

NICOLE LOUGHAN

MIDNIGHT SAINTS



SAINTS MYSTERY SERIES
HALLOWEEN SHORT STORY

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Cover illustration and design by Genevieve LaVO Cosdon, LaVO Marketing and Design

Book design and production by Little Spot for Stories

Editing by Erin McNelis, MFA

Author Photograph by Rikki Leigh Shepherd, Rikki Leigh Photography

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Saints Mystery Series

To Murder a Saint

All Saints' Secrets

A Masquerade of Saints

Halloween short story

Midnight Saints

“My grandmother used to tell me on Halloween you have to look out for rougarou. If the werewolf-like beast catches you out alone after midnight and you lock eyes, you’re doomed. If you’re lucky and you get out alive, you will turn into a rougarou at the next full moon. If the next full moon comes, and you haven’t been changed, you only have one year to live. You will perish from the earth one year from the date you met the rougarou. True story.”

“Oh, Fanchon. That old fable is a bunch of bull meant to scare kids into behaving on mischief night. Even if there is such a thing as a rougarou, there ain’t one in this world scary enough to keep me from having fun on Halloween.”

Josephine shrugged off my warning, walked past me and grabbed her make-up bag off of her night table.

The two of us had been scurrying around her tiny room in oversized hoop skirts all afternoon trying to get ready for the annual Halloween Plantation ball. It was a hot day, but we had propped her window open. It looked out over the bayou and was allowing a breeze to pass through the room and keep us from overheating in our oversized skirts. The bed, made up with a floral bed spread, held Josephine’s little sister Lisette. Lisette had parked herself on the bed all day, moaning about being too young to go out. She was laying back dangling her feet over the side of the bed kicking out at us every so often to remind us she was still there.

“It’s not fair,” she pouted.

“Of course it’s fair, dumplin’. We have to go for work,” Josephine said. She was leaning forward into her mirror to swipe another layer of mascara over her already ample lashes. “When you’re older you’ll get your chance at fun too. Don’t worry, *cher*.”

I pushed my giant skirt past Lisette’s dangling legs and jumped away before she kicked out at me. I made my way to the makeup table by Josephine.

She looked me up and down and shook her head. “You got two problems, Fanchon. You are hidin’ your best assets in that corset, and your face looks white as a sheet. You need to push the girls up and rouge up. Turn around and let me show you how.”

She unlaced my satin blue corset and told me to hold up my boobs. I threw off my satin gloves and covered myself with my hands. Josephine told me to bend forward, then she tightened the corset. When I stood and looked in the mirror, I blushed and the need for rouge became unnecessary. With my breasts moved up a few inches closer to my neck, I had what my grandmother would call an “unladylike display of cleavage.”

“Now that’s how you wear a dress,” Josephine said. “We want to keep those cheeks pink like that. Now put on some dark rouge and slut it up. If you’re wearing this much fabric you need a little color so you don’t look like you’re no fun.”

“I’m not out man catching,” I told her. “I’m working tonight. Plus, I already got Jori.”

“Pish tosh. Jori’s boring. I got my eyes set on a soldier tonight. I saw that boy from Hillock Parish, the one on the football team. I saw him in his confederate uniform, his arms bulging out all over. There ain’t enough wool in the south to hide what defines him in that uniform.”

She turned around and put a fan up to her face and waved it in front of her. Then she said in a deep southern drawl, “He gives me the vapors.”

Lisette and I burst out laughing.

Josephine turned back to the mirror and adjusted her top again. Not that she needed to. Josephine was blessed with a tiny waist and giant bosoms, a combination so powerful no teenager should ever have it. She had spent the better part of the afternoon curling her massive mane of dark hair so it was even bigger than usual. She pulled it half up and half down just as the style dictated at the turn of the century. The result, as always with Josephine, was stunning.

We made our way through the living room of her rustic bayou house and then to the kitchen. There her father Clement and her mother Abolina were scurrying about wearing blood soaked aprons. When we

walked into the room we saw that they had spread newspaper over the Formica table, which was strewn with fish. The two of them were using the sullied aprons to cover their clothes while they cleaned the fish. Clem was holding up a catfish which he slit in a long line down the belly before pulling out the head and spine. Then he passed it on to Abolina who deftly sliced it into fillets in seconds. When Abolina looked up from her task she smiled at us, pulled off her apron and ran to the sink to wash her hands. Josephine and I dared not walk much past the entryway as there was so little room between the satin skirts and the table full of dead fish. Lisette stood in the doorway making sure we didn't forget she was there, huffing and stomping.

“Well, aren't you two just the belles of the ball.” Abolina beamed, running to us with her arms outstretched. We both stood a full head above her so we had to bend down to allow her to get her arms around us.

She lingered looking at Josephine. “Well, I swear you got every last bit of beauty I had in me on your way out. And you got your Daddy's fine green eyes to boot.”

Clem walked to Josephine's side giving her a kiss on the cheek, careful not to touch her with his blood-soaked smock. He turned to Abolina and said, “Don't you fret. I ain't never seen anyone prettier den you, boo.”

Abolina kissed him back and then turned to Josephine. “You may have all the young men of Louisiana at your feet. But I got me the love of an old man wearing fish guts, and I still think I got the better end of the bargain.”

“Sure did, Mama,” Josephine replied.

“Now what's the plan tonight, girls? I don't want to hear of the two of you gettin' into any trouble. Oh, and Fanchon, your mama called around again yesterday. She said you two keep missin' each other. How bouts we schedule a time so you and your mother can get together?”

I let out a long sigh and changed the subject. “Beau is driving us out to the Plantation tonight.”

Abolina would not be swayed. “You are going to have to see your mama in the morning for All Saints' Day when you visit your grand

mammy's grave. All the more reason you girls shouldn't stay out too late."

I was trying as best I could to avoid my parents since I had started living with Clem, Abolina and the girls, but Abolina wasn't making it easy. I had left my parents' home for good a few months back, when my father had one too many drinks and I had one too many sassy comments. I wanted to tell Abolina all about our fight, how he had sent me to the Spanish Oak in our backyard and told me to grab a switch. How the moon shone over my naked body as he forced me to strip down and stand in the grass. I wanted to tell her how even the fireflies wouldn't come near me that night, for they knew something wicked was to come. I wanted to tell her how the birds flew from the trees the moment the first lash hit my backside and I cried out. But I didn't. I didn't tell Abolina any of it. Instead I told her what she wanted to hear and respectfully replied, "Yes ma'am."

She looked satisfied that I would visit my parents, but I knew I would never do it.

"Good girl," she said changing the conversation. "So, who's playing the ghosts of confederate soldiers out the graveyard this year? You know your daddy played a ghost back when we was in school?"

"Some of the boys from our school are going to be out there, and the boys from Hillock. Jori's going to be out there this year, too," Josephine replied. "And I hope he stays lost out in that graveyard all night so I can have some fun with Fanchon."

A stern look crossed Abolina's face. "You're prone to too much fun if you ask me, Josephine. Don't you have too much of it tonight. You girls be safe, and I'll be waitin' up."

"Yes Mama, but I can't help my joie de vivre," Josephine said, kissing her mother and blowing a kiss to her father before she started for the door. She gave Lisette a cheer-up tap on the chin before she left.

Beau, Josephine's cute but lazy cousin was on the dock waiting for us. He was leaning against a post, wearing an open flannel shirt with the sleeves cut out to show off his arms. His shirt left more skin exposed than not and his tight Levi's left little to the imagination. I could clearly see that Beau had benefitted from the summer of hard labor on the construction

crew. He had a cigarette in his hand, and when he caught sight of us he flicked it into the water and said, “Well shoot. Look at the two of you. Howdy doo, ladies.”

“Don’t let daddy see you doin’ that,” Josephine said pointing to the cigarette in the water. “You know he doesn’t like it if you mess wit’ his snakes.”

Beau ignored her and walked down the dock, which ran the length of the front of the house and down to his short aluminum fishing boat. He steadied it for us, but neither of us could sit properly. We each took a bench and sat on our sides holding the boat in precarious positions so we wouldn’t tip over. Before long we were whizzing down the bayou to Beau’s truck, which was parked in a thick of trees near the water.

When we tried to get into the tight cabin of the truck, we realized our plan to go to the party fully dressed wasn’t well thought out. The hoops of our skirts wouldn’t fit in the cab.

Josephine pulled up her silken skirt and whipped off her hoop with one hand. “Tie this down with a bungee cord,” she said to Beau, tossing her undergarments to him.

I tugged at mine with some trouble, when Beau said with a smirk, “Looks like I’m going to have to get into your skirt, Fanchon.”

Josephine rolled her eyes at him, stood behind me and whisked my skirt off with one flick of her wrist.

Beau tied down our hoops with bungee cords, and we made our way to Oak Alley.

The beautiful three-story retired plantation known as Oak Alley was known for its symmetrically planted rows of Spanish Oaks. The trees beautifully framed the house, which had wrap-around porches on the first and second floors. On that night, the plantation staff had set up tables and a tent in the front of the house. The tent was situated between the trees marring the usual majesty with a sea of white vinyl. The sun was going down behind the house, but the front yard was kept alight with torches and candelabras.

Beau drove past the house and the main parking lot, which was filled with guests who had already parked for the ball. Once he found a space near the edge of the property, Josephine and I ducked behind a tree and shimmied back into our hoops. We started for the house, when Josephine stopped at a car to check her face in a mirror. I tried to hurry her along. “Josephine, we are already late. “Stop worrying about how you look.”

She was undeterred and added another layer of lipstick.

I looked on at the house and was surprised when I saw light on the second floor. It flickered like an oil lamp and not the electric lights which had been installed in the room years ago. The light was on in a room we referred to as the Lavender Room, and we had often been warned it was off limits after dark. Our manager told us it was because the room was said to be haunted, but I always suspected that rumor was to keep us out of the room because that’s where many of the home’s valuables were kept. Others swore they could feel a presence in the room. I stared up at it and watched the lights flicker for a moment before Josephine caught up with me and came to my side.

“What ya lookin’ at, sugar?” she asked.

I pointed to the Lavender Room and Josephine said, “You don’t believe that old haunting fiddle faddle, do you, Fanchon?”

I shook my head, but kept my eyes on the room just the same. Beau talked as we walked, going on about how much he’d made that summer and Josephine dawdled behind listening to him brag, but I scuttled ahead, worried that we were going to be late. I looked back up at the room and was startled when I saw a woman in a black dress and black bonnet staring down at me.

I stopped in my tracks and stared at her. While I was looking she didn’t move. Josephine nudged me with her elbow, breaking my concentration. “Come on, darlin’. We is gonna be late.”

I looked back up at the room and saw that the light had gone out and the woman was gone.

“Didn’t you see that?” I said.

“See what?” Beau asked.

I looked back at the room but there was nothing to see.

Josephine, Beau and I made our way past the line of tourists, standing on the back porch waiting for the doors to open. They were all dressed in attire that would have fit right in on the set of *Gone with the Wind*. A couple of women wore the infamous dress made from drapes, finished off with fringe and gold tassels. After we were past them we went around the house to the kitchen entrance.

Beau left us and said he was going back to his truck to smoke. He promised to come back after the cocktail hour to get some leftovers. Our manager, Stan, was leaning against the open kitchen door with a cigarette in his mouth. He was wearing a white suit and a tiny black tie, that coupled with his white hair and goatee made him look like Colonel Sanders. Though his high pitched voice betrayed his look of authority.

“You girls is late,” he said setting his cigarette on the ground. He stepped on it with his shiny black loafer, picked up the butt and cupped his hand around it.

Josephine jumped up on the steps next to him, kissed him on the cheek and said, “Ain’t nobody in here yet anyway so no harm done.” She strolled past him into the kitchen and didn’t look back to check his reaction. I followed and said, “Somebody was up in the Lavender Room.”

He looked at me sharply, “Who?”

“I don’t know. I saw the oil lamp on when we were walking up, and there was a lady in a black dress.”

He looked at me angrily. “Are you messing with me, Fanchon? Did Josephine put you up to saying that?”

“No sir,” I replied. “I saw somebody up...”

Josephine grabbed my arm and said, “Stop messing around, Fanchon. Let’s get to work.”

She strode away from him without looking back. I tried my best to look as confident as she did, but I couldn’t and I looked back to see Stan shaking his head at me.

We walked through the small kitchen, where there was one lone silver tray of hors d'oeuvres sitting on the counter. Josephine picked it up and popped one of the tiny croissants on it into her mouth and walked down the hallway. She turned to the right just beyond the stairs into the main dining room. Normally that room was furnished with an elegant maple dining table and intricately carved chairs, but it had all been removed for the party. In its place were high top tables with white tablecloths and a long bar along the outer wall. I turned left at the end of the foyer into the drawing room and found my mentor and boss Mr. Talbot sitting at the piano warming up. He was wearing a black tuxedo with tails and a top hat.

When he caught sight of me he jumped up from the piano and said, "Good gracious, girl. Hurry up and run your scales. They are going to open the doors any minute."

I jumped onto the bench and ran my hands up and down the keyboard as fast as I could.

"Sorry," I mouthed at him. Unable to speak over the sound of the piano.

He shook his head, walked over to the window sill, picked up a book of music and brought it to me while opening it to the first page. "Monster Mash." He ran back to the foyer and held up three fingers to me, and then he counted down, two and one and I started the song. He darted back to the piano and started singing "The Monster Mash" in his lively baritone. He winked at the guests and played to them as they walked through the door, never breaking his character or missing a beat during the song. Within moments guests filled the entire first floor.

Once the outside porch was empty I saw Stan walk to the door, lock it, and turn his attention to the steps. He removed the velvet rope that was blocking off the second level and ascended the stairs two at a time.

Mr. Talbot and I took turns playing different macabre themes. He took the more intricate pieces and the task of introducing each song with a dark story.

With just two songs left in the program for the night I stood, ready to step aside for the two most difficult pieces, but Mr. Talbot put his hand

on my shoulder and pushed me back down onto the bench. I looked up at him and he didn't give anything away. He turned the pages in the booklet to the very difficult and fast paced "Ride of the Valkyries."

I looked up to him and whispered, "I'm not ready for that."

He stood before the audience and said, "We have a special treat for you tonight. Our youngest musician to play at the plantation, Fanchon Deveroux, will be performing "Ride of the Valkyries" for you this evening. I must tell you that it is a special and rare event to see the level of talent you will see tonight in one so young."

I turned ten shades of crimson as he spoke. By that time Josephine had made her way into the room, along with Stan. He had just walked over from the steps and the veins in his neck were bulging. I had to take my eyes off of him for the sake of my nerves.

"The piece she will play for you tonight is beautiful but deadly. The words themselves are a clue to the power of this music. The name Valkyrie means "chooser of the slain" from the words *val* meaning "those slain on the battlefield" and *kjosa* meaning "to choose". Fanchon will be the one who wields the power to be the chooser of the slain if she plays well enough. Who shall be slain, Fanchon?" he asked.

At this point he would typically choose a person from amongst the paying guests, but in my fright I instinctively pointed at Josephine. She pointed at herself, looked affronted then laughed and the other guests joined her.

"Very well, Fanchon," he said, removing his hat. "Let's see if you deserve the honor to be the chooser of the slain." He flipped his coat and took a step behind me, leaving me exposed with a hundred pairs of eyes on me.

I took a deep breath and when I let it out the pages rustled in front of me. I held up my hand to steady them, and then rested my hands in position on keys. I knew once I started there was no stopping. The piece never let up. I had been sitting for what seemed like an eternity staring at the notes. I turned to the crowd and saw Josephine staring back at me urging me to start and when I looked ahead I saw Beau in the dining room,

eating off of a discarded plate. He shot me a thumbs up and I found my strength. Without thinking I started tapping my foot to keep time and my fingers took off, starting the intricate beginning on their own. The swift key movements, when hit correctly are reminiscent of the sounds of an invading army. I managed to keep perfect time with three beats to every measure. My fingers flittered up and down the keyboard so fast that I could barely keep track of them. I was moving along at a good clip, until the final pass, when I missed my chance to turn the page. I panicked for a moment and had to fudge through the grand ascension. I could feel the weight of my mentor's gaze on my back and finally closed my eyes and let my hands go without the benefit of looking at the music. At the last run up the piano I found I held my breath and did not let it out until the last chord was struck. The ending was flawless.

I kept my eyes tight, until I heard a slow clap behind me, followed by applause from the rest of the room. When I opened my eyes I found that Mr. Talbot had bowed low to me, yielding the floor. I stood up and curtsied. Josephine had an ear-to-ear smile on her face and nodded at me in approval. Mr. Talbot turned his attention to me and quietly said, "Want to take the *Danse Macabre* tonight?"

"Nope," I said still smiling and jumped away from the piano.

Mr. Talbot took his seat for the final piece and while he told his story of the *Danse Macabre* I made my way to Josephine.

"Hands from the devil himself," she said reaching out to touch my fingers. "Oh, hot!" she shrieked. "I didn't know you were literally on fire."

I didn't know if my hands were warm from the fright of being under pressure to play such a difficult song, or from the actual act of playing. But I was definitely relieved to be done with my job for the night. While Josephine and I watched the final piece, Stan slid in between us and said, "Who'd you see up in that room, Fanchon?"

"I told you. Some lady in a black dress," I replied.

"Did you see her, Josephine?" he asked.

"I didn't see nothin'," she said.

"Sure it wasn't you up there, Josephine?" he asked.

We both turned around to look at him, Josephine with a stern look across her face. “No, indeed, sir. And I don’t think it’s very professional to go throwing around accusations. I was with Fanchon and my cousin Beau right up till I walked through that door.”

“Is Beau the person in the dining room stealing shrimp?” We turned to see Beau stuffing shrimp and sauce into a baseball cap lined with napkins.

“Tosh,” Josephine said. “That ain’t stealing. We was all done in there and I told him to come get it.”

“I give the leftovers to a shelter, Josephine. I don’t just throw that food away.”

“Well, if you want me to ask him to give his shrimp-filled hat to the homeless I’m sure he’d oblige.”

The vein in Stan’s neck pulsed again. “Get your cousin out of here, Josephine.”

She stomped away to the dining room and I turned back to Stan to ask him what he found upstairs.

“It’s not what I found. It’s what I didn’t. The oil lamp is gone and so is Ms. Stewart’s Antebellum black onyx cameo necklace. It’s priceless, and I want it back by the end of the night or I’m holding Josephine responsible.”

“How can you do that?” I pouted. “She was with me. I’d swear it on the Holy Bible. Look around for a woman in a black dress.”

“Mighty convenient that you saw a woman in black, Fanchon, and I haven’t seen one all night. I’m telling you now you better come up with it by the end of the party at midnight or I’m calling the police.”

I nodded and he left.

Once the piece was finished, Mr. Talbot stood and said, “Thank you. Now if you will all go out to the front lawn and find your seats, dinner is served.”

Josephine found me and the two of us worked together to get all of the stragglers out. Two older gentlemen who were already well past the

point of common inebriation were waving at Josephine and blowing kisses to her. Josephine kept a wide smile plastered across her face but she looked to me without moving her lips and said, “Move along, jackasses.”

When they were finally gone Josephine slammed the front door and said, “Let’s go out back.”

As we walked through the house I said, “That cameo from the case upstairs was stolen from the Lavender Room and Stan thinks you and I had something to do with it. He said if it’s not found by the end of the night he’s holding you responsible.”

She ignored me and continued out to the back porch. We found a young freckle-faced bartender closing up his mint Julep station. Josephine batted her big green eyes at him and placed an order for two. The awkward young man gladly unpacked his glasses and made up her order. She bounded over to me and held out a drink for me, proud of her haul. We wandered through the back alley by the gift shop which was empty of customers. The woman who ran the shop, Angie, was standing inside straightening up the display in the front window. She was the first person I had seen working at the plantation who was not wearing period attire. She waved at us as we passed and we responded in kind.

To the right of the shop was the vendor pavilion, which had different stations selling everything from voodoo to candles.

With all of the potential customers eating their dinner, the vendors had amassed together to chat.

Josephine and I wandered in and found Adelaide Du’Ponde, the granddaughter of Josephine’s neighbor, sitting at a booth decorated with heavy purple curtains and silver stars. She had a sign in front of her that said “Psychic Readings \$20.”

“I didn’t know you were doing readings now,” Josephine said, stepping over to her table. Adelaide was wearing a billowing burgundy gown with puffy-long white sleeves and a multi-colored turban. She pulled off the turban and shook out her dark braided strands before saying, “Oh, I’m just in training. Grandmamma says I’m not ready for the big predictions yet, but I do a little palm reading here and there. Mammy says it’s my

talent. I'm still not sure about everything, but if I find something I don't understand I just make some shit up."

Josephine laughed, "I want a readin'. Listen, you give me a readin' and I'll let you finish off my drink. She passed her the half emptied mint julep, which Adalaide grabbed and sipped, nodding with approval.

Josephine snatched my drink out of my hand, poured the rest of it into her cup and said, "Fanchon wants a readin', too."

"I really don't know," replied Adelaide.

Josephine pushed the cup to Adalaide and said, "Bought and paid for. Do Fanchon first."

Adalaide took a sip of the drink and set it aside. She bent under the table and pulled out a thick dog-eared book with a gold palm painted on the cover and plunked it down beside her.

"Sit a spell, Fanchon," she said.

I sat down and reluctantly held out my palm, which she grabbed and moved close to her face to study.

"Is there anything in particular you want to know about?" she asked.

I thought on it. There was a lot I did want to know, but asking about it would involve me telling her all about my abusive parents and my inner dreams to move to New York City. My dreams belonged to me, and I didn't want to share them, so I simply asked, "Will Jori and I stay together and get married?"

She looked up at me and loosened her grip on my hand, "No, and it don't take no psychic to tell you that. You aren't staying with Jori. Jori's boring. Ain't no woman with half a mind gonna marry Jori."

I looked to Josephine with surprise, but she nodded her head at me. "Told you he's boring."

I shushed at the two of them. "You know Jori's here, don't you?"

"Don't matter," Adelaide said sipping her drink. "Jori wouldn't say boo to me about it. He's also a coward."

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” I said. “Just tell me what you see, Adelaide.”

She bent back over my hand and ran her finger down the center of my palm. She pointed to the line in the center. “This is a life line right here. Now you got somethin’ real interestin’ in it. Look how your life lines break off. You done gone off on a tangent when you were little. See this path here that faded away?” I bent down to look at it and saw what she meant.

“What can cause a line to break off like that?” I asked.

“Usually a big tragedy,” she said. “Anything big happen to you when you was a little girl?”

My whole childhood had been one series of unhappy tragedies after another, but I couldn’t recall any particular tragedy.

“Could be a lot of things,” I replied.

She bent over again and ran her fingers over the center of my hand, pulling a candle close enough to my palm that I could feel its warmth.

“Well, well,” she said. “Another change is coming. Then maybe we’ll see what all these lines are about.”

I wondered if that next change was me moving to New York and asked, “Can a change be something like a change in location?”

“It can be, but this fork is something bigger. Look. See how your old fork disappeared down here?” She ran the tip of her nail across the line, leaving a light scratch on my palm. She kept on going and then showed me my palm again. “Whatever path was presented to you when you were young that you got off of, you are going to get back on it.”

“Will it be a good path? A better path?” I asked. Afraid that I was moving away from my white trash destiny now and might be about to go back towards it.

“No way to say, Fanchon, but it’s going to be real interesting.”

She smiled at me and handed me back my hand. “I think no matter what happens to you, Fanchon, you’re going to come out on top. Don’t take no psychic reading to know you got something special in you. You’re going to be just fine.”

I slid to the side and let Josephine sit down in the hot seat. Josephine smiled eagerly at Adalaide and raised her eyebrows at her in a way that made Adalaide giggle. With a smile on her face she pulled Josephine's hand towards her and started running her finger over her palm. She quickly sucked in a breath and dropped Josephine's hand, letting it fall with a thud to the table. The smile was wiped from her face and she had lost two shades of color.

She leaned back and stared at Josephine.

"What?" Josephine asked.

She shakily said, "Let me see your other hand?" She pulled Josephine's left hand forward and ran her finger across the lines. She turned over Josephine's palm and sat it face down on the table gently. She reached for her book with the palm on the front and flipped through the pages.

"What is it? What do you see?" Josephine prodded.

Adalaide refused to look up and focused on her book. When she found what she was searching for she stopped and mumbled to herself, nodding along as she read. When she had finally finished the passage she looked up at Josephine.

She turned her palm face up again and spoke in hushed tones. "Josephine as you can see here, these little wisps away from your main line are near misses. Your whole life you have had the misfortune of being close to danger, but you have never fallen victim to it. The danger has always passed you by and left you unscathed."

"I like the sound of a little danger," Josephine said with a flirty smile to me.

"No, Josephine." Adalaide said. "When we travel through life, we are only given a certain amount of luck and good fortune. It doesn't go on forever. With all of these near misses you have needed and used so much luck."

"What are you sayin'?" Josephine asked no longer smiling.

"I'm saying. Well. What I'm reading here. Is that you have just about used up all your luck and the next thing to come at you isn't going to

miss, nor is the thing after that or the one after that.”

“So you’re saying I’m about to get a string of bad luck?” Josephine replied. “That don’t sound so bad.”

Adalaide closed Josephine’s palm passed her back her drink and said, “Have a good night, Josephine, and enjoy your life.”

I felt like she wanted to say, “what’s left of it,” but she didn’t. She merely closed the book, said sorry and turned away from the table. I could see a tear in the corner of her eye. She ran back before she could say anything more.

I looked at Josephine waiting for her to say something. But instead she picked up the drink, downed the last of it and shrugged her shoulders.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Let’s go find those boys.”

“Well, what about what she just said?” I asked.

“What?” Josephine replied. “She just got done tellin’ us she makes shit up when she doesn’t see anything.”

“I didn’t think she looked like she was making anything up,” I replied.

Josephine looked me in the eye and said, “Plenty of bad stuff has come my way. If she thinks I’ve missed all of it, she didn’t see a thing.”

I was shocked by that statement. I never knew Josephine to have any trouble in life. Her parents were kind and her family was very well thought of. She always had a warm house and plenty of food. Her upbringing and mine couldn’t have been geographically any closer and yet any farther apart. If Josephine had any troubles she had never shared them with me.

“What are you talking about, Josephine?” I asked.

She placed her hand on my cheek and said, “Well nothin’ to rival your troubles, *ma cher*. So don’t worry yourself.”

We left the pavilion and walked down the lantern-lit path to the small graveyard at the back of the property. The lights by the graveyard

were low, and the civil war era tombstones were surrounded by fog from a smoke machine. Josephine stepped off of the lit path and into the graveyard towards a lantern off in the distance. Where she stepped, the fog whipped around her dress and up into the air around her. I followed her and held my hand out trying to feel the fog, but got nothing for my trouble.

Josephine whispered as she walked, “Any spirits out here tonight?” She kept walking towards the light, passing the low broken tombstones as she went. When there was no reply she stopped and stood still. I followed her lead.

“What are we doing?” I asked. “We’re listening for those boys. They are supposed to be out here as ghosts of the confederacy for the ghost story,” she replied.

I stood still with her and heard rustling behind me. She heard it too but didn’t move.

“Maybe it’s a rougarou?” I teased and she shushed me.

She pointed out further in the distance. I lifted my foot to take a step and felt something grab my ankle and pull me down.

I opened my mouth to scream but felt a strong hand clasp over my mouth before I could get out a peep. When I turned to see who had pulled me to the ground I found a baby-faced boy with broad shoulders and a gruesome looking head wound. I screamed through his hand, and then on closer inspection I saw that he was wearing a wool soldier’s uniform painted with far too much blood to be real. When he got a good look at my face he looked startled, let go and jumped to his feet.

“Sorry, I thought you were Josephine,” he said holding out his hand.

I took his hand and stood up. Josephine was behind him laughing. After I was up he apologized again but quickly turned his attention to Josephine. He had a ferocious look on his face when he saw her. It was a look that I had seen many times when a man got Josephine in his sights.

She smiled and batted her eyes at him. “What exactly did you think you would do with me down there?”

He took quick steps to her and encircled her tiny waist with his hands before he said, “The same thing I’m going to do with you up here.”

She looked up to him, giggled and licked her lips. He bent his head to her and met her lips with force. She moaned and he moved his hands up her corset, she slapped him on the wrist and he backed away from her. “What?”

“You can’t open it from the front,” she scolded. He moved his hands behind her back working his hands to untie her corset.

I decided it was time for me to make an exit and turned back to the path. When I looked forward I saw that the party goers had started to amass around the entrance of the graveyard. I turned and whispered as loud as I could in Josephine’s direction, “Josephine, we’ve got to go.”

She didn’t respond, but I could still hear rustling in the distance. I walked towards the sound but I didn’t see anything. I looked to the ground, but instead of finding Josephine I found Jori at my feet. He too was sporting a massive fake head wound and motioned for me to come to the ground. I bent to him and asked, “Did you boys have fun with that fake blood?”

He smiled, reached for his head, and said, “Yeah, I guess we got a little carried away.”

I got on my knees beside him and said, “I’m looking for Josephine. The ghost hunt is starting and we need to get out of here. We’re going to mess it up.”

He waved his hand to his right kicking up the fog, and we got a glimpse of Josephine and the boy soldier intertwined from the waist up. Her corset was nowhere to be seen.

I jumped up from the fog and could hear Stan giving the story of the confederate soldiers lost to the great Civil War. He was minutes from unleashing the tourists on the graveyard to search for the fallen soldiers.

I bent back down into the fog, and Jori pointed to Josephine and said, “You want to do what they’re doing?”

“Ugh,” I said.

“What?” he asked. If he was going to kiss me like that, I would have preferred he just kiss me like that, but Jori always stammered about kissing me and when he did I just didn’t want it.

I ignored him and crawled towards Josephine. Unable to see her I brushed some fog and found her in an even further state of undress, down to her bloomers. The soldier was missing his coat his palms were working their way across her naked chest, giving me far more of a show than I had bargained for.

“Hey, people are coming. Get your clothes on,” I whispered.

Josephine turned her face away from the boy and the crimson she had swiped over her lips had been slathered all over her face, but her cheeks were so flushed her skin nearly matched the shade.

She giggled and said, “She’s right. Get off.”

He smiled and said, “Okay,” gyrating into her hip and smiling at her.

She pushed him off and held her breasts in her hands as she got to her knees, searching through the fog.

“Help me find my corset, Fanchon,” she whispered.

The boy fastened his coat and got on his knees behind her. He touched his fingertips to her naked back and then worked them around her chest sliding her hands out of the way. “Let me hold those for you,” he said, sliding his lips down to her neck. He ran his tongue over her shoulder before he took a nip of her neck and sucked so hard I was annoyed by the noise from five feet away. She gasped and moved her hand behind his head to grab a tuft of his hair and push his teeth even further into her.

“Good gracious,” I said padding past them. I was annoyed for two major reasons, one that they weren’t at all worried about being caught naked in a field and secondly that there was no chance I would be caught half-naked in a field.

Just a few steps away from them I finally found her corset, when I whipped the fog away from it I saw the oil lantern from the upstairs bedroom next to it. I used the corset to fan away more smoke in search of

the cameo to no avail. I grabbed the lantern, and saw that the glass globe was broken. I heard Stan shout in the distance, "Let the hunt begin!"

I scurried on my knees back to Josephine who was intertwined yet again in a face to face make-out session with her soldier. I threw her corset at her back then jumped to my feet and darted towards the edge of the field, and hid behind a tree. I could still hear the distant smacking sounds of her and her soldier as they both took turns kissing and saying, "You go first." The lanterns from the ghost hunters were drawing closer to the field where the boys were supposed to be hiding. I finally looked out from behind the tree and said, "Josephine, you go first."

She kissed him one more time, and I could have gagged at how long she stared at him afterwards. She ran over to me and when I got a glimpse of her in the moonlight I could see her hair and dress in complete disarray. I straightened her out while she stared off in the distance.

"I swear, Josephine," I said sternly. And she repeated what I said only in a breathless dreamy tone. "Oh, I swear, Fanchon."

When she finally popped out of her dreamy state and looked at me I showed her the broken lamp. "This was out here. We need to go get a flashlight and see if we can find the cameo. It might be out here."

"Why are you so worried about that?" she said.

"Because Stan said he's going to call the police on you if that's not returned by midnight."

Her face changed, and she looked to me, wiping the extra lipstick from her chin. "Why didn't you tell me that?" she asked.

"I did tell you that."

"No, you told me he was going to hold me responsible. You never said he was calling the police."

"Well, I know you didn't do it," I said. "I'll tell them about the lady in black."

She rolled her eyes, grabbed the lamp and stomped towards the house.

I followed behind her trying to keep up as she darted past the shop and the vendor pavilion. She moved straight on to the house.

She whipped open the doors and stomped in. The only people left in the house were the cleaners mopping the floors and moving out the bar tables. She didn't look at them as she walked through the foyer. She threw down the velvet rope and bounded up the steps. She flicked on the lights in the Lavender Room, so named for the garish color on the walls. The room was furnished with a lush four poster bed, a fainting couch, wash basin, dresser and two small night tables. Josephine set the lamp back on the night table where it came from and looked around the room.

"It would be easy enough for somebody to get up here," she said. "We just walked by and nobody stopped us. But I would think somebody would have seen a woman in black."

"I saw her," I offered but she didn't respond. She walked over to the display case where the cameo was kept, along with the other jewelry and saw a faded spot in the red velvet where the necklace used to hang.

"There's a chance it didn't even go missing tonight. It's just the first time he looked," I said.

She let out a sigh. "No, it was there yesterday."

"How do you know?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes and said, "Because I was trying it on yesterday and Stan caught me and I'm guessing that's why he thinks I took it."

"Why were you trying it on?" I asked.

"I try on everything in this house from time to time," she said. "There is a whole mess of clothes in Ms. Stewart's closet and bonnets and a pair of sapphire earrings in a drawer in the nanny's room, and I have tried them all on at one point or another. She's dead so I'm sure she wouldn't mind that I was putting her stuff to good use."

"Sapphire earrings," I said and ran down the hall to the nanny's room, flicked on the lights and pulled out every drawer in the dresser. Josephine came up behind me looked over my shoulder and said, "Well look at that. Those are gone too."

“Shoot,” I said looking at Josephine. “Now my prints are all over this drawer. And yours are all over the jewelry case.”

“Sho’ nuff look like thieves don’t we?” she said. “What do we do now?”

Then I remembered that I had a clear view of the stairs from the piano. “Mr. Talbot might have seen somebody. I could see the steps from the piano.”

Josephine agreed and we bounded down the stairs back to the main floor. We went to the piano room first and found all of the music gone and the piano closed.

“Where does he go after he plays?” she asked.

“If the music is gone he probably left,” I said. Josephine wasted no time and darted for the door and then out to the parking lot. She ran up and down the cars yelling, “Mr. Talbot.”

When I caught up to her and looked at her face she looked panicked.

“I don’t think we have to worry that much, Josephine. It’s just going to be Stan’s word against yours, and you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“There is things I’m not prepared to explain tonight,” she said and I stopped in my tracks. She ran ahead of me shouting for Mr. Talbot then looked back. “Why are you looking all kicked dog on me, Fanchon?”

“Because you aren’t telling me something.” I said. “When we were talking to Adalaide you said bad stuff has happened to you, and now you are all worried about the police. What don’t I know about you, Josephine? I thought I was your best friend.”

She loosened her stance and walked back towards me. Headlights shined behind her, blinding me. She scurried over to the side of the road to let the car pass and when she did I could see it was Mr. Talbot. He drove right past me, but I yelled after him and jumped up in the air waving my hands.

I thought he didn’t see me, but then he suddenly braked and I ran to catch up to him.

“Mr. Talbot.” I said breathless.

“You did a great job tonight,” he said. “You should be really proud. I know you are ready for your college audition now. You are going to wow them, Fanchon.”

I thanked him for the kind words and he handed me an envelope filled with cash. He told me it was an extra tip he got after the performance. He said a well-dressed woman sought him out after my performance and told him to make sure I knew I was appreciated.

“I tried to find you to give it to you, but nobody knew where you went after you saw the psychic.” I knew he was telling the truth about not being able to find me. He wouldn’t think to look for me in the middle of a cemetery trying to get Josephine to put her clothes back on.

Josephine ran up behind me and breathlessly shouted, “Did he see anybody?”

A look of confusion crossed his face and I asked, “Did you see anybody go upstairs while you were at the piano? Stan said that a cameo was stolen from the Lavender Room, and I saw a woman in a black dress up there, but nobody else did. I thought maybe with your view from the piano you might have seen who it was.”

He took a moment to think. “A woman in a black dress? I didn’t see anybody like that. I did see a man and a woman walk down the stairs just before you came, but nobody was wearing a black dress.”

“What did they look like?” I asked.

“Well, I think I had seen the man around before. He was wearing a staff tuxedo. He was tall with light hair. I didn’t get a good look at the woman, but I think she was smallish and she was wearing a dark shawl with violet flowers on it and jeans. Maybe if she had the shawl wrapped around her it looked like a dress. I thought it was odd that she was wearing jeans, as most people were dressed up tonight.”

A woman wearing jeans, I thought back to whom I had seen wearing jeans. Nobody in the house and nobody in the vendor pavilion. Then I remembered the gift shop. Angie was wearing jeans.

“Anything else?”

“Sorry, Fanchon. That’s all I saw.”

I thanked him again, and he drove away.

I looked to Josephine and said, “I think he saw Angie from the gift shop up there. He said she had a black shawl wrapped around her. Maybe that looked like a black dress.”

Josephine agreed and we walked back to the main property and to the gift shop. The lights in the store were still on. When we entered, the bell rang, announcing our presence. There was nobody in the main room, so we walked past the racks of trinkets and post cards to the back counter. After a few moments Angie emerged from the back with a forced smile, which turned into a real smile when she saw us.

“Oh, you girls don’t mind if I grab my dinner while we chat?” she said. We shook our heads and she walked into the back room and came out with a Styrofoam container filled with Jambalaya. I saw the black shawl Mr. Talbot mentioned hanging on the back of the office chair.

“What y’all need?” she asked.

I started, “We were just wondering if you saw anything strange on the second floor of the main house when you went up to the Lavender Room. Like was there anybody else up there and was anything missing?”

She sat her food down and stopped chewing. She kept quiet for a few moments then finally said, “No, I don’t recall going upstairs today at all.”

I motioned for Josephine to come closer to me so she could see the shawl on the chair in the back room.

When she came to my side and saw the shawl she gave me a knowing look. Angie turned around, looked into the room then jumped up and closed the door.

“I’m not supposed to leave the office open,” she said curtly. “And I wasn’t at the main house today.”

“We aren’t here to accuse you,” Josephine said. “Listen, Stan thinks somebody stole the cameo from the display in the Lavender Room. He

thinks it was me, and I'm just trying to clear my name. Fanchon found the oil lamp from the bedroom, broken down in the graveyard."

"You found it in the graveyard? Shoot," she said. "What did you do with it?"

Josephine pointed towards the house. "I put it back on the table in the bedroom."

"Dang it," she said, and ran past the two of us to look out the window.

"Are they still doing the ghost hunt?"

"I don't know," Josephine said. "Why?"

"Oh shoot, I didn't know anybody saw me go up there. You girls have to help me out. I broke the lamp from the display case in the front window this morning, and I knew there was a matching lamp up in the bedroom, so I threw the broken one out in the field and ran up to the bedroom to grab the good one. I broke a vase last week and Stan said if I got careless one more time I'd be fired. You know there isn't any place to work round here, so I really need this job."

"Well, how's he going to know the lamp in the bedroom is the one from the shop?"

"I forgot to take the price tag off the bottom of it. I realized it after I put this one in the case and it wasn't tagged. I made one up for it and was planning to go back to the field after the hunt, take the tag off and get outta Dodge."

Josephine walked over to the window and saw Stan standing near the pavilion talking with a group of guests.

"Can one of you girls run up and get the tag off of that lamp for me, please? Or my goose is cooked."

Josephine said, "We'll get that sticker off for you, but if you have the cameo you need to tell me. I gotta clear my name."

"No sir, no how," Angie said. "I did not touch another single thing in that room. I went in, got the lamp and got out."

“Did you light the lamp or stand by the window?” I asked.

“No, but now you mention it, it was warm when I picked it up. I thought that was rather an odd thing.”

“Did you see a man go up there, a tall one with blonde hair?” I asked.

“Sorry, no ma’am.”

We thanked her, and then Josephine and I walked slowly back towards the house and when I looked over at her I found her chewing her lip.

“What’s the matter with you?” I asked.

She let out a long sigh and said, “It’s time I tell you something.”

She pulled my hand taking me towards the old slave’s quarters. The small white clapboard buildings were empty and unlit. The slave quarters were not among the party stops planned for the night. She pulled me into one of the small buildings, the rustic door squeaking closed behind us.

We walked into the dark and saw only the portions of the room illuminated by moonlight.

“What is it, Josephine?” I asked.

She searched the dark corners of the room, and when she was sure we were alone she talked. “I didn’t steal that necklace, Fanchon, but I’m no saint and if people go looking too far into my life they might come out with some nasty surprises.”

“I’ve never known you to be in any sort of trouble, unless you count man troubles. In that case you have had a few.”

“It all starts with man troubles with me,” she said. “Do you recollect that fire that nearly destroyed the Vallencourt manor last year?” she asked. I told her I did. “I got a little out of hand with a man I shouldn’t have at the Vallencourt party, namely Mr. Vallencourt.”

I made a disapproving noise and she said, “I know, I know. Well, we danced a few turns, and then he whispered in my ear to go to the upstairs sitting room and find myself a glass of brandy and a cigar. He told

me right where to go. He told me where to find the cigars and the drinks. I went up, helped myself to everything. Brandy in the side table, cigars hidden in a globe by the window, small silver lighter sittin' right next to those cigars. I lit up a stogie and was too fool stupid to think anything of the odd set up. I made myself comfortable and looked at the near empty room, thinking rich people sure do have a lot when they got big rooms full of nothin'. There wasn't but a couch and a table in that room. I lay back on the lounge and shortly thereafter smelled a horrid smoke that made my nose curl. I thought it was the cigar so I put it out in the fireplace and left. I went back to the party and danced with near every man in the room. Until smoke alarms went off, sending us all running out into the night. We were all herded into the garden, to wait until the police cleared the house. Up until then we all thought things were still just fine, maybe this was a part of the party, or a joke. The staff at the party handed out flashlights and left us to run through the maze in the garden. I ran through with a group of boys from school. We found these stone demon statues hidden all through the maze, gargoyles they call them. We ran from statue to statue, making our way through the maze and just having a good ol' time."

"So how would that get you into trouble?" I asked.

"Well you see, people got together afterwards and the police were lining everybody up for questioning. I learned that room I was in burned up. People were saying there was quite a bit of valuables in that room, like old paintings, and a valuable rug. The truth of the matter is Fanchon, I know there wasn't a single paintin' in that room and I planned to make it known when Mr. Vallencourt stopped me and told me he wanted a private audience. He pulled me aside and told me I better think hard about what I say to the police, because they found some curious items outside the house. He said they found that the fire started with a brandy soaked rug. And one of the firemen had just happened upon a little silver lighter, right next to a bottle of brandy in the woods behind the house, both covered in prints. Well, I told him that was a bunch of bull. I had no reason to burn down that house. And he said, 'Twenty thousand dollars is a pretty good reason. That's how much money was missing from my upstairs safe. It's hidden inside a globe up on the second floor and I sure hope the box inside the globe survives the fire so they can look in it for evidence.'"

“Oh, Josephine. What a mess. Why would he frame you like that?”

“Beau said he thinks I was targeted because I’m such a flirt. Men remember where they saw me, women have a low opinion of me and with so many sets of eyes on me it would be easy for somebody to remember they saw me go upstairs. I am just the perfect fool for such a scheme.”

“You’re right,” I said. “And maybe it’s happening again.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I don’t think that blonde man or Angie took that necklace. I think the necklace was there right up until the minute Stan went upstairs.”

“Then where is it?” Josephine asked.

I was lost in thought. Stan wouldn’t put it in his own car if he was thinking of calling the police because they might check there. He wouldn’t have it on him, because that would be too dangerous if he were searched. Also, I wondered why would Stan risk a good job for a necklace and a pair of earrings. They couldn’t be worth enough to jeopardize a good job in bayou country. So, I looked to Josephine and said, “I think he must have stolen more than just the jewelry tonight. It doesn’t make sense that he would steal these little trinkets worth a few hundred dollars, a thousand at best, and risk his job and jail. I think something bigger is missing.”

She looked to me and said, “I think you’re on to something, Fanchon. It’s not about the necklace or the earrings. I know what it’s about. Getting’ rid of me. I caught Stan diddlin’ one of the girls from the clean-up crew a few weeks ago in Ms. Stewart’s closet. I told him I wouldn’t say boo about it, but it looks like he doesn’t trust that. If I say anything against him now it will just look like sour grapes. He couldn’t have known all that trouble with the fire and how much I’d fight to stay away from the police. He just wants me fired.”

“If it’s not about money, just getting rid of you, then I know where the jewelry is.”

I grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the house and onto the main path that connected the slave quarter homes. From our perch in the dark we could see the lights of a police cruiser in the parking lot.

“Shoot,” I said. “We might be too late.”

We stood in the dark for a moment. Then I said, “Let’s go to the graveyard. See if we can find one of the boys to do us a favor.” We ran through the woods towards the back end of the graveyard. We came out near the edge of the woods where we had seen the lantern. The smoke machines had been running so long the fog was now waist deep. We stepped into the fog and it circled up around us allowing almost no visibility. I reached out and held her hand as we walked together through the cemetery.

She shouted for her soldier and I shouted for Jori. We walked almost halfway through the cemetery and neither saw or heard a thing.

“I can’t tell if we’re coming or going,” she said, standing still.

I could see just a hint of red and blue light off to our right and knew we were still facing the path and told her so. We took a few more steps and then heard the sound of a twig breaking not but a few feet from us.

“Hey,” Josephine shouted and we saw the outline of a tall figure move towards us. She waved the smoke away from her face and saw Beau smiling back at her.

“Oh, thank heavens,” I said.

“What are you doing out here?” Josephine asked.

“Lookin’ for you two. We need to get out of here, cuz. People are saying you stole from dat house, Josephine. And you me both know we don’t want the cops takin’ your prints, nuh uh.”

“We can do better than that, Beau. We need to clear her name. Can you run to your truck as fast as you can and search it for a silver necklace with a black ornament on it, and a pair of earrings? We need you to sneak it up to the Lavender Room and hide it in one of the drawers.”

“No problem,” he said.

I replied, “You do know if you get caught with this you are going to be the one busted for stealin’?”

“I said no problem,” he replied without a bit of apprehension and ran off into the fog.

Josephine yelled after him, “And if you see a price sticker on the bottom of an old oil lamp peel that off, too.”

“What do we do now?” I said. “I suppose you’re in the clear. Beau doesn’t seem to mind being caught. I imagine he’d take the fall for you without question.”

“It’s not right, Fanchon. It’s not right that people do these things. Stealin’ and lyin’. I flirt a little, but that don’t do anyone no harm.”

“What about people like Mrs. Vallencourt, when you are flirting with her husband?”

She pushed the fog away from my face and looked into my eyes. “You are dead right, Fanchon. I’ve got to have some sort of moral code from here on out. My mama always says if you don’t stand for something you’ll fall for anything and I’ve been fallin’ for all sorts of nonsense. That stops now. We can’t let Stan get away with this,” she said.

She stepped back into the dark of the woods and with purpose marched towards the house. We looked on at the scene near the main house and saw a young officer taking a statement on the back porch from one of the women wearing a dress made of curtain fabric. We moved around to the front of the house and hid behind one of the oak trees and watched Beau climb into the window of the room from the balcony. From our perch we could see the top of the stairs and watched the officer and Stan ascend the stairs and turn the corner into the main hallway. They stopped for a moment to talk and I could feel Josephine and me collectively urging Beau to get out of the room. We held our breath as they approached the door, and then we saw Beau jump out the moment the door swung open. As soon as he was out the window he ducked. The two men in the room looked out the open window and then shut it. As soon as they were gone Beau jumped up and crawled over the railing of the balcony. He lowered himself down over the edge and jumped five feet to the ground as if it were nothing. As soon as he was on the ground he lit up a cigarette and strolled through the front yard. Josephine and I moved from tree to tree until we were close enough to Beau to get his attention.

“I put that necklace in the room,” Beau said. “Weren’t no earrings though. And ain’t nobody talking about a pair of earrings.”

“Hmm,” Josephine said. “I wonder if the earrings went the way of that twenty thousand dollars?”

I watched the two of them exchange a knowing glance.

“What are you guys talking about?” I asked.

“Let’s go for a walk,” Josephine said. And we went into the woods again and started for the cemetery.

“You know we have a lot of money right, Fanchon?”

I nodded and said, “We’ve been saving that money for years and years.”

“We sure have. Though, it’s a bit more than it ought to be, sugar, and I have had to be real careful about my accounting practices.”

“We earned it Josephine,” I protested.

“You’re half right, you earned your share. And the money I put in the bank I earned. But the money I spend, well that comes, for lack of a better explanation, out of thin air.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Remember how I told you there was twenty thousand dollars missing from that room at the Vallencourt house?”

“You didn’t?” I said in shock.

“Oh, I most certainly didn’t steal that money from that room. But I thought, what a curious thing to have somebody say that much money was missing from an empty room when I knew that money was never there. How would somebody prove they had that much money in the first place? I thought well there must have been a withdrawal and somebody was double dipping, trying to claim that money was gone and keep it to boot.”

She looked at Beau who smiled. “Well, when Beau and I put our heads together and we had a long think on where that money might have snuck off to we got a few ideas. We thought it must be outside the house, because the person who hid it wouldn’t know if the fire could be contained. Nobody would risk burying that much money in the ground or hiding it unprotected. So we figured it must be in plain sight, out in the open where it

could be watched. I sent Beau out for a walk in the gardens and told him about the maze filled with gargoyles. Such an odd choice we thought to throw a bunch of gargoyles in a beautiful garden. Beau walked around and gave each of them a good knock, till he found one that didn't quite match the others. It was light and hollow. Beau picked it up, carried it out of the garden and nobody thought nothin' about Beau stealing a gargoyle from a party. He walked right past Mr. Vallencourt and the police."

The two of them laughed, and Beau said, "Vallencourt turned pale as a ghost as I walked past him. He opened his mouth to say something. I walked right up to him, face to face and asked him what it is dat he wanted to say. He knew he couldn't make a fuss about it. It was all sealed up. He couldn't accuse Josephine of making a statue with money sealed up in it in one night. So, I just stared at him and said in front of the cops, 'You don't mind if I borrow this do you?' Then I pretended to stumble a bit, nearly dropped the statue at his feet and he 'bout fainted. He agreed through gritted teeth that I could take it with me."

Josephine added, "Everybody had a laugh as he hefted it up onto his shoulder and tied it down in the back of his truck. When we got it home, we cracked it open, and found the cash. And ever since, I've been careful to sneak it out a little bit at a time."

"Shouldn't you return it?" I said.

"To who?" Beau asked, "That crook. Plus, who they gonna think took it?"

When I thought about it there was no good way to give the money back or good person to give it back to.

"Well, let's donate some of it. At least let some good come from that money," I said. Josephine told me she couldn't think of a better use for it than sending us to college.

"So, what does this have to do with where the earrings went?" I asked.

The two of them pointed to the lantern from the back of the cemetery and in unison said, "In plain sight."

Beau ran to it, opened the door in front of the lantern and nodded his head. He walked back to us and gave the lantern to Josephine. He said. "I'm going to run up to the house and have a quick talk with Stan. You girls wait here a spell, then come up to the house after me. And Josephine, bring the lantern with you. Make sure Stan sees it."

We watched him leave, kicking up fog in his wake as he ran towards the house. We waited, then walked through the graveyard. We emerged from the fog and walked towards the house. As we approached we saw Stan and the police officer near the pavilion and beyond them was Beau sitting on the back porch of the main house in a rocking chair, smoking and smiling. He nodded his head in Stan's direction.

I spoke to Stan first and asked, "What's going on?"

"You don't know?" he yelled angrily.

"I have no idea. We've been out in the cemetery," I said pointing to Josephine.

The officer stepped forward and said, "There was a report of a missing necklace, but it seems to have turned up. When we searched the second floor we discovered there was also a missing set of sapphire earrings. A few people mentioned they saw you two girls in the upstairs bedrooms tonight. Do either of you have anything you want to tell me?"

I shook my head, pointed to Josephine and said, "Do you have anything to share?"

She held the lantern in front of her and gently rocked it back and forth, making sure Stan saw it.

"Where did you get that?" he asked.

"We grabbed it when we were out in the cemetery," Josephine said. "After the hunt was over we thought we'd help you clean up."

Stan's eyes went wide then he patted the front of his jacket and looked at Beau sitting on the porch, who waved and winked at him.

"Well, where do you think those earrings went, Stan?" Josephine asked. "I know I didn't take anything. Go ahead and search me."

She lifted her arms and let the officer pat her down. I did the same. Then we offered up Beau's truck, but he said he'd already searched it.

Then we both looked to Stan, who said, "Never mind. I'm sure the earrings will turn up. Just like the necklace. They must have been misplaced."

The officer took a step to him and he instinctively reached for his breast pocket.

"Sir, can I check your pockets?"

Stan turned and said, "No, you may not." And started for his car.

The officer followed him, asking him to stop, but he continued on without looking back.

Josephine and I didn't follow them, but the woman who had been talking to the police officer was on the Plantation's charity board and we overheard her say, "I don't like the way he handled this whole night. Calling the police before the guests were gone. I'm going to mention this at the next board meeting."

Josephine turned towards her and said, "And the police said he wasn't being cooperative. What a shame."

"Indeed," the woman said.

The party was dying down and nearly all of the guests had gone. Josephine and I called Beau over and the three of us strolled the back walkway towards the gift shop.

"We need to ease Angie's mind," Josephine said. We found her locking the door to the gift shop. When she turned and saw us the look of anguish on her face told us that she needed to know she was out of trouble.

"It's taken care of," I said.

"I owe you girls a favor. You name it," she replied.

"Ca c'est bon," Josephine said telling her in our native tongue that we were even. "Cajun's stick together."

"You girls go home and get some sleep," Angie replied. "It's after midnight. And well past quitin' time."

We looked out at the parking lot filled with lines of cars.

“We can wait until some of those are gone,” Josephine said.

I added, “Plus, I need to say good night to Jori.”

The two of them rolled their eyes so hard I swore I could hear it. We made our way to the graveyard, where only a thin blanket of fog remained. The machines had been turned off, along with all of the lanterns. The only light that was cast on the stones was from the moon. We walked through the cemetery, which seemed small without the benefit of the smoke effects.

“Jori,” I called, but our quick search didn’t find any of the boys remaining from the hunt. I turned back to Josephine and Beau.

“You guys want to try to catch a rougarou tonight?”

“No, way,” Josephine answered. “You heard Adalaide. My luck is clean out.”

She joked but the look on her face told me she was worried about the prediction.

Beau noticed it too and came to her side. “I’ll give you some of mine, cousin.”

I walked to her and said, “Mine, too.”

She stared up at the full moon, which looked like it was hanging too low in the trees to be natural, and Beau and I looked on with her.

“I’ve got big dreams,” she said. “Dreams too big to keep me here. I just know I’m going to be somebody. I can feel it. Everything is going to get better from here on out. We’ve got graduation coming up, the big end of the year parties, and college. It’s going to be a great year. I just know it.”

We stayed in the graveyard until most of the cars were gone, and then walked back towards the main house. I looked up at the Lavender room and saw the light on again. I pointed to it and said, “We never did figure out who the blonde man was. Or the woman in black.”

The light was flickering again, just like the oil lamp. Josephine noticed too and said, “But it’s broken.”

“Want to check it out?” Beau asked.

“No,” we shouted in unison. We walked across the parking lot back to our car. I saw the reflection of the Lavender Room window in Beau’s truck mirror. Then I caught sight of a dark figure looking out at us. I gasped and swung around, but I found the window was empty and the light out again. I felt the skin of my arm cover in goose bumps.

Josephine turned, looked back up at the building and shrugged her shoulders. “Looks like that got sorted out.”

I crawled into the car next to Beau and asked him if I could hold his hand for the ride back. A proud look crossed his face. He wrapped his fingers around mine and said, “Anytime.”

What's next for Fanchon?

There are currently three other books in the Saints Mystery Series which follow Fanchon and her life in New York, New Orleans and the bayou. In "To Murder a Saint" you can learn what happened to Fanchon when she finally follows her dreams to New York City, where she learns to be careful what you wish for. In "All Saints Secrets" you will learn that the bayou holds dark secrets which hold the power to change Fanchon's life if they come to the surface. In "A Masquerade of Saints" Fanchon goes on the run at Mardi Gras. As always she finds a little romance and a lot of danger.

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