walked up the dock and stopped in front of the two young people, his eyes appraising them both. "Miz Remy."

"What brings you out here, Dad?" Cork led the way back into the cabin, and they seated themselves at the kitchen table, the sound of bullfrogs singing in the evening air as they chatted.

Pierre looked at Remy. "Got a message from Roberta. It's your mother. She called and wants you to call off this treasure hunt and come home."

Remy's heart sank. They knew! "I'm afraid I can't do that," she said ruefully. "I've spent a lot of time and money to come here and explore this, as well as visit Gramma, and I have no intention of cutting it short."

Pierre packed some aromatic sweet cherry tobacco in his pipe. "Roberta says she's scared; that she wants you to come back real bad."

"What is she scared of?" Remy frowned.

"Don't rightly know," replied Pierre, taking a puff on his pipe.

"That doesn't make any sense. I knew Mother wouldn't want me doing this, but I can't understand why she is so against the bayou...or why she left.

Pierre looked thoughtful, and then he held his pipe in his hand and spoke slowly. "You know, there were a lot of ugly rumors going around when Charlie Montaine was killed. Maybe it has something to do with that."

"I've heard that," replied Remy impatiently. "But that doesn't explain why she would be scared."

Pierre's shrewd gaze pinned hers. "Some say that your father had something to do with it. Some people think Perly and Raymond left to protect him, to keep him from being charged with murder."

Remy gasped. "Is that what you think too?" Her Dad? A murderer? Remy's mind reeled at the thought.

Cork frowned at his father. "Where did you hear that, Dad?"

"Just speculation and hearsay." He leaned forward. "You know, Remy, your grandmother used to have some interesting visitors out here. Some say she prepared voodoo dolls and other such stuff for people who wanted to curse someone. Not to mention the fact that Raymond was in love with Perly too. Some say he put a curse on Charlie so he could have Perly."

"You really think that, Dad?" Cork put his sandwich on his plate and lifted his coffee cup. This was getting interesting.

"How come Gramma didn't tell me any of this?" Remy's eyes were huge in her small face.

"Because Perly didn't confide much in her mother," replied Pierre bluntly. "But she did visit Rheims all the time...and she believed in the voodoo magic her grandmother practiced."

"I think Perly may have reason to be scared," said Cork grimly. "There's something strange going on around here. Someone has been in the hut and

they took a shot at Old Joe this afternoon. Luckily they only grazed him. Whoever it is, they are interested in this treasure too. And if they are willing to carry a gun, then Remy is in danger."

"There's something else, son," said Pierre slowly, taking another drag off his pipe. "I had a long talk with Sheriff Coleman today before I came out here. It seems that some of Rheims's visitors were some mighty important people."

"Like who?"

"Like a certain retired Senator...the one who was running against Charlie's father. After Charlie was killed, his father dropped out of the senate race."

"So the Sheriff thinks Charlie's death was a murder?" Cork asked.

"Maybe, maybe not. No one can prove or disprove anything, and no one that knows anything is talking. In fact, Charlie's death was covered up. The investigation was dropped after Raymond and Perly left town, and nothing more was ever done with it. Sam said the files were closed and sealed and no one has access to them except government authorities, not even him." His blue eyes gleamed. "Mighty strange if you ask me."

Remy spoke uncertainly. "I still don't see what this has to do with anything."

Pierre spoke again. "Rheims thought the world of Perly, would have done anything for her. She used to make love potions and things for Perly so Charlie would fall in love with her. She was angry when Perly left the bayou and some say she vowed to avenge Charlie's death for Perly's sake. Most people wrote her off as a crazy old woman, but Sam thinks there could be more to it than that.

Speculation, of course, but his gut feeling is that there is something odd about the whole affair."

Cork took the makeshift map out of his pocket and read the poem once again.

*Weep not, my child, the dawn will come,  
Its lighted fingers point the way.  
When Zamballa greets the morning sun,  
All will be revealed, I say.*

"What's that?" Asked Pierre curiously.

"It's part of the map that Rheims left to Perly," replied Cork. He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Just suppose for a minute, that the Sheriff is right, Dad. That Charlie's death was a murder, and Rheims knew who did it."

Pierre nodded. "That would make a lot of people very nervous," he agreed. "Especially if someone knows she knew...and thinks that she might reach from beyond the grave to get revenge for her granddaughter."

Remy gasped again. "But...but that's impossible! How could she do that?"

"I don't know," replied Cork grimly. "But this treasure is sure making somebody nervous enough to come looking around with a gun. Not to mention Quantraine out here sniffing around."

"Who is this Quantraine?" Asked Remy.

"He's what passes for a detective in these parts," replied Pierre. "He's been around here for years. The Montaines hired him to dig into the circumstances concerning their son's death, but nothing ever came of it. Couldn't prove anything although they were sure he was murdered." He stood up to stretch, then knocked his pipe against the inside of the fireplace hearth. "Time for me to



get on home." He looked at Remy. "Are you sure you don't want to give up this treasure hunt and come back to Roberta's?"

Remy looked indignant. "Of course not! I'm not going to let twenty five year old rumors and innuendo scare me off. This just makes me more determined to find whatever it is that Great Gramma wanted Mother to have."

Pierre sighed and turned towards the door. "I'll pass that on."

Cork stood up and picked up his lantern flashlight. "I'll walk you down, Dad."

Remy stretched and stood up with a yawn, then headed for her room. She lit the lantern inside the door and turned to open her huge suitcase intent on getting the pillow and blanket she had brought. When she turned towards the bed, she gasped and screamed a bloodcurdling, horrendous scream that split the night air. There was her suitcase, gaping open, its contents strewn all around and a huge, black snake coiled on her pillow. She stood, transfixed and unable to move. Dimly, she was aware of footsteps behind her, pounding into the room and a muffled curse as someone shoved her aside.

It took Cork a moment to realize that the snake was dead and then he turned to take Remy in his arms, turning her head towards his broad chest. "It's okay, the snake is dead," he muttered gruffly, his big hand patting her back roughly as she shuddered and shook in his grasp.

Pierre grabbed the snake behind its head and picked it up, grimacing at the blood it left on the pristine white pillowcase. Someone had done this deliberately to scare the girl off, and it made him frown with worry. Maybe Perly was right, maybe the

girl should give up this quest. Whatever Rheim's treasure was, was it worth someone getting hurt or even killed for? Maybe the past was best left in the past.

"This is a warning, Remy," he said as he opened a window and threw the snake out. "Someone doesn't want you to find Rheim's treasure, and they are willing to try and scare you off."

Remy sucked air back into her depleted lungs as her heart rate slowly returned to normal. She wasn't afraid of snakes, but to find one like that was frightening and disconcerting. Still trembling, she quickly went through her suitcase, checking its contents. Finally, she looked up at the two men. "It's gone....the diary is gone."

"I think you better go to Roberta's," said Cork grimly. "I don't like the way this is developing. You're becoming a target, Remy."

Remy's face grew dark. "No, I'm not running away. I want to be here in the morning, and no one is going to keep from doing that."

"Remy," began Cork warningly.

She held up her hand. "No, Cork, you're not going to intimidate me. I'm not leaving, and that's final."

Cork glared at her in frustration. "I could just put you in the pirogue and take you there myself, even if I have to tie you in."

"You could, but I'd just be back," she said defiantly, those vivid blue eyes blazing into his.

Cork gritted his teeth. "You need another spanking."

"I'd still be back! I'm going to find my Great Gramma's treasure, no matter how many times you beat me!"

"I hope I'm not intruding," came an amused voice from behind the trio. "I knocked, but no one answered."

Three heads whipped to the door of the room. There stood an impeccably dressed older man, his even white teeth gleaming in a charming smile. Impeccable was the only way you could describe him, even though he wasn't dressed in a suit. The neatness of the crease in his tan slacks and the expensive cut of his yellow polo shirt screamed class even if his gold Rolex didn't give him away.

"Mr. Montaine," acknowledged Pierre with a nod of his head. "What brings you into the bayou?"

## Chapter Seven

"I'm looking for Remy Broussard," he replied, his eyes locked on Remy's face as if he were fascinated. "Where did you get those incredible light blue eyes, young lady?"

Remy gave him a guarded look. "My Mother said her grandmother had eyes this color," she replied cautiously. "I'm Remy Broussard, named after my Great Gramma and this color is a throwback to her."

The man looked startled for a moment, then he seemed to catch himself and he held out his hand. "I'm Charles Montaine Sr.; it's a pleasure to meet you."

Remy shook his hand, its warmth enveloping her small one and seeming to hold it briefly, and then almost reluctantly it seemed, let her go. Then he held out his hand to Cork and Pierre.

Pierre seemed a bit subdued as he too inspected Remy's face a little closer, then shook hands with the man.

Cork recovered himself and invited their uninvited guest into the kitchen to have a chair. "So what can we do for you, Mr. Montaine?"

"Actually, I have come to see Remy," he replied. "I'm hoping I can see this map you speak of and perhaps the diary of old Rheims, if I may?"

"The diary is gone and so is the map," said Remy. "So I can't fulfill that request. I'm sorry."

"What happened to them?"

"The map was stolen out of Roberta's library last night, and the diary was in my suitcase, which has been rifled through, as you could see."

"So does that put the treasure hunt on hold then?" Charles frowned, his face giving nothing away but polite interest.

"Not necessarily," replied Remy. "I remember the map pretty well."

"Anything interesting in the diary?" His interest seemed casually feigned, but Remy felt the tension in the air. What was he looking for?

"Not really," she said cautiously. "Just a lot of daily stuff, a few rituals, things like that. Nothing about having a treasure, if that's what you mean."

They chatted for a few more minutes and then he stood up, shaking his head regretfully. "Well, I guess I better be off. My man is waiting at the boat, and the mosquitoes are thick."

Pierre watched thoughtfully as Remy walked the man down to the boat dock after saying their goodbyes. "Odd," he muttered.

"What's odd, Dad?" Cork came out to stand behind his father, he too keeping his eye on Remy's slight figure.

"I didn't notice until Charles mentioned it, but Remy's eyes are the same color as Charlie Junior."

Cork looked confused. "I thought she said her eyes were a throwback to Rheims Renquist."

Pierre looked at his son. "Rheim's eyes were brown...the color of melted chocolate brown. No hint of blue in them."

"So Perly lied to her daughter?" Cork stared at Remy as she talked with Charles. "Now isn't that interesting?"

"Very," agreed Pierre. "And I wonder if Charles ever met Rheims?" He rubbed his five o'clock shadow as he considered the possibility. "I think I'll just sack out on the loveseat tonight, son. This appears to be getting stickier by the minute. You might just need some back up for a few days."

"Don't tell Remy this...at least for now," replied Cork, nodding his acquiescence.

"I'll run home and get a few things and be back later."

"Sure, Dad," replied Cork, keeping a strict eye on Remy. Perly's daughter had eyes like Perly's ex-fiance...that was certainly a spanner in the works! He wondered if anyone else knew? Or if that had ever been speculated on? Probably not, since Perly had never been back and never brought Remy back. There was no way for anyone to know if she had been pregnant when she left the bayou. He wondered if Roberta knew and was keeping it to herself? Obviously, Perly knew, or she wouldn't have lied to Remy.

He thought about his Dad's words...wondering if Charles had ever met Rheims. Oddly enough, it occurred to him that he hadn't heard Old Joe baying when Montaine had showed up. In fact, the man had entered the cabin and no one had even known he was there until he spoke. That was very odd too, especially since Old Joe had been lying in front of the fireplace. Had the bullet graze affected him? Or was there another explanation?

The slender man dressed in dark clothing held the book under the flashlight in the small lean-to he had set up in the swamp. His slim fingers flipped through the pages, looking for something, anything, that might be a clue to where the old woman's treasure was hidden, but he could find nothing.

Hearing something outside, he tensed and snapped the light off. It was getting far too crowded around here for his liking! Silent as a wraith, he climbed the huge tree behind him and lifted his night vision binoculars to scan the perimeter. It wasn't long before he spied the medium build man working his way through the swamp. It was that fool Quantraine! He reached behind him and took

his gun out of the back of his dark pants. Reaching inside his vested sweater, he took out the silencer and attached it, then pointed it at the advancing man. If he discovered the lean-to, Quantraine was a dead man.

As the man in black watched, his finger on the trigger, Quantraine suddenly tensed and stopped, his head held high as he scanned the swamp in front of him. It was too dark to see very far, and the flashlight beam he held got lost in the inky blackness that was filling the swamp with its ghoulish presence. He grunted imperceptibly when Quantraine lifted his head and sniffed the air, as if he scented a prey close to him....or the lack of one. When the detective turned and began making his way back the way he had come, he released the trigger on the gun. With the stealth of a man used to these things, he dropped lightly to the ground and went back inside the lean-to to study the diary some more. At last he flipped open the slim silver cell phone and punched in a number.

"Anything?"

"Nope, nothing in here about the treasure." He threw the book aside. "Now what do you want me to do?"

"Damn, " the voice swore softly. "And the map isn't clear?"

"No, I think she tore off part of the map," he replied to the disembodied voice on the phone. "There's a jagged edge along the bottom of the paper, like it's been torn."

"I doubt you'll ever get the rest of it," replied the voice angrily. "I'm sure by now she has it on her person, if she has it all."

He shifted uneasily. "You want I should kidnap her and search her?"

"No, she'll be ready for anything like that now. And that Renoir fellow has taken her under his wing; he won't be as easy to get around, especially after the snake incident. No, just keep an eye on them. Let me know the minute they find anything and be prepared to lift it from them."

"All right, but it may cost you more. This place is getting too crowded, and the risks are getting higher."

"I don't care what it costs...I want Old Rheim's treasure."

"Suit yourself," he replied. "I'll keep you posted."

Lance Beauregard was the personal aide to Senator Durbin, the younger Senator Durbin. Of course, Lance had been the aide to his father before him, and Lance had a bad feeling about the treasure of Rheims Renquist. He knew that Senator Durbin Sr. had visited the old voodoo priestess on several occasions, always entering her home through the tunneled well. So had he. But what he didn't know was what the Senator was doing there. He had his suspicions, but then he didn't get paid to speculate on his employer's personal life. He did get paid to protect their reputations, and that's what he intended to do...whatever it took.

"Working late, Lance?" The door had opened and the current Senator of Louisiana stood there watching him.

"I'm always working, Louis, you know that," Lance replied, an easy grin coming to his thin face. One thing you learned to hide in politics was your true feelings. It never paid to show your temper or your feelings until you were told how you were supposed to feel. It was a hell of a life, but it paid well, and Lance was devoted to it.



Senator Durbin poured himself a shot of brandy from the sideboard and took the chair beside his aide's desk. "Anything to do with the treasure hunt of Remy Broussard?" His even white teeth gleamed in his dark face, his well defined fingers gripping the shot glass. His soft southern drawl served him nicely, giving him a charming, easygoing approach for the camera, but Louis Durbin was no fool. He knew about his father's visits to the old voodoo priestess, but as a modern thinking black man in today's world, he had no use for such rituals and outdated theologies.

However, he knew Lance well...and something was bothering him. He'd been like a cat on hot Louisiana tar ever since the news had filtered its way up about the treasure hunt. Nervous! It was an election year, though, so it stood to reason he would be even more edgy than usual.

"Perhaps," replied Lance noncommittally. He wondered how much he should tell the Senator. He had found that the less they knew, the better off they were when the proverbial crap hit the fan. Supposedly, Rheims Renquist had been furious when Perly had married Raymond Broussard and left the bayou. She had sworn to get revenge one day, if she had to come back from the grave to do it...or so it was said. After Charles Montaine's son had been killed, the senior Senator Durbin had stopped visiting Rheims, but all kinds of rumors had flown around until no one seemed to know what was true and what wasn't.

Lance wasn't one to leave things to chance. If there was any chance that this treasure had to do with a stab at revenge, then he wanted to be the one to get his hands on it and stop it. Whatever it was, it surely would not redound to the Durbins's

credit and this was an election year. If Senator Durbin were to be re-elected, he didn't need any scandals attached to his family's name that could hurt him in return.

"Are you thinking of some way to use this to our advantage?"

"Could be."

"Don't share too much information here, Lance," the Senator replied dryly, tossing back his shot.

Lance grinned. "I'll let you know when I have something."

The men went on to chat about other things, but it never left the back of Lance's mind. No map and nothing in the diary...that meant they had to keep a very close eye on Remy Broussard.

Remy was asleep, but her sleep was not a restful one. Cork didn't know why he was so aware of the girl when his father was snoring on the loveseat, but he was. His ears seemed to be fine tuned to every move she made on the cot; when its legs slid on the floor as she tossed and turned, and when she emitted those low moans that were driving him crazy.

Finally, he flung off the sheet and slipped into his jeans to pad softly across the living room floor to the open doorway of her room. He had insisted she leave the door open so he or his Dad could hear if anything were to happen. Apparently, he was the only one hearing anything, but he stood in the moonlight streaming from her window, listening. He folded his brawny arms across his bare chest and studied her pale skin peeking out from different locations. It gleamed like satin in the moonlight, and he longed to reach out and touch her silky shoulder, but he didn't trust himself.

For once, he was glad his father was here when he had a woman close. He would love to scoop her up and take her into his own room and cuddle her close, quelling the demons that plagued her in her sleep. He wanted to bury himself in her softness, make her moan from pleasure instead of the troubling moans that were resonating from that soft throat.

What was bothering her? He studied the features of her face, searching for clues, moving on down to her curvy form moving beneath the sheet. She flipped over suddenly, and the curves of her luscious buttocks were outlined and his throat went dry as he tried to control the urge to run his palm over those jutting mounds. To peel the sheet back and feel the warm curves and trace the valley between them with his fingers, leading on down to the honeyed crevice between her slender thighs. When she flipped again, the sheet fell below the rounded globes of her breasts outlined in the silk tank she wore. He gulped when one cup slipped aside, revealing a berried nipple, puckering in the cooler air. Desire stabbed him, white hot like a poker in his groin, and he trembled from the effort of keeping his hands from touching her.

As if suddenly aware of him, her eyes popped open, instantly awake. She sat up with a gasp, pulling the sheet above her breasts and staring at him in confusion, her hair tumbling about her softly flushed face. "Wha...what are you doing here?" She asked in a whisper.

"You were moaning in your sleep, like you were troubled," he replied hoarsely, reigning his desire in with a determined hand. "Sounded like you weren't sleeping very well and were having bad dreams."

Remy trembled at the sight of Cork standing there, his massive fur covered chest affecting her strangely. His shoulders were broad and well muscled, his deeply tanned skin rippling as he moved, and she longed suddenly to be brought up against that chest once again, like she had been earlier. Only this time, she didn't want any clothes to ruin the sensations between her body and his. She wanted to feel him crushing her breasts, his hands freely roaming the curve of her back, drawing her close to him as they splayed across her small bottom. She wanted him with an intensity that she hadn't even known existed until now. She gripped the sheet, her knuckles white from the desire that slashed through her, leaving its heavy wake in her groin and her throat too dry to do more than whisper hoarsely. "I...I'm fine...really."

The two stared at each other, each fighting their own desire, and Cork took a step closer to the bed as if being drawn inexorably against his will to a siren's call.

"Everything all right in there?"

The words were like a bucket of ice water, and they both started, the spell between them broken as Pierre peeked his head around the corner of the open door.

Cork's eyes burned hotly into hers, and his voice was gruff when he spoke. "Try to get some sleep then, it's not long until morning." He turned and strode past his Dad, making his way back to his own room.

Remy looked at Pierre. "I'm...I'm fine...I was dreaming...he heard me I guess. I'm sorry if we disturbed you."

"Just making sure everything's okay," drawled Pierre softly, his sharp eyes missing nothing. He

made his way back to the sofa and chuckled softly to himself. Looked like Cork was doomed to suffer the pangs of love after all, just like he had. It was about time too, by golly. He'd like to have some grandchildren before he followed Olivia into heaven's gates. A whole passel of them as far as he was concerned. Then he could give Olivia a good report when he next saw her. She had loved children too, but Cork had been their only son, and she hadn't been blessed with a long life. He lay down with a deep sigh, closed his eyes and was soon snoring again. It was one of the perks of old age, being able to fall asleep anywhere, anytime.

Remy settled back on the cot and tried to relax and not think about Cork in the other bedroom, alone in that big bed. She must have slept, but she didn't remember going to sleep when she felt herself suddenly awake and alert. The hair on the back of her neck was slowly rising, and she felt cold, yet her senses were razor sharp as her eyes scanned the darkness, straining to see or hear what had wakened her.

She froze when she realized the air at the bottom of her bed seemed to waver, a dark shape materializing even as she watched with bated breath. It looked like the same woman that had appeared to her in the quicksand, but the image was hazy and transparent. She was afraid to move as she lay there and stared, transfixed by what was happening.

"It's almost dawn, Remyyyyyyy..." the voice was light and whispery. "Looook to Zamballaaaaaaaaa..." The figure was gone as fast as she blinked and she blinked again, wondering if she had hallucinated it the first time. Her hands trembling, she looked at her watch...only thirty minutes to sunrise! She

knew because she had checked it yesterday morning at Roberta's, and she knew it wouldn't be far off today.

Quickly, she jumped out of bed and got dressed, then let herself out to the privy, the darkness surrounding her like a blanket. She still had goose bumps on her arms, and she tried to hurry, hoping she wouldn't have a visitor while she was in the outhouse...that would certainly be embarrassing! She froze once again when she thought she heard a noise behind the facilities, and her hands gripped her jeans snap as she stilled and listened. Was someone nosing around?

Silently, she moved forward and looked out the moon shaped hole in the door, grimacing at Cork's perverted sense of humor in putting it there. Suddenly, she squeaked when a pair of vivid blue eyes appeared in front of hers, and she jumped back, her heart thumping with fright.

"Would you hurry up in there, it's almost time for the sunrise," growled Cork as he paced back and forth.

With a slump of relief came the simultaneous jab of anger. "Not all of us can find relief at the nearest tree," she retorted acidly. She opened the door and stepped out.

"Come on, I've been up for an hour." He started towards the trail, leaving her to follow him.

"I'm coming, I'm coming." She hurried after him, taking three steps to his one long stride.

It wasn't long before they arrived at the shanty and Cork led the way into the garden, the machete at the ready as he held the lantern flashlight in his other hand. The mists swirled around their feet, and it was very spooky there in that garden with the snake God on watch. Remy shivered as she peered

around. It was starting to get a little light on the eastern horizon, though, and she watched excitedly as the day began to slowly dawn, keeping her eye pinned on the stone snake.

Thirty minutes later, she was still staring at the statue, disappointment written all over her expressive face. "Lighted fingers, huh?"

Cork grunted and opened his coffee flask. "I wasn't looking for fingers in particular, but I was hoping for some sort of light beam or something."

"What are we missing?" Remy walked around the statue, looking it over carefully for the hundredth time. It was taller than she was, and she couldn't even reach its head, but she knew it was the key to this riddle. She just had to figure it out!

"Let's go get some breakfast. We can come back later and spend the day looking around again. Maybe we missed something the first time." Cork turned and started out of the garden.

"I'm not hungry, you go ahead."

"I'm not leaving you here by yourself."

"I'll be fine, really." Remy looked exasperated. "Besides, Old Joe is here, he'll holler if someone comes."

"Maybe," replied Cork sarcastically. "He didn't holler for you and he didn't holler for Charles Montaine. I can't trust him after that, so you get to come with me."

"I don't want to stop for breakfast," replied Remy in frustration. "I'm in the mood to explore, and I want to study this statue some more!"

"No dice, pipsqueak."

"Don't call me pipsqueak!"

"I'll call you what I please and besides, pipsqueak suits you."

Cork grinned then, a crazy lopsided grin that did weird things to Remy's stomach. It was the first time he had actually smiled at her! However, she wasn't about to be charmed by the beast! "I'm not coming yet, so you might as well leave without me." She looked around for something to stand on; she wanted to see the top of the snake.

Cork's congenial grin vanished and his brows drew together in a frown, but Remy didn't notice. She protested heartily, though, when she suddenly found herself airborne and then face down over a broad shoulder.

"Would you stop playing caveman and put me down," she grunted through gritted teeth as his shoulder dug into her stomach. She tried to push herself up from that shoulder and was rewarded with a sharp spank on her cheek.

"Ouch!" She cried. "Let me go, Cork Renoir!"

He didn't acknowledge her request, but swung her around and headed out of the garden. Remy's sharp eyes caught something she had missed before as the snake's head passed her. "Wait! Wait Cork....hold it," she yelped, wriggling like crazy. "Take me to the snake's head...quick!"

"What are you talking about?" Cork sounded impatient, but he backed up where she could see the head and held her buttocks under his broad arms as he balanced her. He couldn't see what she was doing, but he could hear her fingers picking at the stone.

"It's loose," Remy said excitedly. "This stone on top of the head is just mortar put inside a hollow granite shell! I think the eyes are supposed to be empty holes!" She elbowed him in the jaw as her fingers slipped.

"Hey...watch it, pipsqueak!"



"Darn...I need a chisel or something to clear this out with!"

"Here, let me help," he replied setting her on her feet. He reached in his pocket and brought out a pocket knife and then looked around for a stone to stand on. Once he was a few inches higher, he could see what they had missed before, and he began to pry the mortar out while Remy looked around again for something to stand on. She was so excited she could hardly contain it.

Her vivid blue eyes appeared on the other side of the statue after she found an old bucket, and she watched with growing delight as the eyes of the snake did indeed began to hollow out.

"I think we found it," she crowed.

"We found something," agreed Cork. He felt excited himself when he realized the sun could poke through the openings of the eyes. Perhaps this was what the old woman had meant by lighted fingers, because snakes certainly didn't have real fingers!

After picking and prodding with his pocket knife, Cork had most of the mortar out of the head of the snake, leaving basically a front shell with the eye sockets open. He turned and squinted up at the sun. It was too late in the day to catch the morning rays; they would have to wait until tomorrow. "Sorry, pipsqueak, it looks like tomorrow morning is on again."

"I know," agreed Remy with a heavy sigh. "I figured that out already."

"You ready for breakfast now?" His blue eyes gleamed across at her.

"If you're cooking," she replied.

"Last one to the cabin has to cook," he replied, jumping off the rock with an evil grin and heading towards the gate of the garden.

"You're on!"

Remy jumped off the bucket and fell ungracefully to the ground clutching her ankle with a shriek.

Cork hurried back towards her, concern etched in his face, but just before he reached her, she jumped up and took off like a shot, shooting out around him and towards the gate.

"Why, you little faker," shouted Cork sprinting after her. She was as fast as little rabbit, darn her!

"All's fair in food wars," she called back over her shoulder, her eyes sparkling with mischief. She wasn't watching the path in front of her when she collided with the man coming down it, and she bounced off him and landed on her backside with a whump! With a shocked gasp, she stared up into dark eyes she had never seen before. With a horrified shriek, she shrank back and slapped at him he as reached out to grab her.

## Chapter Eight

"Easy there, little lady," came the soft southern drawl. "I'm not here to harm you." He held out his hand to offer her a lift up, an ingratiating smile on his dark handsome features. "I'm Louis Durbin."

"Senator Durbin?" Asked Cork smoothly as he came up behind Remy and picked her up beneath the arms. He noticed that Old Joe was standing behind the black man, his tongue lolling over the side of his mouth in a doggy grin. So much for his watchdog!

"Yes, I'm Senator Durbin."

"This place is beginning to look like Grand Central Station," muttered Cork, but he moved Remy aside and shook the proffered hand. He didn't miss the man off to the Senator's right...the bodyguard, he supposed.

"I'm here to see Remy Broussard," he went on, his gaze sliding up and down Remy's lithe figure. "Is that you, Miss?"

"Yes, I'm Remy Broussard," she answered breathlessly, her pulse rate returning to normal. Her bright eyes checked him out curiously. "Don't tell me you want to see the treasure map too?"

He flashed her a toothy white grin. "Well, that would be nice...if you don't mind?"

"Sorry, but I don't have it." She shrugged her shoulders apologetically. "It was stolen."

"The diary?"

"That too," she added.

"What interest do you have in the map?" Asked Cork, his eyes narrowing at this turn of events. What was so important that the Senator of Louisiana himself would come down to see Remy? This was getting more curious by the day.

Senator Durbin moved in a little closer. "Did the diary happen to mention anything about my father or grandfather?" His eyes pinned hers in a questioning gaze. "Anything at all?"

Remy shook her head negatively. "No, I'm sorry...nothing at all. It was mostly recipes for medicines and gris-gris potions and stuff like that. Not much of a personal nature at all."

"I see," he replied thoughtfully. "So does this loss of the map and the diary end the treasure hunt?"

"Oh no..."

Cork cut Remy off. "It greatly impedes it, I'm afraid. Without the map, Remy can't remember the exact details and such. So she is pretty much groping in the dark, although I'm trying to help her. I don't hold out much hope, though, right Remy?" He looked at her, a warning in his blue eyes.

"Uh...yeah...that's right." She gave a dramatic sigh. "And I so wanted to find it. It has made the summer exciting for me."

The Senator studied them for a moment, then reached into his pocket and handed Remy a card. "If you do happen to find anything, here is my personal number to my cell phone. I carry it with me at all times. You will let me know...won't you?"

Cork studied the man in return, then nodded at the bodyguard. "Can we speak privately for a moment?"

The Senator turned and inclined his head at the bodyguard, and the man moved off. Then he turned back to Cork. "Yes?"

Cork lowered his voice. "Just what is going on here, Senator? There is a big to-do being made over what appears to be a simple treasure of an old

woman long dead. Is there something we should know? Exactly what is your interest in it?"

"I was just curious, it's an interesting story," he replied easily, flashing another toothy grin. "You never know, the media might even pick up on it."

Cork folded his arms. "Uh uh...we aren't buying that. A Senator doesn't make personal visits to lowly people unless there's something he wants to hide...so what is it? If Remy is in any danger, I want to know right now."

"Cork is right, Senator Durbin," chimed in Remy. "Important people like you don't visit people like us. Just what is so interesting about my Great Grandmother?"

"Okay, that's a fair question," he admitted. He sighed and looked thoughtfully at Remy. "But what I'm about to tell you, I want you to keep to yourselves, agreed?"

Remy looked suspiciously at him. "If you're going to tell us something that will get us killed, don't bother."

Louis Durbin threw his head back and laughed. "I'm afraid you've been watching too many movies, Miss Broussard." Still chuckling, he went on. "Believe me, if there was anything that secret, I wouldn't tell you. However, it is rather sensitive."

Remy looked relieved. "Okay, go ahead."

"My father told me once that my grandfather used to visit your great grandmother on a regular basis." His eyes twinkled at the young girl. "And that during the course of these visits, a ring that belonged to the family disappeared. Father always suspected him of giving it to Rheims for reasons of his own, but he never admitted it. That ring has never turned up, and I was curious about this treasure hunt of yours, because of it."

"And you're afraid if Remy did find the treasure, that this ring might be in it?" Cork's eyes narrowed as the implications hit home. "Even if it was, what difference would it make after all these years? That was two generations ago."

"Probably none," admitted the Senator. "But this is an election year, you know. I'd rather no hint of scandal came to light just before the polls. The media could have a hay day with it, even if there was nothing to it."

Cork nodded grimly. That he understood!

"It might also be quite the romantic story," said Remy with a grin. "You know as well as I do that the right story can also work wonders. After all, my great grandmother would have been a Creole. That would have been an unusual alliance back then. The stuff fairy tales are made of...or can be made of."

"True," agreed Senator Durbin. "It does have possibilities. Just the same, I'd rather not take the chance. Would you let me know if you find anything?"

"Why not?" Asked Remy with a smile. "I'll keep this card with me, just in case." She looked at Cork. "Not that I expect to find anything now, though."

Cork and Remy saw the Senator and his bodyguard off at the docks, a third man sending the mudbug sloshing down the waterway.

"Come on, you two...breakfast is ready," yelled Pierre from the doorway.

"Looks like neither of us have to cook," said Remy, sprinting for the cabin. "But I'll still beat you to the table."

In the Pirogue, Senator Durbin leaned over and muttered to his bodyguard. "I want you to keep an eye on those two. Let me know if they find anything."

The man in the sunglasses just nodded, his mission understood. He'd get on it right away.

The boat waiting for them to enter the waterway took them all by surprise, but the camera clicking away filled the Senator with fury. Trying to control his rage, he slipped his camera face on and smiled at the reporter.

A wide grin lit up the girl's face. "Bring me closer, Augustus," she instructed. Augustus grunted and brought the skiff in beside the Senator's mudbug. "What brings you to the bayou, Sir?" She asked eagerly, her green eyes sparkling in the morning light.

"How did you know I was here?"

"I saw you getting into the pirogue this morning, and I couldn't believe my eyes," she gushed, flipping her long dark hair behind her. "I've been waiting for an opportunity to get a job at the paper in New Orleans...I live here of course...but I want to work on the paper...and I just happened to see you! So I grabbed my camera, got Augustus out of bed...and here we are! I'm so excited! Can you tell me about your visit?"

Senator Durbin's eyes narrowed as he took in her youth and obvious inexperience. "Well, young lady, I grew up in the bayou and sometimes I just like to make a nostalgic visit...privately, of course." He watched her face fall and knew he had scored a conscious point. He was no fool though. His visit would still come out because she wouldn't be able to contain her excitement and curiosity at having an exclusive on one of his movements.

He shot Daniel a sideways glance. Daniel turned slightly red. It was his job to see that they were unobserved...he had screwed up. Still, there was

nothing about this girl to suggest a highly skilled reporter; small wonder he had missed her.

In any case, he launched into his explanation, already created, about a nostalgic visit to the bayou and his old stomping grounds. An early morning return if you will, on the spur of the moment, to his roots.

The girl held out the recorder, her eyes shining with excitement, her fingers trembling slightly as she listened.

The two men with him turned off the mudbug and settled down for a thirty minute dissertation on the beauties of one of America's disappearing waterways and the Senators growing concern for the commerce along it and the animals beneath it. It was a good cover.

Remy dusted off the last book and put it back on the fireplace, then stood back to survey the room. She and Cork had spent all afternoon putting the hut back into order.

Pierre had eaten lunch with them and then gone off somewhere, promising to be back by dark, so they had decided to clean up the mess their intruder had made a few days ago. Something about the snake statue kept bothering Remy, but it remained elusive just along the edge of her consciousness, refusing to be recognized. She wandered outside to the garden and stood looking at once again.

"If the sun hits it," she muttered to herself, "where will it shine?" She stood beside the statue and looked into the shadowy foliage. Then she walked forward, trying to stay in a straight line, guessing where the sun's rays might hit. There was an opening in the wispy hanging moss and nothing solid in front of her that might indicate a hollow tree trunk or anything like that. There was however, a



huge rounded tree about fifty yards ahead...off the path.

Nervously she glanced behind her. Cork was in the basement cleaning up the mess down there and shoring up the old tunnel. She glanced down at Old Joe who stood beside her, his tongue lolling out of his mouth. In spite of his fierce appearance, he acted like a puppy at times, and she reached down and patted his head. She supposed she should go ask Cork to come with her, but she could see the tree from the path, and there was surely nothing to bother her in this short distance. Besides, she really wanted to find this mysterious treasure on her own, and she didn't intend to get into trouble. She could do this just fine without Oscar the swamp grouch!

Searching the ground carefully to look for quicksand, Remy stepped through the underbrush and moved aside the hanging moss to pick her way towards the tree. She was about halfway there when Old Joe froze, the hair on the back of his neck standing up, and a growl coming from low in his throat. Remy stopped and peered ahead of her, trying to see what the dog might be growling at. Her knees trembled when a low mournful howl laced the air, and she realized it was Old Joe. What in the world was the matter with the dog?

Her heart beat rapidly when he began pawing at the underbrush and digging dirt out behind him.

Remy knelt beside him. "What's the matter, boy? What have you found?" She grabbed some of the grasses and brush and pulled it out, tossing it behind her. When the first sign of the weathered concrete cross appeared, her heart raced and she began tearing at the brush, trying to clear it off. Old Joe dug furiously while Remy cleared the brush away enough to read the inscription on the

darkened stone. Rheims Renquist. That was all it said! It had no birth nor death date, or any of the usual platitudes people put on headstones. There were two snakes engraved on the stone, one on each end of the name and Remy peered closely, excited and dismayed at the same time. Was her great grandmother buried out here?

"Remyyyyyyy!" The whisper was so soft that Remy strained to listen, wondering if the spooky atmosphere of the grave was making her hear things. Frowning, she put her hand on Old Joe's neck. "Stop, boy...stop digging! If she is buried here, you don't want to dig her up!"

"Maybe he smells bones," drawled a lazy voice behind her, and Remy whirled to see Quantraine standing there, watching them. Remy grimaced as he chuckled at his own morbid humor and came up beside the dog, who ignored him.

"How did you get here?" Demanded Remy. She didn't quite trust the nosy detective and thought him rather sleazy. So far, he hadn't done anything to change that image. "And what do you want?"

"Same way I got here last time, only I didn't get the canine reception I did before," he replied, watching Old Joe avidly. "Looks like he might be onto something."

"Oh my gosh," squeaked Remy, when Old Joe snuffled into the shallow opening he had made near the headstone and came up with a huge bone in his mouth. She was horrified! "What the heck is that? Don't tell me it's human; I'll die for sure!"

"Nah, it don't look human," assured Quantraine, reaching for the bone. The menacing growl in Old Joe's throat made him think twice, and he pulled his hand back. "Dogs bury bones all the time and then go back and dig 'em up."

Remy shuddered and decided to believe him, whether he was lying or not. It was easier to do that than to believe the dog had dug up a human bone!

Looking back at the headstone, she knelt to put the dirt back in place. It was then she noticed the snake emblem peeking through the dirt. She reached down and brushed more dirt aside and realized there was some kind of brass looking box there! Excited, she began to dig the dirt out with her fingers, completely forgetting about the detective.

"What have you got there?" He asked, kneeling beside her to peer into the hole.

Remy hesitated, then bit her lip. She should have waited until Quantraine was gone. Too late now! She pulled at the edges of the box and brought it up, hugging it to her chest as she stood up. It was about 12 inches long, four inches high and 6 inches across. It wasn't very heavy though, but she held it in a death grip, staring at Quantraine. No way the man was going to take it from her, not after she finally found it! This was HER treasure! She jerked back when he reached for it.

"No! You can't have it...its mine," she said breathlessly, daring him to refute her statement.

Quantraine dropped his hand, his smile slick and oily looking. It was the best description her mind could come with on such short notice, but that's what it reminded her of. "Well...open it...let's see this treasure! A lot of people have wondered if it was really real all this time!" His beady eyes pinned hers greedily.

"I don't think so, Quantraine." Both Remy and Quantraine turned to face Cork, who was suddenly

standing there, a very disapproving look on his face. "Whatever is in there is private, and Remy doesn't have to open it for you or anyone else."

Remy felt better having Cork there, so she could afford to be magnanimous.

"It's okay, I'll open it," she replied, brushing the dirt away from the clasp. After several tries, it finally came loose, and she held her breath as she flipped the lid open. She tried not to be disappointed when she realized the box was filled with envelopes! She picked up the yellowed missives and looked beneath them....nothing else! "Is this all there is to the treasure?" She asked, disappointment washing over her.

"What's in the envelopes?" Asked Quantraine interestedly.

Remy handed Cork the box and took one of the yellowed envelopes out and opened it. She broke the wax seal and with trembling fingers, took the sheet of paper out. Quickly she scanned the contents, realizing at once that it was a love letter...signed by none other than Bastion Durbin. So there really had been a love alliance between the two! She grinned. "It's a love letter, that's all....just a love letter!"

Quantraine looked speculatively at the box. "Who are they from?"

"That's information we'll keep to ourselves, Quantraine," responded Cork. He opened the box for Remy to replace the letter.

Quantraine grunted and looked at the grave. "So the old lady wanted her lover as close to her as possible, eh? So badly that she had his letters buried with her? Interesting!" He trained his searching gaze back on Remy. "So do you think this was the treasure?"

Remy glanced at Cork, and then turned back to Quantraine. "Yes, I guess this is it." She looked disappointed, and she sighed heavily as she shook her head. "All this work for a few love letters." She didn't tell Quantraine about the small leather pouch between the letters. That part she would keep to herself until she was alone. She shrugged her shoulders. "Sorry!"

Quantraine glared suspiciously at her, grunted again and then turned around and left, making his way back to the path.

Remy watched him go, a satisfied smirk lighting up her face. The smirk was wiped away when she looked up and saw Cork staring down at her, his face a massive thundercloud of disapproval.

"What in the hell are you doing out here alone? What if I hadn't come up looking for you when I heard Old Joe howling? What if Quantraine had taken this box away from you? What if it had been someone besides Quantraine? You've got about three seconds to start talking, pipsqueak!"

"I...I..." stammered Remy, her heart thumping in trepidation.

Cork tucked the metal box under one arm and put his huge palm beneath Remy's elbow, marching her back to the path despite her stammering protests.

Finally, she found her voice...and her temper. She tried to jerk away from Cork, but his hand closed in a vice like grip on her upper arm, refusing to let her go. "Don't even try to run," he warned. "You've got a lot of explaining to do, and you're in enough trouble already."

"I have to practically run to keep up with you," she retorted acidly. "And you're hurting my arm."

Cork glared down at her flushed face. "Don't worry, something else will be hurting shortly, and you'll forget all about your arm."

"I hate you, Cork Renoir, you're a big bully," she spat at him. He wasn't really hurting her arm, but she resented the fact that he knew that. Not only knew that, but didn't even pretend to care! Her trepidation grew as they neared the cabin, and she felt like she was choking. She tried not to be afraid, but the memory of that switching was flashing through her mind, and her heart beat sped up as he pushed her through the doorway.

"I'm not a bully; I'm a man who is used to being obeyed." He pushed her towards a kitchen chair and pulled it from beneath the edge of the table. "I told you never to go anywhere alone, and you took off into the swamp on your own! Unless you're going to tell me that Quantraine kidnapped you?" He sat down and looked up at her on his right side. "Well? Did he?"

Remy bit her lip and looked down at the big man, her knees trembling in spite of herself. His thighs looked broad and powerful from where she was standing, and the thought of being dragged over them was humiliating.

"I...I was following the direction of the st...statue's eyes," she stammered, trying to be coherent and think clearly. If she didn't come up with something quick, her backside was going to be toast!

"Why didn't you come and get me? What if it hadn't been Quantraine, but someone else? Like the person who shot Old Joe?" His ferocious scowl made Remy's heart beat even harder until she thought it would jump from her chest.

"Well...I...I..."

"You don't have a good excuse, do you?"

Remy tried to moisten her dry lips with the tip of her tongue, and Cork zeroed in on it, his eyes narrowing. She didn't notice that because she was too busy trying to come up with something plausible that would buy her time.

"You were busy...and...I didn't intend to go off the path, but Old Joe started growling and...and..."

"You followed him off the path?"

Cork's voice raised a notch in incredulity, and Remy gulped as she realized her mistake. She tried desperately to backtrack.

"No...no...I was already off the path, and he started growling, he..." she stammered, trying to remember the exact chain of events. Gawd...she wasn't trying to lie, but she also realized how incriminating she sounded. Probably because she didn't really have a good excuse, and he knew it! Damn the man for intimidating her into a babbling idiot.

"And what did you do when he started growling? Did you turn around and head back lickity-split to get me?"

Remy tried to think in her panicked state, but her thoughts were garbled like the class clown as the incriminating words tumbled forth from her trembling lips, "I didn't think about that, I was watching him and...trying to see what he was growling at...and...and..."

Her words were cut off as Cork pulled her slight weight down across his broad thighs where she landed incongruously, her feet not even touching the floor. Her arms flailed out as she grabbed the chair leg for support, and her right hand instinctively flew to cover her rear end. "No...you can't! Let me up!"

Cork's only answer was to fire a burning swat at the unprotected side of her butt, and Remy squealed as his broad palm found its target.

"Move your hand," he ordered, as he let fly with another spank to the underside of her cheeks in the denim jeans.

"Ouch!" Yelped Remy as she desperately tried to cover the target area better, but it was a useless cause. Every time she moved her hand to cover the newly swatted area, Cork picked another spot!

"Are you going to move your hand so I can get started?"

Remy was vainly trying to cover her already burning cheeks when his words seared into her brain. "Get started? You're already started! Ouch!"

"Not yet, I'm not," he retorted. He slipped his hand beneath her tummy and unbuttoned her pants, then proceeded to slide the jeans down and over the mound of her wiggling buttocks. He held her tightly with his left arm across her back, keeping her from getting away from him.

"No...don't," screeched Remy, her face going even redder than it already was. "Stop it, Cork...stop!"

But Cork was relentless in his determination to de-pant her, pausing only when he had a full view of the sassy yellow and red bikini's she had on. The words, "catch me if you can," were emblazoned in red across the seat of the yellow cotton underwear and he had to grin. "Looks like I caught you, pipsqueak," he said, admiring the view. Some of his fingerprints were peeking from the elastic edges and near the tops of her thighs, turning her skin a dark pink.

"Let me up!"



"Not yet, I'm not finished," he said amiably, ignoring her outraged demand. He was a long way from finished, and he deftly slipped his hand inside the waistband of her panties and brought them down as his palm slipped over the warm, satiny flesh of her buttocks. Nice...very nice! He felt his throat constrict and his groin tighten and for a moment, he wondered if he would be able to finish spanking her.

"No...no," yelled Remy, kicking and waving her free hand above her bottom, trying to block the nonexistent swats. When she felt her hand taken in Cork's strong grip, she realized he intended to hold her down even further. She could hardly move now, and she highly resented being pinned in place, but when she felt his body shift and his right leg come down over hers, she really panicked. She began to buck for all she was worth, which did her no good, because when the next blistering spank came, she was pushing right into it!

She let out a howl that would have rivaled Old Joe when Cork really lit into her cheeks, raining the fires of hell down upon them in hot, blazing spanks that burned her skin and left her sobbing piteously. All thoughts of rebellion were gone, and Remy thought she would surely melt into nothingness as she valiantly endured the painful chastisement this man was dealing out to her!

## Chapter Nine

When Remy thought she would surely die, Cork finally stopped; his palm softly caressing the tortured flesh slumped over his knee. The sobs tore at her chest as she tried to bring herself under control and to identify another, more urgent fire that was beginning somewhere in her nether regions. The feel of his hand on her burning skin was soothing and his gentleness after the harshness of the previous minutes confused her. She wanted to kill him....cut him up in little pieces and skewer them over a hot fire! But she also didn't want him to stop touching and soothing her backside! What a strange mixture of feelings!

"I...I hate you, Cork Renoir," she sobbed, her words lacking conviction, Cork winced, then pulled her upright to give her a gentle kiss on her temple.

"I hate you too, pipsqueak," he said gruffly. "You make me feel things I don't want to feel and most of the time I want to wring your neck. The rest of the time I want to strip you and put you in my bed and fill your body with the part of me that aches every time I get near you!"

His words had her gaping and staring at him with those incredulous light blue eyes...the ones that were drowning in the tears he had created.

Cork felt his control slipping as his gaze locked with hers and his head bent inexorably as if he had no will to keep it back. The half open lips, the soft panting sobs that still shook her body made him want to comfort her, to hold her close, to turn those sobs to moans of delight and pleasure. With a monumental effort, he broke their deadlock and roughly yanked her panties up her legs, standing her up to finish the job. "Get your jeans up," he

instructed as he set her aside and pushed past her to get out the back door. The screen slammed behind him as he stalked off...to anywhere that was away from her.

Remy watched him go as her trembling hands pulled her jeans up and fastened them. She tentatively rubbed her palms across the seat of her pants, feeling the heat coming from inside them already. Her butt burned and hurt, and she felt sorry for herself, especially after Cork had left her like that. She didn't really hate him at that moment; she longed instead to be in his arms, feeling his maleness surrounding her.

Gawd...she was an idiot! Oscar the swamp grouch...how could she sink so low? The man was a total throwback to the dinosaur age! Who spanked their women these days? Even Clan of the Cave Bear didn't spank their women! True, they expected them to fall to their knees at a signal from any male of the tribe and be taken from behind, but that was kind of exciting. Remy felt a heaviness between her thighs at the thought of Cork ordering her to her knees and she shook her head to ward off the thought. What in the world was the matter with her?

Confused, she brushed the tears off her face and picked the metal box up off the table. Carrying it to the loveseat, she sat gingerly on the side of her thigh and opened it, examining the contents once again...this time more thoroughly.

The pouch was still there, peeking from between the envelopes, and Remy's eager fingers picked it up. It was brown with a drawstring cord, and she pulled it open and turned it upside down, the ring inside falling into the palm of her hand. With an indrawn breath, she picked it up to look closely at

it. It was a woman's ring, rather gaudy in her opinion, but it gleamed softly in the afternoon sunlight. It was a ruby, surrounded with several diamond chips and set off to the side of the band, while a sapphire set on the other side also surrounded by diamond chips. Between the two stones was a single large diamond, probably a quarter carat at least. The inside of the band said 18k and it had an inscription on it. To my love. Remy wondered if this was the ring Senator Durbin was looking for. He hadn't given them a description, but she supposed it might be worth quite a bit of money.

She picked up the bag to put the ring back in it and felt something hard between her fingers. Peeking inside, she saw another ring....a much smaller one, caught on a thread. She took it out and held it up to the light. This was much more her style! The ring was a gold band with a single green emerald. Each side of the emerald had a small baguette diamond on a gold stem that curled lovingly around the ring, creating a beautiful half circle on each side. Remy couldn't resist trying the ring on...it fit perfectly! Delighted, she left it on while she continued to look through the envelopes.

One particular envelope near the bottom caught her attention because it was addressed to her mother! Picking it up, she lifted the flap to take the paper out, and then paused, wondering if she should leave it for Perly.

As she debated the issue, she noticed another faded envelope that wasn't addressed to anyone. Setting her mother's things aside, she picked it up, realizing at once it was heavier than any of the others. Inside were several folded sheets of paper and she took them out and opened them up to

reveal very scratchy, spidery writing. They looked like more recipes...or...something else!

Remy's breath caught in her throat as she realized she was looking at incantations...spells! She shuffled through the papers, reading the titles. Placing a curse, Reincarnation, Returning from the afterlife, Appearing to loved ones, Planting thoughts....the sheets went on! She bent her head to study them, amazed that her great grandmother had actually believed in these things, and wondering if there was any connection between the ghostly appearances of the woman that she and Cork had both seen!

Cork tramped down the path towards the shanty trying to clear his head. This was a hell of a mess! How could one small, aggravating, little woman create so much havoc in his heretofore well ordered life? Cork had been around a lot of women during his travels and his career as a musician, but he had never had one effect his libido the way Remy Broussard managed to do without even trying! It was as if his manhood had a life of its own around her and it came to attention every time she walked into the room!

One of the reasons he had left the music business was the constant parade of women through his life. Some he had liked, some he had disliked, but he had loved none of them. None had been able to touch that inner core that held womanhood sacred.

Pierre had loved only one woman and when fate took her from him, he had loved no other. Cork wanted to feel that way about someone and to have her feel that way about him. He wanted a woman who wouldn't flaunt herself to every man around him to make him jealous. One who didn't want him

for his money and his fame, but for who he was, and one who wanted to raise a family and be happy with just him. The music circuit had burned him out completely. Even after he had made all the money he would ever need, they had still wanted to market his talent just for the sake of making more money. His agent was still after him to come back on the road, but Cork had no intention of doing that. He loved music for the sake of music and money was secondary. Why keep playing just for money?

On the other hand, what was he going to do with a woman that loved heavy metal? And who seemed to take great delight in annoying him at every turn! She was a thoroughly modern little brat that felt he had no right to paddle her and every right to do exactly as she pleased come hell or high water. All of which meant he had to rescue her when she ended up in trouble...which she usually did.

Cork had taken great pleasure in spanking her little ass, but then she had rocked his emotions all over again with those tears in her incredible eyes. In an instant, she had made him feel like a heel. The girl was turning him inside out, and he hated it!

"You're a wimp, Renoir, admit it," he told himself. "She deserved the blistering I gave her...I warned her and she didn't listen...she should have listened and then I wouldn't have had to spank her."

He continued to argue with himself as he made his way to the concrete cross Remy had discovered earlier. He frowned as he knelt down, the footprints in the freshly dug earth concerning him. He could make out Remy's just fine....they were small. And he saw his and Quantraines, but there was another

set of prints...slightly smaller than Quantraines. "Now who the devil has been here?" A sudden jolt to his stomach later and he realized he had left Remy alone! "Damn," he muttered as he leapt to his feet and headed back the way he had come. He had lectured her for going off alone and then he had turned around and left her on her own himself. Fear urged him on as he raced down the path and into view of the cabin, heading straight for the back door. He barely paused to slam it open and raced through it, looking around frantically. She wasn't there!

"Remy!" He shouted, slamming open her bedroom door. No Remy. He felt stomach punched when he realized she wasn't in the cabin at all, and he raced out the front and looked frantically around, his gaze skimming the docks, the boats, anything that might give him a clue as to where she was. Had someone taken her away?

"Remyyyy," he bellowed as he rounded the cabin to look around out back. He circled the cabin completely, panting at his exertions, and had to conclude that she was nowhere to be found. Fear clawed at his stomach like a wild animal in a cage, and he turned to head down the path again when he heard it...the opening of the privy door!

He sped towards her as she poked her head out. "I'm in here, Cork...thank god you're back!" Her eyes were wide and her face pale as she looked around before she stepped out. "There was a man....he..."

Cork grabbed her and hugged her in close, his long arms wrapping around her like a Christmas tie, relief soaring through him. She was safe! She was also clutching the metal box and it was poking him

in the stomach. "Why are you carrying that thing around?"

"I was just trying to tell you," she said breathlessly, looking around her. "There was a man...I saw a man dressed in black, and he was snooping around at the edge of the woods near the front. I went out the back and locked myself in here because I figured whoever it was wanted to steal this box."

"Did you get a good look at him?" Cork frowned. "It wasn't Quantraine? He was dressed in black?"

"No, it wasn't Quantraine, I'd have recognized him. This man worn some type of stocking hat, although I couldn't see his face clearly. I've never seen him before, but Cork...he had a gun!"

Cork opened the privy door and pushed her inside. "Lock the door and stay there until I tell you to come out."

Remy obeyed, but she watched through the little sliver of half moon, trying to see what was happening.

Cork was pretty sure there was no one in the cabin, but he went in cautiously this time, and looked around. He took his rifle off the fireplace and checked to see it was cocked, then inched his bedroom door open with the barrel. Slipping inside, he looked around, then he returned to the living room and did the same thing with Remy's room. The only thing left was the shell for the bathroom and the pantry and he checked both of those. Nothing. It didn't look like anyone had been in the cabin, either, so he figured whoever it was had made a quick check and left after not finding the box. They had probably heard him returning and been scared off.



The sound of a motor got his attention, and he looked out the front screen door in time to see a mudbug, driven by Augustus, slipping up to the dock with a couple in it. Old Joe lay there watching their approach, his tail thumping on the dock and not a sound coming out of his mouth. "Dumb dog," muttered Cork. "I'm gonna have to fire him." He turned around and went to get Remy. Chances are, her parents had arrived.

Perly stepped out of the pirogue and walked up the dock to step onto ground she hadn't visited in twenty some years. The familiar sounds of the bayou greeted her, and she looked around hesitantly, almost expecting to see her grandmother walking towards her and smiling that secretive smile she had always worn. But things were different now, and a cabin stood where only trees and moss had been before.

As Raymond came up behind her to take her elbow, she saw Remy flying out the screened front door and a large man behind her. That must be Pierre's son; the one Roberta had told her about. It was amazing how time changed things. When she had left the bayou, Cork had been a small boy, and his mother was still living. Now Renee was long dead, and Cork was all grown up and famous in his own genre.

Perly's own father had passed away long before she had left the bayou, but her mother had never remarried. The rumors from Raymond's family had been that Roberta and Pierre might have made a match of it, although Roberta was older than Pierre by a few years. Roberta hadn't been but fifteen when she had married and born her daughter, so the age wouldn't have been out of range, but they

had never gotten together. She went to meet Remy, relieved to see that she was all right.

"What are you doing here, Mother?" Remy asked, shocked to see her parents. "How did you get here? What's going on?" She embraced her parents one by one, asking questions avidly as she did so.

Behind them, Augustus was offloading stuff from the skiff onto the dock, and Cork frowned. Cots? Coolers? Suitcases? What was going on here? Were they planning on moving in?

"We came to see about you, Remy; I was worried," Perly replied, a soft smile on her face. She looked at Cork. "I hope you don't mind if we spend a few days with you? Mama said you didn't have any extra beds, so we brought our own, and food too. Whatever else we need, we can send Augustus after if we have too." Her voice was calm, but it held a thread of steel that Cork didn't miss.

"Uh...yeah...I guess so," he replied tersely, not liking this turn of events. His island was getting more crowded by the minute! He took the proffered hand of Raymond Broussard and shook it briefly, then strode down to help Augustus with the luggage. Raymond followed while Perly tucked her arm into Remy's and followed her daughter to the cabin.

"Why are you worried about me, Mother?" Remy asked as she sat down on the loveseat with her parent. "I can't believe you are even here...what's going on? I thought you weren't ever coming back to the bayou?"

Perly's blue eyes were troubled as they stared at her daughter. "Raymond decided it was time," she said finally, watching as the men dumped things into the living room floor.

"Time for what?"

"Time to stop running from the past."

Remy frowned. "That doesn't make sense. What are you and Dad running from?"

Cork interrupted the conversation. "Perhaps we could all use a cup of coffee and then we can talk?"

Perly nodded, smiling gratefully at Cork. "Yes...please."

Remy opened the box she was holding on her lap. "While we are waiting, Mother, there is something that Great Gramma left for you...a letter."

"Where did you get that box?" Asked Perly, eyeing the box more closely.

"I found it today...in the woods." She cocked her head at Perly as she handed her the envelope. "Mother...is Great Gramma Rheims buried here on the island?"

"Where did you get that ring?" Perly countered, her eyes glued suddenly to Remy's right hand.

"It was in the box. Do you recognize it?"

Perly was silent for a moment, then she replied, "Yes, I recognize it and yes, Gramma was buried here." She tore her eyes away from the ring and opened the letter with trembling hands as she spoke. "She insisted on being buried here...said she needed to be near her magic. It was understood that she would be buried here before she died. It was what she wanted."

"This box was buried near her grave marker."

Perly looked rather pale as she unfolded the missive. "I gave Gramma that box when I was fifteen," she said. "It was a birthday gift. I always wondered what happened to it. Mama never said anything about it being buried with her."

"Maybe she didn't know," said Cork, chiming into the conversation from the kitchen area. "Why would she bury it after Rheims was already dead? Maybe Rheims had someone else bury it, or buried it herself before she died, making sure it was near her marker."

*My dear Perly,*

*I surely do pray that this letter makes its way to your hands, child, for it means you are well on your way to finding my treasure. Look to Zamballa, child, he will show you the way to the answers you seek.*

*In this box is a ring that belongs to the Durbin family. As you have seen, Bastion and I were in love, but it was not a relationship the world would have accepted. We were doomed to be hidden lovers. Bastion gave me the ring as a symbol of his love, but I never liked it. It was always too gaudy to me, but to him, it meant he was sincere in his intentions towards me and that he truly loved me in spite of convention. In a way, it was a flout to his prestigious family roots and a heritage that he could not escape. It gave him pleasure to thwart them.*

*The emerald I'm sure you will recognize, child, and I want to return it to you. You can do with it as you will, but it is yours to keep. Please return the other ring to the Durbin family, I'm sure they would like to have it back and I hold no animosity towards them.*

*I hope the knowledge you gain from my treasure will enable you to move forward in life and be happy. Your happiness was always my hearts desire, you know that, and I have gone*

*to great lengths to insure you know the truth,  
even from the grave.*

*I asked Antoinette to bury this box near my  
gravestone so Zamballa would lead you to it. If  
you are reading this, then she was loyal to me  
and did as I ask.*

*Go on and find the secrets I have waiting for  
you. Look to Zamballa from the north and you  
will find the treasure.*

*My deepest love always, my child,  
Gramma Rheims*

"Well? What does it say?" Asked Remy eagerly.  
"Can I read it?"

"You might as well," replied Perly, "you've  
probably already read everything else."

"No, not everything...I kind of got...interrupted."  
Remy took the ring off. "Do you want this back,  
Mother? Who did it belong too?"

"It was mine...a gift from...someone," Perly  
trailed off as she took the ring. She stared at it,  
remembering.

It had been a starlit night, and Charles had just  
taken her to a restaurant in New Orleans, a very  
upper crust restaurant. It was one she would never  
have been allowed inside if she hadn't been with  
him. Charles had been a handsome devil with light  
blue eyes that seemed to pierce her soul. He had  
looked at her with those eyes and took her hand to  
place a small kiss on the palm. His warm lips had  
nibbled and tasted her before he dropped the ring  
into it and then smiled at her. "Something to  
remember me by," he had said huskily.

"Oh, Charles, it's beautiful," she had gasped as  
she took the ring and slipped it on her finger. She  
had held her hand up to the light and watched the

gems sparkle in delight. Emeralds had been her favorite.

The next day, she had taken it off at her Gramma's shanty and left it there. It was the same day Charles had died. Remembering Charles was too bittersweet, and she had wanted no reminders...it hurt too much. He had gone to work early that next morning and never came home, and Perly's world had fallen apart. She had cried in her Gramma's arms until Rheims had thought she would make herself sick. It was only later that she had found out she was pregnant, and she had been very dismayed. She wanted Charles's child and she was afraid the Montaines would take her baby if she stayed. She had gone to Raymond and told him about the baby, and Raymond had offered to take her out of the bayou and raise the child as his own.

The ugly rumors that went around during that time had made Perly sick with apprehension, but she felt her choices were very limited. She knew Raymond was in love with her, and she didn't love him, but she was desperate. Praying that she wasn't making a mistake and marrying Charles's killer, she had married Raymond and left with him, moving to Chicago. She hadn't been back since.

"Mother?"

Perly's smile was strained as she returned to the present. "I'm all right, Remy...just old memories, that's all."

Raymond cleared his throat and looked at his daughter. "Remy, we are afraid you might be in danger, that's why we are here...and why we are prepared to stay with you if we can't talk you into leaving with us."

"I can't leave, Dad," Remy replied, frowning. "I'm so close, I can feel it. Aren't you guys

interested at all? I mean...this was supposed to be yours, Mother. Don't you want to find it?"

Raymond sighed heavily. "I'm afraid there are some things you need to know, honey, before you find out the wrong way and get hurt."

Cork pulled up a chair beside Remy. Now this was starting to get interesting. But if Remy needed him, he would be there for her. He was pretty sure he knew what they were going to tell her already.

Remy looked puzzled. "Like what, Dad?"

Raymond glanced at Perly, a helpless look on his face.

Perly cleared her throat. "Remy...I was pregnant when I married your father." She paused. "With Charles Montaine's child."

Remy went pale as she suddenly realized what they were trying to say. "You...you mean...I'm not...he's not..."

"No, Raymond is not your blood father."

Raymond leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "Someone doesn't want you to find the treasure, Remy...someone who wants to blame me for your real father's death." He looked at Perly, feeling helpless at the shock on his daughter's face, but unable to soften the blow any further.

"They...they called me early yesterday...threatened your father. They wanted me to stop this treasure hunt and make you leave it alone. I wanted to, but Raymond said no. He thinks we need to end these rumors once and for all."

"Who's they," croaked Remy, her throat dry. She was trying to absorb the fact that the man who had been her father for twenty two years was suddenly not her father! Without realizing it, she reached for Cork's hand, and he took hers in his warm grasp.

Raymond spoke up gently, eyeing the clasped hands of the two young people. "I don't know, Remy, but I suspect we may find out if we find this treasure Rheims has hidden. That's why we rushed down here. To protect you and help you find it and if possible, put all this to rest."

When Old Joe suddenly stood up and howled, everyone in the room stared at him. Remy felt the shiver run up her back at the low mournful howl that filled the air.

"Knock it off, Joe," commanded Cork, his skin crawling. There was nothing worse than the howl of a dog. It was said that dogs howled when someone died and the darkness that had fallen outside the cabin didn't help the eerie feeling that invaded the inhabitants inside. Cork had lit the lanterns, but they cast long shadows across the floor, making it spookier than ever. Remy shivered, and Cork put his arm around her protectively.

Old Joe stared at the doorway, his eyes seemingly turned blood red as he froze in place. They all saw it, but no one spoke as the apparition appeared in front of the door, more solid than Cork and Remy had seen it yet.

"Welcome home, my childddd," came the soft whisper as it slowly dissipated, leaving them wondering if they had really seen it. "Loookkk to Zamballaaaaa."

Old Joe whined and stared at the door, then turned in a circle and flopped down, breaking the spell that had been cast across the room. No one wanted to comment on what they had seen, maybe hoping they hadn't really seen it and not wanting to validate it. All four occupants let out the collective breath they had been holding. Then they all started violently when someone pounded on the door and a



pair of white eyes appeared in the screen,  
seemingly bodiless.

## Chapter Ten

Remy let out a small scream and grabbed Cork's hand in a death grip. Perly gasped fearfully, and Raymond stood up to protect her. They all stared at the door in fascination, waiting for the floating eyeballs to do something!

"S'cuse me, but am I supposed to wait any longer? Or can I go back to Miz Roberta's now?"

"Augustus," exclaimed Raymond, slumping in relief. "Geez, man, you scared the devil out of us! I thought you were already gone!"

"No, suh...I was waiting to see if you was coming back first."

Raymond crossed to the door, took out some money, and passed it to Augustus. Augustus smiled and nodded his goodnights to everyone, then disappeared into the dark.

Remy shivered. "I think all this is getting to me," she said with a chuckle. "Especially since that old woman keeps appearing around here in that ghostly whispering voice she uses."

"It's Gramma," replied Perly serenely, slipping her dark hair behind an ear. "She always said she'd find a way to come back...I guess she did."

"Well, I say we have some sandwiches and get you two settled in," said Cork briskly, trying to insert some sanity into the eerie atmosphere. He didn't believe in ghosts...maybe he should say he didn't WANT to believe in ghosts!

He turned up the gas lanterns until the room was brightly lit, dispelling a lot of the shadows and went into the kitchen area. A short while later they were all seated at the table munching on the roast beef that Raymond and Perly had brought from

Roberta's and chatting. Remy was reading the letter again.

Suddenly, she stopped chewing and put her sandwich down. "Hey, I just noticed this!" She pointed to the last line of the letter. "It says look to Zamballa from the north!" She grinned triumphantly at Cork who looked puzzled.

"So?"

"The statue...it's on the south side of the house," she replied. "Remember?"

"Yes, you're right...it is!" Cork groaned. "Does this mean we have to go drag it around to the other side of the house?"

"I'm afraid so," replied Remy, grinning unrepentantly.

"It was always on the north side," countered Perly. "Gramma must have moved it so we would find the box in her grave."

"I knew there was something bothering me," replied Remy thoughtfully. "The map showed the statue on the north side, but the statue must have been moved on purpose."

"What map?" Asked Cork, his brows furrowing together. "You drew the map and I didn't see any statue on it. Were you holding out on me, Remy?"

"Uhhh...wellll...yeah," chuckled Remy. "I guess I was. I wanted to find the treasure myself, so I kept that last bit secret."

Cork drawled smoothly...too smoothly, "is there anything else you're not telling me?"

Remy looked suspiciously at him. "Well...if there is, I'm still not telling you...at least not until I think of it." She grinned suddenly at his ferocious scowl.

Cork changed the subject. "After we eat, let's go change the statue to the other side of the house for the morning sun."

"Good, I want to go with you," Perly said. She had kind of a sad smile on her face, and Remy was sure she was remembering her Grandmother. "It's been a long time."

Remy disappeared into her bedroom while Cork was gathering flashlights and setting up a cot near Pierre's loveseat bed. He had given Perly and Raymond his bedroom.

Finally, they all went out the back door and headed down the path single file, Cork hoping they had no more ghostly visitors for the evening. Old Joe led the way, his enormous tail flipping back and forth in front of the procession, his tongue lolling out as if happy to be headed to the shanty.

When they arrived, Perly stood and looked for a moment as if gathering her strength together, then she pushed the door open and Remy followed her inside. Raymond and Cork went to move the statue.

Inside, Perly lit the lanterns that Cork had refilled with lamp oil and then she slowly looked around the room. It was much as she had left it, and she could feel her Gramma's presence like a warm blanket, enveloping her and soothing her.

Remy shivered slightly although it wasn't cold. She wasn't sure how much of all this she believed, she just knew it was very spooky to be seeing appearances of her great grandmother all over the place. It didn't seem as foreign a concept as she might have thought at one time, though, perhaps she was getting used to it! "Mother, do you really believe in all this voodoo magic?" She asked curiously, watching her mother run her hand lovingly along the books in the fireplace.

Perly looked at Remy. "I believe that you can make things happen through your own faith, Remy," she replied finally. "If voodoo is what you

believe in, then yes...it can be magic. If it's something else you believe in, then that can work for you too. It just depends on what you choose to have faith in."

She picked up one of the books on gris-gris and love potions. "Gramma believed devoutly in voodoo magic. I always found it fascinating, and she taught me a lot of things that most people would not believe possible today. So yes, I believe in it too. Or perhaps you could say I wanted to believe in it." She smiled nostalgically. "At least it helped me win Charlie's heart."

"You really loved him?" Remy tried to put herself in her mother's shoes. Tried to understand and grasp that Raymond wasn't her father. So far she had tried to not think about it, wanting to put it aside and think about it later...when she was alone. She rubbed her hands up the back of her arms, rather forlornly.

Perly came to stand in front of her daughter, a sad smile on her face. "Yes, I really loved him," she replied gently. "You have his eyes, you know."

Remy laughed painfully. "I thought I had great Gramma's eyes. A throwback, I think you said."

"I'm sorry, darling; I didn't mean to hurt you." Perly ran her finger gently down the side of Remy's cheek. "I never wanted to lose you, and I was afraid I would if the Montaines found out you were Charlie's. They had a lot more money than I did and I couldn't fight them. So I ran."

"Were you ever going to tell me?"

"I planned to...someday," Perly answered honestly. "I just didn't know when someday would come."

Remy changed the subject. "Do you suppose Great Gramma meant for you to find her treasure before this?"

"Probably. I don't really know. She's been gone for twenty years, and I probably never would have if it hadn't been for you. I never wanted to come back here."

"Well, maybe it was meant to be that I would find the map instead," ventured Remy thoughtfully. "That is...if you believe in voodoo magic. Great Gramma seemed to know who I was anyway; maybe she planned it this way."

Perly smiled and hugged her daughter. "You would have loved her, Remy. She was wonderful."

"Gramma didn't believe in voodoo, did she?"

"No, darling. Mama never believed in it at all, and she and Gramma never got along very well because of it." Perly wandered over to a basket of dried herbs. "As a result, Mama and I never were close either because of my belief in Gramma and her magic. Something Mother never approved of."

She looked around wistfully. "I always knew Gramma loved me deeply, and we had many wonderful hours together when I was growing up. I've missed her and I hated not being here for her funeral, but I couldn't take the risk of coming back. There was too much at stake. You...Raymond...I just wanted to let sleeping dogs lie."

"Speaking of dogs, where does Old Joe fit in?" Remy asked curiously. "Is he supposed to be the reincarnation of Argonaut? The one you told me about?"

Perly laughed. "Well, he does look exactly like Argonaut. And Gramma always said she'd find a way to bring him back to guard over her island. But

I think she was just trying to spook people into staying away and leaving her alone."

"It's weird, but he didn't bark when I played the flute for him," said Remy. "Although I ended up dropping it in the leech bed."

Perly's eyes twinkled. "That was a tale Gramma started just for the fun of it. She liked to mess with people's overactive imagination. It don't take much to spook some people, and she rather enjoyed it."

"Sooo..it has no basis in fact?"

"I didn't say that," replied Perly mysteriously. "I wouldn't put it past Gramma to have put a spell on Argonaut and try to reincarnate him. Whether it worked or not, is anybody's guess. But that dog does look just as I remember him."

Remy shivered. "You're giving me goose bumps!"

Perly laughed delightedly. "See? It's easy to creep someone out, isn't it?"

Remy jumped when the door opened and Cork and Raymond came inside. "You two having a good chat?" Cork's eyes gleamed at Remy, unconsciously looking for tear trails. She had had a shock earlier, and he could feel for her. Seeing none, he relaxed. Perhaps she was stronger than he thought.

"Yes, we were just talking about Argonaut," replied Perly.

"Argonaut?"

"Old Joe," supplied Remy helpfully.

They chatted for a few more minutes about the likeness of Old Joe and the Argonaut Perly remembered.

"We need to get headed back," said Cork, glancing at his watch. "It's after 9:00pm, and Dad will be getting here soon. I locked the cabin this time."

Raymond and Perly nodded in agreement. Cork had already explained about the thefts and the gunshot. They were about halfway there when several things happened at once. Old Joe let out a bellow and began running towards the cabin, a loud blaring music filled the air, and gunshots rang out from the cabin."

They all broke into a run, Cork leading the way. The music, or so called music, was deafening to their ears as they ran towards the open front door where light was spilling out and two figures were wrestling in the yard. A figure dressed totally in black punched the other one, then jumped up and ran into the swamp, Old Joe hot on his trail. The other figure was Pierre, and he got up slowly rubbing his jaw and grinning ruefully. "I think he got away."

"Are you all right, Dad?" Asked Cork, his ears ringing as he helped Pierre up.

Remy ran inside the house and into the bedroom to turn off her stereo. Then she checked to see that the box was still tucked into the corner of the closet. Yep...it was still there! She had managed to thwart the thief this time!

"Yessss," she laughed, jumping up and down. The best of Lamb of God's heavy metal had come in handy after all!

"Do me a favor, Remy," came Corks' voice, dripping with sarcasm. "Get rid of that CD!"

"Hey, don't knock my music...it scared off the thief," crowed Remy. "He never got the box!"

"Maybe not," responded Cork dryly, "but it scared the crap out him enough to leave bullet holes in my wall."

Remy stared at the far wall where moonlight was shining through the outside boards, bereft of



wallboard or insulation, and she started to giggle. She couldn't help it...it was just too funny.

Cork couldn't help a wry grin at her helpless giggles. "I can't say I blame him. I wonder if he needs to change his pants too?"

That made Remy laugh even harder. "I think I'll keep this CD around, just in case we have any more visitors," she chortled. "I'm just glad HE missed my stereo...unlike someone else I know." She couldn't quite resist the dig.

Cork glared at her. "Just how long have you had this love affair with that insane racket?" The question was not just rhetorical. If they were going to have a prayer of getting along, Remy was going to have to give up heavy metal. He pondered how soon before he could pinch this CD and dump it in the bayou.

Remy chuckled. "It'll grow on you, just wait and see." She didn't want to tell him yet that she hated the stuff. Annoying him with it was too much fun. At his impatient stare, she changed the subject. "Is Pierre okay?" Later, she'd set the alarm to the CD. Having to get up to that racket should curdle the cream in his coffee.

"Yes, he just has a lump on his jaw." He watched her speculatively, wondering what the secretive grin was all about. Probably up to no good he surmised as she waited for him to leave the room. Smart girl...she didn't want to leave him in here. As she passed him in the living room, he had to curtail the impulse to reach out and swat her impertinent butt. Another time, he promised himself.

"That's good, I'm glad he's okay," said Remy somewhat breathlessly as she passed Cork. If ever a man had a spanking gleam in his eye, Cork had it

and she resisted the urge to sidle past him. He wouldn't do anything with both their parents in the house...would he? Just the same, she held her breath until she was well into the living room and clear of his long arms before she sighed in relief.

It was much later and everyone had settled down in the cabin. Pierre and Cork were in the living room but Cork was restless. If they found the treasure the next day, Remy wouldn't be staying with him anymore. He should be relieved, so why wasn't he? He got up and looked out the window towards the shanty. Old Joe lay on the hearth, his legs jerking in his sleep, and Cork supposed he must be having doggie dreams. But at least he wasn't baying at lights in the woods and all seemed quiet outside. He wondered where the man dressed all in black had got to? Out there somewhere, watching, Cork was sure of it. What was he looking for?

"What's the matter, son? Can't sleep?" Pierre sat up, his hair awry and stretched with a yawn. "It's pretty late, and we have to get up at dawn."

"I know, Dad," grunted Cork, coming back to the cot. "It's just hard to sleep right now, for some reason."

"Wouldn't happen to have anything to do with Remy now would it?" His Dad's knowing gaze bore into his, and Cork shrugged.

"We have nothing in common, not even our music," Cork said gruffly. "I don't have time for a brat like that in my life."

"Love has no rhyme or reason," replied Pierre with a chuckle. "That's the magic of it."

"It would take some kind of magic to make us compatible, that's for sure," said Cork vigorously. "I

think she deliberately likes to annoy me...in fact, I'm sure of it."

"Well, there's always one magic cure for that."

Cork looked skeptical. "Don't go giving me that voodoo stuff again, I don't believe in it."

Pierre chuckled and shook his head. "I wasn't talking about voodoo...I was talking about that old spankin' magic...works wonders, you know." He winked at his son.

Cork grinned. "That might work for some things, but not everything. If we aren't compatible, spanking her ass isn't going to change that. Even though I'd enjoy it of course...she needs more than she ever had, obviously."

"You never know, son. Give it a chance. I never thought your mother and I would be compatible either, but we managed. Love makes strange partners sometimes."

"How come you never remarried, Dad?"

"Never wanted too. Your mother was the only wife I ever needed and if I couldn't have her, then I didn't want anybody."

"What about Roberta?" Cork asked curiously. He had never probed into his Dad's business before, but tonight seemed the right time.

"Roberta and I have always been friends. Marriage would never suit us; we are both too old and set in our ways now."

Cork gave him a sly grin. "What about that old spankin' magic?"

"Are you kidding me?" Pierre chuckled. "Roberta would take a rolling pin to my head if I tried it after all this time. No, you best set out the way you mean to go on when you get married. Your mother and I did and we never regretted it. I guess that's partly

why I don't want anyone else. Ain't no one else can ever take her place."

Cork grunted in surprise. "You spanked Mother?"

"Many a time; that woman was a handful." His eyes gleamed in the dim light of the cabin. "Besides, there's a special relationship you develop that goes deeper than any other when you spank a woman. Especially when you find the right one...it's an explosive combination. Love and spanking just go together naturally...or at least I think so. You'll have to find your own way, though, son...we all do."

Cork grunted noncommittally and laid down, his hands behind his head to contemplate his father's words. He and Remy certainly had an explosive relationship, that was for sure. She riled him like no one he had met before, yet he felt the need to protect her at the same time. He should be glad this was almost over and she would be leaving, but the thought of any other man putting his hands on her twisted his gut. Grimly, he wondered if there was a potion to ward off love...he'd be happy to take it! With a tired yawn, he tried to relax and get some sleep. Love...ha! He wasn't in love with the little brat, just a case of good old fashioned lust!

It seemed like he'd barely closed his eyes when the sound of the raucous music split the air, and Cork leaped from his cot, his hair awry and his eyes wild. It was coming from Remy's bedroom...had the intruder returned? As he crossed the floor and slammed the door open, the music stopped and Remy sat on the edge of the bed, yawning sleepily as if nothing had happened.

"What the hell was that?" He bit out, wishing he had his rifle in his hands. Another stereo would soon bite the dust if he had!

Remy blinked innocently. "It was my alarm of course. What did you think it was?"

Cork stared at her, mentally counting to ten as his fingers curled into claws.

"You did that on purpose," he accused hotly.

Of course she had, but Remy wasn't going to admit it. "Hey, I needed to get up on time, we can't miss the sunrise," she protested.

"You need the color of the sunrise painted on your ass," he seethed, "but now is not the time. Consider this a rain check, pipsqueak, cause your time is coming."

Remy jumped as he slammed the door behind him, then she slumped into giggles on the bed for a minute before jumping up and grabbing her clothes. Time to head for the privy and then to the shanty, time was a wasting!

Pierre had told them all to go ahead, and they had tromped down the path to the shanty and into the garden just before sunrise. Cork was still giving Remy curt glances, but he wasn't saying anything as she and Perly chattered to one another excitedly. He had his rifle in the crook of his arm and kept a sharp eye out for the intruder...or intruders as the case might be. They had certainly had their share of visitors since the news of the treasure hunt had come out.

He and Raymond had found the old base and put the statue back into place last night. It had only fit one direction, so they were sure it was properly positioned.

They all held their breath as the first rays of the morning light came stealing over the horizon. How would this work? They didn't have to wait long. As soon as the sun hit the rounded stone inside the half shell of the snake's head, it began to shine

brightly, reflecting the sun's rays through the eyes and straight into the middle of the quicksand pit. Cork knew it was the quicksand pit because it was the tallest tree in the area and that's where the light was focused. It began to quickly dissipate as the sun rose and lightened the day, diffusing the effect.

"Where did it point to?" Asked Remy, rather disappointed. It had happened so quickly that she hadn't really grasped where it was.

"It pointed to the quicksand pit," replied Perly, stepping out briskly. "Let's go!"

"But...the quicksand pit? How? I don't understand."

"We won't know until we look, will we?" Asked Raymond, following Perly's lead.

They all hurried back along the path until they came to the quicksand pit, and then they stopped to stare.

"I don't see anything," complained Remy.

"Well, did you expect it to just fall into your hands?" Asked Cork, surveying the area. "I suggest we spread out and walk around the pit and see what we can find."

One side of the pit was backed up to the heavily wooded swamp and there were trees whose branches extended out and over the pit. Spanish moss clung damply and hung in ghostly profusion among the branches, and Remy eyed those branches as she walked around the pit. She was careful not to get too close...it was misleading, and you could fall in without being aware that the ground was getting softer. She saw the others pick up long sticks to poke the ground in front of them as they moved, so she did the same thing. The entire thing must have been about 12 feet across in both directions and shrubbery grew along three

edges, making it slow going to poke your way around it.

Cork was poking around the base of the trees, clearing away undergrowth and looking for anything on the ground and Raymond and Perly were looking for holes in the tree trunks. Thirty minutes later, they were no closer to finding anything than they had been and Remy was getting frustrated.

It was the profusion of branches that hung across the pit that caught Remy's attention and she stopped at the base of one of the trees to study them closely. Where she had grown up near Chicago, there was a friend that had a farm with a lot of woods on it, and in those woods were vines. As kids, they had called them grapevines and often used them to swing out into the creek and the swimming hole. She wondered how strong the vines and branches were over the quicksand pit and if anyone could have hidden anything in them? With a start her eyes narrowed as she realized there was a snake lying along the lowest hanging branch, right out in the middle. It lifted its head to stare at her as if she had spoken to it, and Remy could hear her name being called inside her head. Or was it the wind whispering in her ear?

## Chapter Eleven

Further away from the searching group, perched in a tree, was the man in black with his binoculars trained on the group. "What the hell are they doing near the quicksand?" He asked himself, keeping an eye on the dog. The dog didn't seem interested in him other than keeping him away from the general area. Once he had run into the woods a little ways last night, the dog had given up the chase and trotted back to the clearing and the cabin. He could have sworn the dog told him to stay out, but he probably imagined it. This was some spooky place, and he would be glad when the boss let him get out of here. All this voodoo garbage was weirding him out, making him see things that weren't there.

He dropped his binoculars for a minute and checked his revolver to make sure it was fully loaded after last night. The stupid chit had scared him out of half a year's growth with that trap she had set to chase him off. He wondered what was in the box and if it had anything to do with what they were doing today? Well, he'd just keep his eyes peeled, like the boss said.

"There has to be something here," said Remy in frustration. "What are we overlooking? We've been all around the perimeter and poked at every tree and looked into every bush and log. Where can it be?" She grimaced in distaste at the snake that was curled along the low hanging tree limb, its tail wrapped around the limb as it watched them from the middle of the quicksand pit. She must have imagined it had spoken to her.

Perly looked around thoughtfully. "Things haven't changed much since I was a kid here, just more overgrown. I'm not sure what to think."



"Did Rheims have any particular fancy towards this area?" Asked Cork, surveying the snake too. "I mean...did she talk about it...say anything that might be a clue?"

The snake had caught Perly's eye too, and she watched it carefully. Was this another Zamballa clue maybe? Or just a snake in a tree?

"Okay, maybe I'm crazy, but I think that snake just called my name," confessed Remy, shaking her head.

"You mean the one on the limb?" Asked Raymond. There was something odd about that snake.

"Yes, that's the one. When I first saw it, it lifted its head and it seemed to call my name...in my head." Remy felt foolish, but there had been so many weird happenings, she supposed it could be possible.

Raymond frowned. "I hate to say it, but that snake doesn't look real, Remy. It hasn't moved since I've seen it. Snakes are usually flicking their tongues or doing something. They are rarely still unless fixed on a prey."

Cork was staring now, his quick mind checking out the limb the snake was on. It was plenty big enough to hold a person. "That's odd," he mused, his eyes traveling down from the snake. The vine just beneath the snake appeared to be thicker and heavier than the other vines and branches that dipped into the sand. He picked up a rock and threw it at the snake. It bounced off the branch just below it but the snake didn't move. "I think you are onto something here, Raymond. The snake didn't move."

Remy was ahead of him, though, her quick mind assimilating the same things he was, and she raced to the trunk of the tree and began to climb. She

squealed in frustration when she felt herself bodily lifted off the tree and set on the ground.

"Oh no you don't, pipsqueak," he said grimly, "you're not going out there! You'd fall in and then I'd have to rescue you again. Just stay put...I'll go."

He took the rope off his shoulder and tied it around the tree trunk, then around his waist while Remy sputtered indignantly. "But I wanted to go out there, Cork. That's not fair! Besides, you'll be harder to pull out if you fall, I'd be easy."

"But I'm less likely to fall," he replied sardonically. "Don't worry, if there's anything out there, I'll let you have it first, okay?" He climbed the short distance to the overhanging limb and began to walk along it, holding onto the branches above him to balance himself.

The others watched with bated breath, hoping he didn't slip, until he reached the snake. As they watched, he reached a booted foot out and cautiously kicked at it, but it didn't move. In fact, it showed no reaction at all, and Cork finally reached down to touch it.

"It's stone," he said in amazement. "It looks so real though, but it's stone."

Remy was puzzled. "How can it be stone? I saw it raise its head!"

"Grammar," murmured Perly with a laugh. "I wonder who she wants to find this treasure, me or you?"

"Apparently, we are both equally susceptible to voodoo," giggled Remy excitedly.

"The snake is entwined in the vines and around the limb, I can't get it off," announced Cork. He began inspecting the thick vine leading into the pit. "Hey, this isn't all vine...there's a chain in the middle of it. It's just overgrown with all this stuff."

He began to tug on the vine, trying to pull it out of the quicksand. It was slow, but he kept pulling up until, finally, he could see the metal chain attached to what looked like some sort of metal box. It wasn't much bigger than the box Remy had found in the grave, but it looked like solid steel, all darkened and mucky from being down inside the wetness of the pit.

Remy was dancing along the edges excitedly. "What is it? What is it?"

"It's a box of some sort. He finally managed to pull it out in spite of the suction of the quicksand and bring it up to the tree limb. There was a metal clamp hooked onto a circle of steel where the box had been suspended from the chain and Cork cleared the sand and mud off it with his handkerchief. The clasp was stuck, however, rusted tight, and Cork pondered how to get it off. Finally, he looked at Raymond. "I need a hammer or something heavy to break the rust that's built up and get the clasp off. The chain has been looped around the tree limb so I can't get it off at the limb, and I can't break the limb either."

Raymond looked around and found a stone that he thought might do the job. "Catch," he called to Cork. Then he threw it out to him.

Cork managed to catch it...just barely. After regaining his balance, he started banging at the clasp. He tried again and again until it finally popped loose, and he was able to get the box off the hook. Tucking it triumphantly beneath his arm, he moved along the branch, holding onto the branches above him once again. Just as he reached the tree trunk and jumped down, a lithe dark figure dressed in black appeared from behind the tree.

"I'll take that."

Cork found himself looking down the blue-black barrel of a gun, and he froze in place, a scowl on his face. "Who the devil are you?"

"It doesn't matter, just hand me the box," the man snarled. "Stay back," he directed to the other's who had started forward in protest.

"Well, well...what have we here," drawled another voice from behind Remy. She whirled to see Quantraine standing there, a gun in his hand as well. "I think you better back off, whoever you are." He stepped in front of Remy and her parents.

"I'm not backing off...give me the box, and I'll go. Move forwards another step and I'll shoot." He trained his gun on Quantraine, and Remy held her breath at the standoff. Cork backed up against the tree, reluctant to be in the crossfire in case the two started shooting.

"I think you both better drop your guns," stated a third voice authoritatively as the Senator's man, Daniel, stepped from the foliage with a partner. One had his gun trained on Quantraine and the other had his gun on the man in black.

"This just keeps getting better and better," muttered Cork. "I wonder who's next?"

His question was soon answered as several men stepped out of the jungle and surrounded them all.

"I think you all better drop those guns," said Pierre, his eyes gleaming across at the Sheriff. "We have you surrounded."

Cork looked around to see several of his Dad's friends that he knew, and he couldn't help grinning. Good old Dad! He had saved the day. "Don't go thinking this is going to get you your chair back," he said, his eyes twinkling as the men dropped their guns.

"It's already a done deed," responded Pierre solemnly, "but you're welcome."

Cork threw back his head and laughed. Then he strode forward and handed the box to Perly with a grin. "Your treasure, I believe."

Back in Cork's cabin, they all gathered around Perly while Cork pried the lid up for her.

The Sheriff had asked if he could stay for the opening, since the treasure hunt had attracted the notice of someone willing to steal it at gunpoint. His deputies had the man in handcuffs outside the cabin along with all of Pierre's friends to keep an eye on him. Quantraine was hovering about too, anxious to see what was in the box when it was opened, having his own ideas about it. The Senator's men had been allowed to stay to, hoping they might have good news to report to Louis Durbin. They all peered as Cork lifted the lid and Perly reached inside.

Inside the box, was another box...a waterproof lightweight aluminum box that Perly was able to open easily. She took a deep breath and opened it, laying the lid back to reveal some papers and a book. She leafed through the papers, noting that they were spells and conjurations, then set them aside. She lifted the book out to look beneath it, but that was all that was in the box. She looked up at the spectators, puzzled as to what exactly the treasure was supposed to be.

"No money, huh? Or gold?" Asked Quantraine skeptically.

Remy looked slightly disappointed. "No jewels either?"

Perly shook her head, feeling all around the velvet lining of the box. "No, there doesn't seem to be anything of value here."

"What's the book about? Another diary?" Asked Cork quizzically, trying to mask his disappointment.

Even the Sheriff looked rather disappointed, and the Senator's men as well.

Perly picked up the book and opened the cover. It was leather-bound with no writing on the front, but she recognized her Gramma's handwriting immediately inside. Puzzled, she leafed through the pages full of names, dates, potions, spells etc. until it finally dawned on her exactly what it was. It was a record!

"Oh lordy," she breathed, her fingers trembling as she quickly leafed towards the back. As she avidly scanned, she began to recognize names...big names, names that probably would not want anyone to know they had visited a voodoo priestess. "She kept records," Perly breathed, looking up at everyone in the room.

"What kind of records?" Asked the Sheriff, leaning forward with interest.

"It looks like records of all her visitors and the things they asked for."

Quantraine rubbed his hands. "So that explains why someone would want to get a hold of that book," he said, his dark eyes gleaming as he immediately grasped the concerns. "Did she name names?" He was excited! This might answer a lot of old questions that had never had answers before.

"Perly needs time to read it," interrupted Cork. "And in the meantime, everyone here needs to keep this to themselves. There's no telling what's in there, but she wanted Perly to have it for a reason." He looked meaningfully at the Sheriff. "I think it would be best to let her read it and then decide what she wants to do with it, if anything."

The Sheriff looked disappointed, but he backed off. "You'll let me know if there is anything in there that can solve some old cases, won't you? Someone was sure nervous about it."

"You can always impound it," replied Quantraine.

"Not without proof of anything," replied the Sheriff.

"We'll take it off your hands," offered one of the Senator's men.

"Obviously, any proof would be IN the book," interjected Quantraine.

"It's personal property, Quantraine," interrupted Pierre evenly. "Left to Perly by her grandmother. It's hers to do what she wants with." He shot the Senator's men a warning glance.

"Oh my god," breathed Perly, her hands beginning to shake and tears filling her eyes. "How could she?" She dropped the book in her lap and wrung her hands, moaning in distress.

Remy peered over Perly's shoulder and started reading the pages. There it was, in black and white...a record of a transaction that was sure to condemn Rheim's in Perly's eyes.

She picked up the book from Perly's lap and turned the page and a piece of paper fell out. Picking that up, she saw that it was addressed to Perly, but she quickly scanned it before she handed it to her Mother. Perly had had enough shocks with the transaction record requested by Senator Durbin's aide for a voodoo doll made in Charlie Montaines likeness...and what Rheims had charged to make it!

*My Darling Perly,*

*I wanted you to know above all, that Charlie's death was an accident. There have been all kinds of talk and it drove you away from me, so I vowed you would know the truth. I have taken great pains to see that you learn what happened and to remove any doubts about Raymond as well.*

*My heart was torn in two when your Charlie was killed, yet I couldn't do anything at the time to help you. You know how much I loved you...I would have done anything for you. That's why I left this, so you would know the truth and your heart could be at peace.*

*I loved Bastion Durbin with a love that transcends this mortal existence. When his son's aide came to me, wanting something to scare his opponent into withdrawing from the Senators race, I was skeptical. When he asked for a voodoo doll to be made in Charlie's likeness, I refused. But when he then told me that Bastion had asked me to do it as a dying favor to his son, I couldn't refuse. He told me they didn't intend to harm Charles, that it was only to scare his father into backing off. And to be honest, the doll was nowhere near full strength and it wouldn't have been enough to cause any real damage.*

*They only intended to use the doll to threaten and blackmail with because the Montaines had a deep belief in voodoo magic, but when Charles was killed, it changed everything. Suddenly there was talk of murder and Charlie's father lost heart for the Senator's chair. He withdrew from the race. Their objective was accomplished, but what a painful*



*way for it to happen and even the Durbins mourned.*

*You always believed in my magic, darling, so I wanted to leave you my favorite spells and conjurations, although the modern world in which you live in after I'm gone may have long rejected it. Nonetheless, it is yours to do with as you wish.*

*Just know that I love you and will await your forgiveness, if you can find it within yourself to do so.*

*Rheims Renquist*

"Read this, Mother," whispered Remy, her throat full. "It explains everything."

"How could she?" Perly was in shock, her face very pale as Raymond picked up the book and read the pages, Cork reading over his shoulder.

"Just read, Mother," urged Remy. "Please...read!"

Her hands shaking, Perly took the letter from Remy and began to read, her eyes so full of tears she could barely make out the words.

Pierre waited quietly as the events unfolded. He had a pretty good idea what was going on, but he held his council. He looked over at the Sheriff and Quantraine. He was pretty sure they had an idea what was happening too.

Perly dropped her hands in her lap, gripping the letter as she tried to gain control of her emotions. Raymond gently extricated it from her fingers and he and Cork read it too.

"Do you want me to tell them, Perly?" Asked Raymond quietly, his hand squeezing her shoulder.

"I...I'll tell them," she responded quietly. She took a deep breath and then spoke. "The book is a

transaction record of all the visitors Rheims had during her years of practicing voodoo. Requests for potions, spells, dolls, curses; whatever anyone wanted. It has names and what she charged for her services, and it goes back a long way. There are many names of politically important people as well."

"Does it say what happened to Charles Montaine?" Asked the Sheriff.

"She says Charlie's death was an accident," replied Perly, wiping her eyes. She went on to explain the purchase of the voodoo doll.

Quantraine interjected. "That's not the way the media would play it if the Montaines knew this. There would be a full investigation into his death all over again."

"You're kidding," scoffed Remy. "There's nothing anyone can prove from a voodoo doll. Besides, there's no proof they even used it."

"Maybe not," explained the Sheriff. "But if they can cast a slur on the Durbin's name, it could be enough to cost him the election this year."

"Which explains our gun toting friend out there," added Quantraine, looking through the screen at the man in handcuffs. "What do you want to bet he works for the Durbins?"

"If he does, Senator Durbin has no knowledge of it," responded one of the men in dark glasses. "We've never seen him before."

"Attempted armed robbery is harmful enough," Cork added. "If we charge him." He looked at Raymond and Perly. "I'll leave that up to you guys."

"May I look at this?" Quantraine took the diary from Cork and began to leaf through it. He whistled in amazement. "Do you realize there are enough names in here to cause a civil war amongst the

families in this area?" He grinned. "This would make very interesting reading, very interesting indeed!"

"Why would anyone care?" Asked Remy. "Other than the Durbins and the Montaines because of Charles?"

"Because a lot of people still believe in voodoo here in the bayou," explained the Sheriff. "If people found out others had had curses and such placed on someone in their family, it could cause a lot of feuding."

"Especially if it was someone that died or was even just hurt," added Pierre. "There are a lot of superstitious folks around who can, and do believe in all kinds of stuff and every little accident would become suspect."

Perly looked at Raymond. "What do you think we should do?"

"I'll leave that up to you, dear, but if it were me, I'd just burn the book." He indicated the fireplace. "Let it all end here. No point in stirring up old feuds and prejudices that can't be resolved. Charlie's death was an accident, let's leave it at that."

Perly nodded and stood up. She took the book from Quantraine who gave it up with an exaggerated sigh and then grinned. Bending over the fireplace, she laid it on the iron grate, and then stepped back. A few muttered words later and the book burst into flames. They all stared at Perly and then at the book.

"How did you do that, Mother?" Asked Remy in astonishment.

Perly smiled mysteriously. "Lots of things are possible when you believe, Remy."

The Sheriff grinned and strode towards the door. "Let him go," he said to the deputies. As they uncuffed the man in black, the Sheriff spoke again.

"Tell your boss there's nothing here, got it? It's all gone up in smoke, over and done with."

The dark eyes pinned him in a stare, then he nodded imperceptibly and turned and headed down the path towards the shanty. The Sheriff and Quantraine headed towards the boats, arguing amiably about the possibilities of a movie deal, and Pierre thanked his friends who left as well. The Senator's men stared after the man in black, and then headed for their pirogue. Soon, there was no one left but family...and Old Joe.

"What does that dog have in his mouth?" Asked Pierre, taking the apparent stick dripping with moss from Old Joe. He cleaned off the mud and seaweed and revealed the flute Remy had lost in the bayou.

"How did you get that, Joe?" Asked Remy, taking the flute. "It was in the leech bed!"

Perly came forward. "Gramma's flute...what's that doing here?"

"I brought it with me when I came to hunt for the treasure," explained Remy. "I thought I might need it."

"What were you going to do with it," drawled Cork, remembering cleaning the leeches off Remy. "Besides drop it in the bayou?"

Perly smiled. "Gramma used to play the flute for Argonaut; it always made him go to sleep. Your Old Joe looks just like Argonaut did...it's almost uncanny," she added.

"That's what I thought the first time I saw him," said Remy. "That's why I brought the flute. It's a long story," she added at the look of puzzlement on Perly's face.

"Very long," agreed Cork with a gleam in his eye.

Remy just glared at him.

"I think I'm going to go visit Grandma's shanty again," murmured Perly. "Would you like to come with me, Remy?" She picked up the box with the other papers in it and laid the missive from Rheims inside it. Tucking it under her arm, she looked at her daughter.

The men watched the ladies go down the path, and Cork scratched his head. "Now what are those two up to?"

"Saying goodbye to Rheims," replied Raymond softly. "I'm sure Perly and I will be heading back to Roberta's for awhile, but Perly will want to spend some time in the shanty. "Do you mind if we come out now and then during our visit?"

"Not at all," said Cork, relief filling him. If her parents weren't leaving yet, maybe Remy wouldn't be either. Not that he really wanted her to stay, but he didn't want her to leave so soon either. After all, he still owed her for the heavy metal wakeup call.

"Oh, Raymond, I have a favor to ask you," said Cork, going to Remy's room and retrieving the CD. "Would you take this and put it in your suitcase, I really don't want to wake up to it again." That would fix the little brat!

Raymond frowned. "I can't imagine what possessed Remy to have a CD like this, she hates heavy metal."

Cork's jaw dropped open. "She what?"

Raymond looked up. "She hates heavy metal. Remy is a light country and rock and roll fan, even a little jazz and classical. I have no idea what she is doing with this."

"Why, that little..." bit out Cork in a mutter.

Pierre just grinned delightedly. Things were certainly getting more interesting all the time!

Inside the shanty, Remy watched as her mother settled down to study the papers in the box. A wave of her mother's fingers and a fire started in the fireplace. She watched, fascinated at this new side of her parent that she had never seen. The dampness of the hut soon dissipated as the fire chased it out and Remy wandered around, looking at the books on the fireplace with new respect. She wondered if Perly could teach her to light fires!

It was several minutes later when Perly took her granny glasses off her nose and smiled at her daughter. Then she laid her papers down and began nosing around the cottage, grabbing an herb here and there and adding them to a bowl.

Remy watched in fascination as her mother hummed and gathered, seemingly in some sort of self absorbed intention that she wasn't sharing with her.

When Perly waved her hand at the door, it came open and Old Joe came inside, his eyes blood red to stand near the fireplace.

Goosebumps rose on her skin, and Remy shivered as Perly began to chant words that were foreign to her as she tossed the mixture she had created into the fire. The flames grew higher and higher, and she gasped when a woman coalesced into a single entity and stepped out of the fire, placing her hand on the dog's neck. It looked like the apparition she and Cork had seen over and over, only her face was very clear and her smile a lot like Perly's. The woman was dressed completely in a black gown, and her hair flowed freely about her. The gentleness in her soft brown eyes caught Remy's attention, and she knew instantly it was her great grandmother.

## Chapter Twelve

"Hello, Gramma," whispered Perly softly, smiling at the woman in front of her. "Of course, I forgive you, you know that. You are free to go and be with Bastion. You are no longer held to this land."

"Thank you, darling," came the ghostly, silvery voice. "I love you..."

"I love you too, Gramma....rest in peace now."

Remy's eyes couldn't have gotten any bigger as she saw Old Joe step into the fire with Rheims and they both dissipated into wisps of smoke.

"How...how did that happen?" Croaked Remy, unable to believe her eyes.

"So you saw it all?"

"Oh yes...everything...I think."

Perly's soft eyes glowed as she smiled at Remy. "Then you are a believer, just like me."

"But...Old Joe...how...what..." Remy stuttered trying to believe the evidence of her own eyes.

Perly turned and went to pick up the box. "Gramma left me the spells and conjurations she used to be able to stay linked to her land until I could release her. Argonaut was one of those spells. She wanted him here to protect her secrets until they could be discovered, whether through me or someone else."

"But...what if she never got released?" Stuttered Remy.

"Oh, she would have...eventually. She could have released herself, but she wanted me to do it as a signal of my forgiveness."

"What about the flute?"

Perly smiled mysteriously once again. "I'll leave that for you, Remy. You never know what you might

be able to do, if you believe deeply enough and are willing to try."

"But...I'm not staying here in the bayou, Mother. I have school to go back to."

"What are you going to do about Cork? He is in love with you, in case you didn't know it."

Remy snorted. "Now that is something I can't believe in, Mother. I hate him...the man is a brute and a bully!"

Her mother's laughter rang out in the cabin. "Are you sure about that?"

"Well, who would teach me about voodoo?" She asked, changing the subject. "Are you going to move back here with Dad?"

Perly hesitated. She and Raymond had talked about it. They had both missed the bayou desperately. "We just might," she replied finally. "Both of our families are all here, and we are considering it pretty seriously. Now that Charlie's death is cleared up, we don't have it hanging over Raymond's head anymore."

It was Remy's turn to hesitate, but she finally asked, "Do you love Dad?"

Perly knew she meant Raymond. She sat down in an old wooden chair and indicated Remy to sit across from her. "I loved Charles Montaine with all my heart. I never thought I'd love anyone else, and I didn't love Raymond when I married him, but I have grown to love him. So the answer is yes, I love your Dad, just in a different way. More mature, I guess." She smiled at her daughter.

"What about the Montaines? Would it upset you if I visited them?" Remy asked rather wistfully. She had a feeling of disconnection, and it bothered her. Like there was a part of her life left unfilled.



"Of course not. You are an adult, Remy; you have to do what your heart tells you."

An idea suddenly hit Remy. "Say, you don't have any potions or curses I could put on Cork, do you? I have a lot to get even with that man for."

Perly laughed. "Remy, I'm shocked! Why would you want to curse poor Cork?"

"Because he spanked me, that's why," she replied indignantly.

"Do tell," murmured Perly, her eyes twinkling. "Not for fun, I suppose?"

"Fun? How can getting your butt blistered be fun, Mother?" Remy glared at her.

"Maybe you'll find out someday," was the mysterious reply.

Remy had had no idea her mother was so full of mysterious information, but it seemed to be true. She grunted noncommittally, sure she was wrong about that one, though!

When the object of their discussion knocked on the door and thrust it open, Remy's eyes narrowed. He seemed to be agitated about something.

"How are you ladies doing down here?" Asked Cork, stepping inside.

Perly stood up. "Actually, we were just coming up to the cabin. I'm finished here."

"Raymond got a call from Roberta on his cell phone. She wants all of us to come for supper and tell her everything that's been happening. He has all your things packed up and has called for Augustus."

"Did he pack my things?" Remy asked, eyeing Cork. There was something about the set of his jaw that looked ominous.

"Only the heavy metal CD. I told him I'd bring you in later, after we've had a chance to chat."

"Maybe I wanted to go now," protested Remy.

Cork's jaw squared off in his bulldog look. "I'll take you in...later."

"I said I'm going now," replied Remy stubbornly, following Perly to the door. When his arm reached out to snake her back, she squealed in frustration.

Cork held her daughter while Perly closed the door behind her and left her to her fate. A smile curled her lips when she heard the smack of Cork's hand against her daughter's jean clad buttocks as she hurried away.

"You're not going anywhere and don't kick me," Cork ordered, giving Remy another hard spank on her seat. "Now, about that addiction to heavy metal, pipsqueak."

"Just because you don't like it is no reason to fault me for liking it!"

"So you actually like it?" Cork turned her around to stare down into her indignant blue eyes. Her chin lifted defiantly.

"Why shouldn't I?"

"You're not answering the question...do you like it?"

Remy couldn't outright lie. "Okay, no...I don't like it."

"So, you are admitting you set it to that alarm to annoy me?"

"Well...yeah. You're a bully, Cork Renoir, and I hate you. You had no right to spank me! Besides, you shot my three hundred dollar stereo!"

"You've done more than your fair share to make my life miserable in the last week," growled Cork. "Most of it has been unintentional, I'm sure, but this last trick takes the cake. You need your ass spanked hard and long!" He took her arm and pulled her along behind him towards the chair that Perly had set in.

"Let go of me," shrieked Remy, struggling for all she was worth to free herself. "I'll put a curse on you, I'll make a voodoo doll, I'll...I'll..."

Her sentence was cut off when Cork's huge hand made contact with her right cheek just after she was pulled across his broad lap. Her indignant scream rang out in the cabin, and another and another as his palm found his target several times over. Reaching down, she bit his thigh and he roared in pain, and then stood her up to unsnap the buckle on her jeans. Tears of anger and pain ran down Remy's face as she slapped at his hand ineffectually, then opted for slapping his face as he grimly slid her jeans and panties down to her knees.

"Little hellcat," muttered Cork as he pulled her back down and over his left knee. There was a sudden creaking noise and then a splintering sound as the chair gave way beneath their combined weight and Cork landed on the floor, still holding onto his prisoner. "Are you hurt?" He asked, lifting her up to check her over.

"No, I'm not hurt, you big bully," cried Remy, trying to keep his hands off her body. "Just let me go!"

"In that case, I'll just finish what I started." He yanked her back over his knee as he sat with his legs extended across the floor and planted his long right leg over both of hers while he scooted her body closer to him. Then he began to pepper her pinkened mounds with a flurry of hard spansks, causing her to yell her protests.

"You're a brat, pipsqueak," he scolded as he paddled her thoroughly. "You obviously didn't get spanked enough as a child, so it's up to me to

remedy that situation, although I have a feeling I'll never catch up to all you missed out on."

Remy struggled and yelped, but no amount of wriggling could help her escape Cork's hard hand of retribution, so she finally stopped trying and began to apologize instead.

"That's better." Cork finally stopped when he heard the flurry of I'm sorry's coming from her pink lips, and he rested his hand on the hot, red flesh. His hand was throbbing, but oh...it had been worth it! He found himself caressing the twin cheeks, unconsciously soothing the flaming pain he had inflicted. Once again, his traitorous body responded to the soft body lying across his thigh, and he lifted her up before he betrayed himself. He couldn't help cuddling her into his shoulder, although every ounce of sanity in him screamed don't do it!

"I...h...hate you, C...Cork Renoir," she sobbed into his shirt. "I...h...hate you!"

"I know, I hate you too, pipsqueak" he whispered into her soft hair. "But I want to make love to you, God help me!"

Remy didn't know what insanity drove her, but she turned her soft mouth up to the hard one above her and felt lost when he closed on her, almost savagely. Her senses swam and a dart of pure pleasure went to the most sensitive parts of her body as his tongue tasted the inside of her mouth. He probed deeper, his hand holding her head still, bending her to his will as his mouth ground against hers. He broke away from her suddenly with a hoarse gasp and nearly shoved her off his lap as he stood up and pulled her up with him. "Fix your clothes," he said harshly, his chest heaving. He turned and stalked out the door.

Remy stared after him, tears in her eyes and her fingers testing her bruised lips. What had just happened? And why oh why hadn't he finished it? She felt anguish and desire in every pore of her body, and she yearned for his touch to fill her, to assuage the ache between her thighs. Trembling, she pulled herself together and pulled her panties and jeans back into place. She had to get away from Cork Renoir, he hated her as much as she hated him.

After pulling into the dock in the village, he carried her bag down the street to Roberta's home and sat it on the porch. Remy followed him, her bottom still aching though she kept stoically silent. He hadn't said a word when she returned to the cabin, just put all her gear in the pirogue and motioned her to get in. So she hadn't said anything either, just stared at the swamp as he ran the mudbug full out to get her to Roberta's place as quickly as possible. He didn't even say goodbye as he turned and stalked away, leaving her to stare painfully after him, confused and hurting.

Later that evening, when they were all chatting about the day's events, she kept thinking about Cork. No one said anything to her because Cork hadn't stayed to dinner, and her pink eyes had told their own story. Even Pierre didn't mention his son, which was fine with her. She didn't want to talk about Oscar the Swamp grouch. Eventually, the conversation turned to Perly and Raymond's plans to return to the bayou.

"What about you, Remy," asked her Grandmother kindly. "What are you going to do? Are you moving back with your Mom and Dad?"

"I don't think so, Gramma," she replied stiffly. "I believe I've had enough of the bayou to last me a

long time. I'm going back to Chicago as soon as I can and finish school. Then maybe I'll get a photography teaching job around there somewhere in one of the schools."

"We're going to stay here for a week or so, darling," said Perly. "You'll have to come visiting with us and then drive back with us."

"That's fine, Mother, I'll do that. But for now, I believe I'll turn in. I'm really tired." She yawned and stood up, wincing slightly at the soreness in her backside. A good hot soak should help her feel better.

The week passed in a whirl of family and friends, but Remy never saw hide nor hair of Cork. Good, she thought fiercely. She never cared if she ever saw that man again! Just the same, she found she missed him and she couldn't deny the longing that crept in at unexpected times. It was time to leave the bayou and she was glad. Tomorrow she would be gone. And this time, she figured it would be a long, long time before she came back.

Cork sat on the chair, having snaffled it from his Dad once again, drinking a beer and staring into the murky water of the bayou. He cocked his head as the sound of the motor entered the waterway to his dock, and he waited expectantly. He knew Old Joe wouldn't be coming around anymore, not after his father told him what had happened in the shanty. That had sure been weird, the whole thing and he was glad it was over. There hadn't been any more mysterious lights at night, no baying dogs, no footprints...and no Remy.

He tried to stop her image from invading his thoughts, but it intruded on him just the same. Those incredible eyes, the tears he had caused and the soft lips, bruised from the harshness of his

mouth. He had been too rough on her, and he was ashamed of himself. He didn't even deserve to have her say goodbye, and he was sure she wouldn't.

Cork found himself glad to hear the sound of the motor approaching because the bayou had taken on a lonely feel now that his guests were gone. He had lost interest in working on the cabin, although he split logs on a daily basis, just to expel the energy built up from missing her. Sleeping at night was a joke because his dreams were filled with the sassy brat, her laughing face and her reddened bikini clad bottom alternately dancing before him.

He watched broodingly as his Dad tied off his pirogue and sat down beside him, reaching for a beer. They sat in silence for awhile, until Pierre finally broke it.

"She's leaving tomorrow."

Cork grunted, not looking at his father.

"You going to let her go like this?"

"It's not my decision." Cork squinted up at the morning sun. It would be noon in a few hours...another long, tedious day. Damn the brat for ruining his lovely solitude!

"Anyway, she hates me."

He looked at his Dad. "Is she coming to say goodbye?"

"Not that I know of," admitted Pierre.

"See? I told you so." Why would she even come to say goodbye, let alone want to stay, he thought.

"Do you love her?"

"No, I hate her too."

Pierre chuckled. "You got it bad, why can't you just admit it? Don't tell me you haven't missed her this week because I won't believe it."

Cork stood up restlessly and threw the beer can in the trash. "Of course, I've missed her. I've

missed Old Joe! I hate that the peace and solitude I wanted now feels like a prison, and it's all her fault. She got under my skin, and I can't get her out."

"So do something about it," urged Pierre. "It's not too late. Don't let her slip away, Cork. Real love is magic, and it usually only comes once in a lifetime...don't lose it."

Cork didn't answer at first, then he stalked to his pirogue and climbed in. Firing up the engine, he backed out of the docking.

"Where you going?"

"To do something about it, where else?" Yelled Cork over his shoulder.

Pierre grinned delightedly. "It's about danged time!"

Remy sighed and walked up the steps to Roberta's home. She paused and turned to wave at the Montaines. She had been to visit them today and been well received. They had told her a lot about her real father and urged them to visit them whenever she could. She planned to, she just didn't know when she would be back. Cork's image implanted itself painfully in the front of her mind, and she valiantly pushed it away as she always did. He hated her as much as she hated him, and she wanted nothing more to do with him!

"Something came for you today," called Roberta as Remy stepped inside. "I put it on your bed."

"What is it?" Remy asked curiously. Who would be sending her mail?

Her grandmother stepped through the doorway, a dishtowel in her hands. "Go look," she urged with a smile. "Oh, and your Mom and Dad will be back in time for supper."

"Thanks," replied Remy, hurrying up the stairs. She flung open the door to her room and stopped



and stared. Sitting in the middle of her bed was a brand new, deluxe model, black and shiny, new stereo. A huge red bow was stuck to the top of it and a note was underneath it. With trembling fingers, she picked it up and opened the small envelope, taking out the card.

Forgive me? Cork

Tears spurted into her eyes, and the words on the card blurred together. Stupid man! Why did he have to go and do that? Now she really hated him! Quickly, she changed from her dress into her jeans and then raced down the stairs, headed for the front door.

"Where are you going?" Asked Roberta, yelling after Remy.

"I'm going to see Cork," she flung over her shoulder as she raced out the door and down the stairs, headed for the docks.

"Wait...Remy...wait!"

But it was too late, Remy was already gone.

"Oh dear," muttered Roberta, going inside to get to the phone. Dialing a number, she waited impatiently for it to pick up.

"Sheriff's office."

"Let me talk to Cork, and hurry Alice," said Roberta.

"Yes?" came Cork's deep voice over the phone.

"Cork, you need to hurry. Remy came flying down the stairs and out the door before I could stop her...she's on her way to see you! And Cork...it's getting dark. The bayou can be really confusing in the dark." Roberta couldn't keep the fear out of her voice.

"I'll get her," growled Cork and the line went dead.

"I hope so." Roberta bit her lip and replaced the phone. She had been going to tell Remy that Cork was waiting for her at Sam's office here in town if she wanted to see him, but she hadn't had time. Her granddaughter had been too fast for her!

Remy's heart raced with excitement as she turned the throttle on the skiff onto full blast. Cork wanted to see her! She sent the skiff whizzing down the waterway, looking for the entrance to Cork's docking. It was getting dark, and she had to make the first turn...or was it the second? Then Cork's entrance would be the fourth on the left. She saw the turn coming up, and she quickly made it, then looked for the 4<sup>th</sup> entrance. One...two...three...there was no 4<sup>th</sup> entrance. Hesitating, she slowed down and turned around. Had she missed it? She went slowly back to the main waterway, turning to the right to try again. Suddenly, it didn't look familiar. She had made the right turn...hadn't she?

As the darkness grew denser, she flipped on the light on the front of the boat, lighting up the darkness before her in an 8ft arc. Her heart beat faster as she passed an alligator on a log, staring at her. She jumped when it slid into the water, and she hastily sped away from it, deciding to go straight for a while.

The light of the moon shone down so it wasn't totally pitch black, but Remy finally had to come to the conclusion that she was lost. How had it happened and what was she supposed to do now? Her hands flew to her pocket for her cell phone, and then she remembered she had left it on the bed...beside the new stereo. She checked the gas gauge and saw that it was half full so she felt somewhat relieved about that.

She wondered if she should turn the engine off and save gas, but what about the alligators? Would they try to attack her if she was just sitting in the middle of the water? What would she do if they turned the skiff over, like Cork had warned? She shivered, her fear and anxiety mounting. She was afraid to go much further. What if she was going in the wrong direction? She might end up deep in the bayou, and they might never find her!

Making a decision, she turned the engine off and grabbed the bargepole. She could keep the skiff moving this way. She just needed to decide which direction to go in. While she was deciding, she heard the faint sound of a motor, and she paused to listen. With joy, she realized it was getting louder, and it was coming from behind her. She stuck the pole in and turned the skiff around, looking down the waterway. Quickly she started the engine again and headed towards the pirogue she could see away off, it's bright light like a beady eye in the darkness. She prayed it was someone looking for her and not just another bayou traveler that might turn off before they got to her.

It kept coming, though, as she steered towards it, and her heart leapt with gladness when she realized it was Cork. Then it sank when she saw the fierce look in his eye. Still, she was happy to see him, even if he was angry with her again!

"Follow me," he ordered harshly, as he pulled up alongside her, then he turned around and sped off, leaving her to follow. She quickly revved the engine and sped after him, her stomach feeling very queasy as she remembered the last time he had spanked her. She didn't want another spanking, but she didn't want to be lost either!

It wasn't too long before they turned into a waterway, and Remy finally recognized it. She had missed it in the dark. Within a few minutes, they had pulled into Cork's docking, and she cut the engine as Cork tied her skiff off, then held out his hand to help her onto the dock.

Hesitantly, she put her small palm in his large one, hoping it wouldn't be punishing her backside as soon as he had her inside the cabin. When she was on the dock, she gasped as Cork pulled her gently to him and lowered his head to kiss her, whispering hoarsely against her mouth, "forgive me?"

Happily, she put her arms around his burly neck and looked shyly up at him. "Of course, I forgive you," she murmured throatily. "You bought me a new stereo, after all."

"It's not just that, Remy," he replied gruffly. "I was too hard on you...too rough. I was angry. I'm sorry."

"I forgive you, Cork," she replied, her eyes shining. "If you promise not to spank me again."

"I can't promise that, pipsqueak. I think you know that. You have one coming now for taking off alone into the bayou. Lucky for you, Roberta knew right where to reach me so I was soon behind you." He cupped her buttocks in his large hands and then slid them up the delightful full mounds and on up her back. "Will you stay?"

Remy looked quizzically at him. "You mean...live in the bayou...with my parents?"

"I mean live in the bayou...with me. Stay with me tonight....and marry me."

Remy's heart burst open like a spring rose and all the weight she had been carrying around all week disappeared into thin air. Pure joy swept through her, and she flung his arms around his neck

again. "Oh...yes! Yes, Cork, I'll stay with you, and I'll marry you. I love you, you old grouch!"

"I can't promise not to be a grouch, especially where your safety is concerned," he said seriously, but I love you too. I fell for you that first morning when you invaded my privacy with that hideous racket. I just didn't want to love you."

"If it's any consolation, I didn't want to love you either, but somehow it happened," she said as he picked her up in his arms. "Maybe Great Gramma put a spell on us." She laughed at the expression on his face. "I know, you don't believe in ghosts and voodoo."

"Let's just say I'm a little more convinced after all that happened," he replied huskily, kicking the door to his cabin open.

She smiled mysteriously in the moonlight, her eyes gleaming. "Well, I'll have to go to the shanty every now and then to make a few love potions, just to make sure you never stop loving me. I think I have enough belief for both of us to make the magic work."

"Oh, I have my own brand of magic," he assured her as he set her on her feet and slid his hands over her buttocks.

"And what might that be?" She cocked her head and looked at him with a teasing grin.

"That old spankin' magic, pipsqueak, it works every time." He patted her cheeks in satisfaction.

"That's not magic, that's just plain mean," she said with a pout. "I don't like it."

"That's because you haven't had the best kind yet," he assured her as his hands roamed all over her, squeezing her cheeks lovingly.

"I guess you'll just have to show me."

"That will be my pleasure," he replied, a wolfish grin on his face as he turned her towards the bedroom.

"Is it better than voodoo?"

"I think so, but I'll let you decide for yourself."

It was much later when Remy had to finally agree. It was better than voodoo magic, much better. Yawning lazily, she cuddled happily in Cork's arms.

There was plenty of time to learn the voodoo magic and create her own spells...all the time in the world.

The wind whispered their names on the night breezes, and Remy smiled as she thought of her Great Gramma. She was pretty sure she would still be around, watching over them both.

