

Prologue

THE FULL moon was climbing into the sky overhead cast its eerie light down upon Landry Swamp just east of the small town of Robicheaux Bayou. For decades, the residents of the small remote town in southern Louisiana had spoken of Landry Swamp as if it were alive and certainly haunted, for many of the ghost stories told around bonfires or barstools in the area told of the many strange happenings in the swamp that everyone knew about, but no one could seem to remember actually witnessing. To the unfortunate soul caught out in the swamp after dark, if he survived to tell the tale, he would often talk about how the swamp itself seemed to be alive and breathing. Odd lights flickered in the bogs, beckoning foolish travelers into sinkholes and quicksand, and the unearthly howls and growls of unidentified beasts could be heard all the way back in town seven miles away. If the ethereal stories were not enough to frighten people away from the swamp, then the sheer magnitude of down-to-earth creatures waiting for your death would certainly do the trick.

Alligators of varying sizes hid in the pools and waterways, waiting to get you when you least expected it, and deadly snakes, such as black water moccasins, slithered in the stagnant pools, waiting to strike. If you were unlucky enough to get bitten by one of those vipers, it was highly unlikely you would even make it to the hospital before you succumbed to the venom if you were too far out. It was quick and deadly, and often unprovoked. Mosquitoes carried blood borne pathogens, and rot seemed to seep into everything from the swamp, living and dead. And yet, the swamp could be a beautiful place, as the Spanish moss swinging in the trees made the branches of ancient cypress trees whisper in the wind, and sunrises and sunsets over the swamps and bayous were some of the most beautiful anywhere in the world. Elegant cranes called egrets glided over the water, and flowers and water lilies were plentiful.

But to the man who desperately dashed through the undergrowth, bracken and thorn bushes, the concept of the beauty of the swamp was the last thing from his mind. The moon was full, but the light barely reached the swamp floor through the thick tangle of trees. The man was running in a blind panic, not bothering to try and hide his trail from his pursuer, with his mind, instead, engaged in attempting to keep from falling in waterways or being stuck in the mud. There was precious little solid ground to speak of in Landry Swamp, and he frequently fell in muck up to his knees as he ran.

The unwashed and unkempt man was a typical sight amongst the fishermen of these waterways, for the job of living as a swamp fisherman was often a hard and dirty one. But the dirt covering did little to hide him from what followed. He huffed and puffed and struggled to draw in air as he continued to run, now regretting that he had abandoned his boat, but the motor had given out well before he could make a getaway, and his pursuer would have had him cornered, floating in the middle of the bayou with nowhere to run. So he had abandoned his vessel pretty much in the middle of the waterway and had swum to the far bank, hoping he did not encounter an alligator along the way. It was only when he set off on foot through the dense underbrush that he realized that the alligators might have been a better choice than what pursued him.

He had not believed his own eyes when he had seen it. He had been so smug standing across from the other man on the dock, knowing there was nothing the old fool could do about the situation. The money was safely deposited in an online account that this swamp hillbilly had no idea how to access. The man doubted that his opponent even knew what a computer looked like.

He had gloated about how no one would ever find the money and how no one would ever find him when the other had insulted him and accused him of stealing. He was going to disappear somewhere to South America, never to be heard from again, safely set up somewhere and comfortable with the money he had failed to deliver. He was finished being an errand boy for criminals who kept most of the money and made him take all the risks.

He had sneered from his boat in the middle of the waterway, having slipped quickly into the boat from the dock and shoving off before the now angry redneck could grab him, calling loudly from the water, knowing that no one would hear, and that the other man on the dock would not be able to reach him. He showed no signs of bearing a weapon, but even if he had, the fading light would have made a shot from the dock somewhat difficult to make. But the sneering man had quickly discovered to his utter shock how little a difference that would have made. Right before his disbelieving eyes, as the moon started to peek out from the clouds, the man on the dock had howled out in rage and snarled like an animal, his eyes gleaming in the moonlight. If anyone had told the man in the boat what would happen next, he would've laughed, sure that the teller was insane, but he had seen the fur begin to grow, and the body began to elongate. The grotesque head had deformed itself as the snout grew and fangs sprouted from the mouth.

He had frantically tried to start his engine, but the damn thing wouldn't turn over. He had pulled the starter cord over and over in vain, and he had felt the sharp pain shoot through his shoulder as a tendon had torn in the process. But when it became obvious that the engine wasn't going to cooperate, he left behind everything in the boat and jumped overboard, swimming frantically for the other shore. He had no thought of the normal things living in the swamp that could kill him in the water, like venomous reptiles or even rabid nutria rats, only that he must put distance between himself and the monster on the other side. As he dragged himself out of the water, he had turned back only once to see what was happening with the creature on the dock.

Absolute horror had descended upon him as the creature had jumped straight in the air from the other side of the river and had landed only about fifty yards away in the water, certainly close enough to the other side to easily pull itself to the shore and come after him, but with an eerie factor: it left no wake in the water as it churned towards him. With a scream, he had turned to run, and set off straight through the swamp, ignoring the thorn bushes clawing at his legs and the slap of kudzu in his face. It was gator nesting season, and the possibility of stumbling into a nest of live baby alligators was high. It was well known to any who lived close to alligators that the cry of a baby alligator would bring a full on attack from any adult nearby, and had he stumbled into a nest, his end would have been bloody and violent, as it surely would be should the creature behind him caught him.

If he had been the type of man who spent most of his time in the swamp, he also might have considered that he was leaving a trail a mile wide for the creature to follow. The man he had double crossed who had turned into the creature had lived in the swamp since birth, and knew the slightest bend of a twig could mark the path of the deer, or a nearly faded footprint in the mud would point the way he had gone. The man running for his life had also lived in the nearby area since birth, though not the town proper, but he was only a habitual fisherman, not a man who made a living in the swamp as so many did in Robicheaux Bayou. Of course, none of this mattered, for the creature pursuing him had the canine look of something that could easily sniff him out if it wanted to.

His blind panic didn't really allow him to make much of a plan as he stumbled over a fallen log and fought to keep his balance. The snarl of the monster gaining on him was enough to dispel any rational thought from his fevered brain, with only a passing notion that he should probably try

and head towards town, but even that was a good seven miles away through the waterways of the swamp.

Another snarl echoed nearly in his ear and he felt the slash of a claw in his back. He screamed again and put forth a fresh burst of speed with his lungs threatening to explode, for he was not a fit man by any stretch of the imagination. The creature was gaining on him, he knew. With a sudden burst of clarity through his panic stricken mind, he realized he was going to die, and there was nothing any one could do to stop it. No one was going to help him.

For the briefest of moments, he sobered enough to consider the kind of life he had led, and wondered if he had done things differently, would his end have come much later than it was about to? Would he ever be found or given a proper Christian burial? He certainly didn't deserve one. He hadn't thought about anyone but himself for years now, but his mind flashed briefly on the daughter he knew he had somewhere in St. Bernard Parish that he had only ever seen once, but certainly had never bothered to send child-support to, much less be any kind of father. He felt the briefest moment of regret before the jaws of the creature clamped down on his shoulder and yanked him backwards.

His last thought before the jaws closed around his throat, cutting off the scream was *“please let it be quick.”*

Chapter One

“Don't go around tonight,
Well, it's bound to take your life,
There's a bad moon on the rise.”

Bad Moon Rising
Creedence Clearwater Revival

HAILEY FORET grumbled as she punched the numbers on her radio console, seeking a channel that would come in, if not free of static, then clear enough to make out exactly what was being played. Not that it mattered, since she was sure that anything she did find wouldn't exactly suit her taste. This far out in the middle of nowhere they were lucky they even got the AM radio stations, much less anything desirable to listen to. About an hour and a half out of Baton Rouge, she had lost all of the contemporary FM stations, which left her only the AM stations filled with gospel music, high school football games, fiery sermons and the occasional replay of the Rush Limbaugh show to fill the time, for she had forgotten to charge her iPod or her phone, which harbored her favorite music, and her car charger was missing in action, probably rolled under the back seat. Now, she didn't even have the howlings of Rush's misogynist rants and conspiracy theories against the Democratic president to fill the long hours driving through the storm to her childhood home of Robicheaux Bayou.

With a sigh, she clicked off the radio and leaned forward to use her sleeve to brush the fog away from her windshield. The rain was coming down in sheets so heavy it was difficult to see the road ahead of her. Storms like these cropped up periodically in south Louisiana, especially during the summer, so she was not unfamiliar with driving rain that could be even more torrential than a hurricane, which also frequently peppered the Gulf Coast.

Even so, familiarity with the weather and the rain in the subtropical climate didn't make it any less dangerous any time you traveled in it. Hailey had taken the interstate to New Orleans where she had turned off and headed towards Houma on the relatively well-maintained state highway, one of few. However, turning somewhat north from Houma towards Cajun country and in the direction of the Atchafalaya basin, and thick Louisiana swamps, had meant that the roadways had become progressively less well-kept. The budget for state highways in Louisiana depended upon when the somewhat corrupt state government decided to throw some money in their direction, and even then, that small amount was usually spent on roadways where more people lived, such as the big cities. Small towns like Hailey's childhood home were not high on the list of priorities, even in the minds of their own representatives up at the capital. Hailey wasn't even sure who the representative for Atakapa Parish was these days. Probably some half educated redneck who had won the seat only because he was popular in his hometown, and maybe owned a couple of car dealerships where the voters had gotten some good deals right before the election. That's how it usually went. Most of those folks had barely graduated high school, much less paid attention in civics class, and so their trips up to the legislature usually involved schemes on how to make more money through backdoor illegal ventures rather than the bother of actually passing laws to benefit the state. Robicheaux Bayou, with its predominantly Cajun population that spoke French until the age of five before learning English in Louisiana's failing rural public schools, was like many small towns out in the middle of nowhere. Forgotten. There was some talk that the new governor

intended to clean things up and behave more ethically and efficiently, but Louisiana residents had heard such talk before and learned to ignore it. It was rarely true.

Hailey, like many of her contemporaries, had moved away from her small home town as soon as she was able. She had not wanted to leave behind her grandmother, who was failing in health, or her mother who was a nurse at the local medical center in the middle of town, but she had not been able to turn down the promise of a free college education through the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students, or TOPS program. It was something of a revolutionary program in the same state that seemed bound and determined to cut education for its citizens at every disastrous budget meeting, for it allowed a full free scholarship to any state educational institution if the student scored a certain grade on the ACT exam in high school, and met several other requirements as well. Hailey had been one of the few from her town to get the scholarship, and she had chosen Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, where she would study psychology in the hopes of becoming a criminal psychologist, while still being within reasonable driving distance of home should she need to get back in a hurry.

At the time, the Baton Rouge area was under the shadow of a serial killer who was stalking women and depositing their bodies in the bayous and swamps. Although most of the victims were from Baton Rouge, Hailey had followed the case with fascination until the man was finally caught. She had lost sleep over the fear of living in a house with only two older women, later in a townhouse full of young women, and protection was at a minimum, for her grandmother did not allow guns or other weapons in the house. Her grandmother was a highly spiritual woman who ensured them that God would look after them and that the monster would soon be caught.

Books had been written about the case, especially one best-selling book by Hailey's favorite author Patricia Cornwell. She had devoured every bit of information collected on the case, as well as other strange cases around Louisiana, and determined to make it her life's goal to understand these types of people. She had studied hard at LSU, sharing a townhouse near campus with five other people who split the rent based on the size of the room they occupied. Since Hailey was sleeping on a small twin bed in what was supposed to be the laundry room, her rent had been the cheapest. Her student job at the library had allowed her to make rent, and the scholarship paid for most of her expenses, including the trusty laptop nestled in her backpack that was her very life.

Graduation had been a celebratory affair, for her mother and grandmother had made the three hour journey from Robicheaux Bayou to attend, although they had sniffed with some disapproval at the sight of her living arrangements, since she had remained with her friends at the townhouse after graduation. Still, they had been very proud, and although Hailey was disappointed that her father had not made an appearance, she was not really surprised, for he had not made an appearance at her various educational or life events since she was ten years old, at least not voluntarily. They had gone out to eat at Boutin's restaurant and enjoyed the live music and food, and in the next few weeks, Hailey hit the ground running looking for a job. It was then that she discovered with dismay that not only had the legislature been cutting funds to education, but also healthcare and law enforcement, and criminal psychologists tended to fall in the realm of the Department of Health and Hospitals, for most treated people who were already incarcerated in the prison system. Although the need for psychologists and social workers was great, and many positions lay open, there were little funds to hire anyone and thus Hailey found herself desperately in need of a job, any job.

She never imagined that her degree would end up working against her, but when she filled out applications for everything from a daycare assistant to a shelf stocker at the grocery store, most refused to hire her, figuring that someone with a college degree was not going to stick around long

and was not worth the effort of training. She had managed to land a job as a waitress at the restaurant La Creole, which was, by Baton Rouge standards, fairly high-end. Baton Rouge, like New Orleans, was a cosmopolitan city and many businesses from out-of-state and overseas were taking advantage of the tax breaks to set up home offices in the area. High-end neighborhoods sprung up overnight, and it was not unusual to see the occasional Mercedes SUV barreling down the interstate next to a beat up old clunker pickup truck. La Creole was an establishment that catered to the well-heeled demographic of the nearby Louisiana country club neighborhood, where the cheapest house was a million and half dollars, far out of the reach of the average Louisiana resident. On a good night with a large crowd of businessmen, Hailey could make three hundred dollars in tips. Still, working as a waitress was hardly a career, but it made enough to allow her to pay the bills, even if most days her pay was not anything to brag about.

As more and more time passed, however, Hailey found herself tiring of the doldrums of waitressing, of having to defend her choice of major to her mother who suggested she had majored in the wrong subject if she couldn't find a job in it, as well as fend off suggestions that she simply move back home to Robicheaux Bayou and help take care of her ailing grandmother, for obviously not much was working out for her in Baton Rouge. At a loss for much to say to her mother, Hailey brushed off the suggestions as long as she could and discovered, in the process, a renewed passion she had forgotten about. As a child, she had always loved writing, and many teachers had told her that she had a talent for it.

On a whim, she spent her free time from her job sitting in front of her laptop typing out the story of her first novel, a crime novel, that made use of what she had learned in her degree program to hammer out a rather thrilling, so she thought, crime story. Preliminary readings of it in local writer's clubs gained her quite a lot of praise, and she decided that if she could not make a living as a criminal psychologist then, like her hero Patricia Cornwell, she could make a living writing stories making use of her degree in that way. She self-published her first novel and made enough moderate sales on it through her own advertising means to make her decide to give a second novel a try. She had submitted her first novel to many literary agents until finally one decided to take her on, and was waiting eagerly for the draft of her second novel, a sequel to the first, at which Hailey was somewhat stuck for a plot.

She had not thought much towards moving back home to the small bayou town where she had grown up until her mother told her that her grandmother was having dizzy spells, and was becoming forgetful and should not be left alone while Hailey's mother, Sandra, worked at the hospital in twelve hour shifts. Hailey's grandmother, Eunice, had scoffed at the idea that she needed a babysitter, and claimed she was still quite physically fit, just getting old, and Hailey had ended up playing referee over the phone between the two of them. Things had gone somewhat downhill from there, as Hailey's roommates started moving out one by one, each taking the job in their field, three of them out-of-state, and one getting married. Her earnings from the restaurant were enough to keep her in rent and food while she had roommates to split the cost, but she could not carry the cost of the rent herself. Even in a college town like Baton Rouge, the cheapest rent for an apartment was high enough that she knew she could not make it on her own any longer. She sold what few bits of furniture she had, packed everything in giant Tupperware bins from Wal-Mart, spent the last of her savings on a pre-owned Honda civic hybrid car, which she had always wanted, packed everything up and turned her wheels towards Robicheaux Bayou.

Her mother was somewhat pleased to hear that Hailey would be moving home, of course. Hailey loved her mother, but the "I am always right because I am your mother" attitude didn't work too well between the two of them. She loved her grandmother too, and wanted to help her out, for

her grandmother Eunice was a very special person indeed, but Hailey only wished that she could still be allowed to try and make her own way back in Baton Rouge at the same time. Sadly, though, this was not to be the case, and that was why she was now driving down a highway filled with potholes that banged her tires struts precariously, all while trying not to veer into the opposite lane for being unable to see the dividing line down the middle in this torrential downpour, heading back to a town she never intended to live in again, not because it was a bad place to live, but because it had not yet joined the twenty first century in terms of technology or job opportunities.

Even with the air conditioning going at full blast, the tropical moisture and heat were causing all the windows to fog up, and the few times she had tried to open the window to let some air vent, a swarm of mosquitoes head dived in like kamikaze pilots seeking her blood like the little vampires they were. Hailey had no idea why mosquitoes seemed to zero in on her no matter how much bug spray she doused herself with. Bonfires or fire pits on somebody's patio had always been a nightmare, for the bugs seemed to seek Hailey out, even as others swore they weren't getting bitten at all. Even with the windows up on her car, they still sought her out, the little bastards.

Hailey gripped the wheel of her car until her knuckles were white, gently easing her foot off of the accelerator to drop it down to 35 miles an hour. These long stretches of backwoods highways were prime speed traps for police who liked to hide in the bushes and catch anyone going forty five miles an hour who had not realized that the speed had dropped to thirty five miles an hour, simply because they passed a Wal-Mart, and that counted as an incorporated area. The sound of silence filling the car was disconcerting and she punched the radio buttons again, hoping that she would be able to pick up Allen Lavelle's low-power FM station that he broadcast out of Robicheaux Bayou, indicating to her that she was only a few miles away from home. She knew once she heard the strains of the strange music that Allen insisted on playing that it would only be a matter of time before she could collapse in front of the warm dry fire in her grandmother's hearth that always seemed comfortable, even in the height of summer.

Hailey had to admit that moving back in with her grandmother and mother meant that at least she would be eating decently. Even some of the best chefs in New Orleans who had local cooking shows couldn't hold a candle to her grandmother's prized jambalaya, gumbo, or the crawfish bisque that took five people and two days to make. For a Cajun, Hailey's own cooking skills were mediocre at best, and most of her meals came out of a box with instructions printed on the back, which was akin to blasphemy where she came from. It almost didn't count as real food unless you made a roux first, which was a combination of flour, bacon fat, oil or butter that started most Cajun dishes. It was also rumored that most Cajun food was started on a dare, as in "I dare ya to eat that" while somebody pointed to an alligator or a crawfish.

Her stomach growled. Just thinking about her grandmother's cooking was enough to realize how hungry she was after only having a salad for lunch. Suddenly, the static cleared somewhat as strains of Credence Clearwater Revival's "Bad Moon Rising" suddenly spouted forth over the airwaves. She turned it up a bit and tried to ignore the static that still interspersed the music. She loved the song and she loved the band that produced it, and so many hits, which had a flavor of Louisiana in the sound. Many Louisiana music groups tried to emulate their sound, including the group made up of brothers and sisters who played at the local bar and grill in Robicheaux Bayou, *La Bande Minuit*, made up of members of the Trahan family. She knew the station sending out the signal was a low-power one, however, and that meant that she was approaching the turn off. Sure enough, she almost missed the faded green sign off the main state highway indicating that Robicheaux Bayou was at the next intersection. Her tires skidded a bit as she turned into the driving rain off the highway and onto a road that could barely be called a paved road. It was riddled with

potholes and her knuckles turned even whiter as she gripped the steering wheel harder. She eased her foot off the gas pedal again and coasted a bit down the street, driving through the swinging Spanish moss of the cypress trees overhead. This portion of the road had to be raised to stay above the water level, but it still had standing water, making the drive precarious.

Most of Atakapa Parish was swampland, and only three small towns were counted within its borders. Robicheaux Bayou had been built on the largest patch of firm earth in the parish, but there was no approach into the town that was not over a waterway of some sort. Boat, bridge, and air were the only ways into the small town hidden in the swamp. Hailey's tires crossed into the incorporated area of Robicheaux Bayou and, almost without warning, the rain slacked off considerably, making it easier for her to see ahead in the fading sunlight. A superstitious person might say that the town was welcoming her back, but that would be silly.

The problem was Hailey wasn't so sure that wasn't the case. Strange coincidental things seemed to happen around Robicheaux Bayou on a regular enough basis, enough so that the sudden evaporation of a driving rainstorm right as you crossed into the town wouldn't always be brushed off as the coincidence it probably was. More than once, Hailey had been convinced that some odd serendipitous force seemed to watch over the sleepy town, a suspicion her grandmother often confirmed in her own theories, and it couldn't always be chalked up to imagination.

At any rate, her journey was almost over and, despite her mixed feelings about being forced to come home under the circumstances she was facing, she had to admit that she was glad the drive was over at the very least. The roads were treacherous even when it wasn't raining cats and dogs, even for the most experienced driver native to the area. More than one person in Hailey's life, especially her high school class, had lost their lives on these roads, usually due to a mixture of weather, alcohol, sometimes pot, and carelessness, and memorial crosses occasionally dotted the shoulders of the roads, indicating where an untimely death had occurred. She passed the Harrison's farmstead, another road leading off to the Deveaux plantation, followed by a trailer park, and slowed down to the turn off to the road that would lead to her grandmother's house. Eunice Dubois lived in the part of town that was considered the "old" part, but it was not truly a neighborhood in the way that the newer part of town was laid out. The spider web of roads that crisscrossed the border of the marsh only had the occasional house dotted alongside the streets, but the two closest homes together were still nearly three hundred yards apart. Eunice's nearest neighbor was close to five football fields away.

Hailey maneuvered her car carefully through the winding roads, and finally pulled up in front of the Acadian style two-story house that belonged to her grandmother. She pulled up under the old water oak tree and turned off the car, leaning back, closing her eyes and breathing a deep sigh of relief. She was finally here after a rather long and treacherous drive. After a few seconds, she opened her eyes and gazed upon the house of her childhood through what was now a steadily worsening drizzle as the storm moved in. Hailey's ancestors on her mother side had been deposited, along with many other families, in these swamps by the British after being ejected from Nova Scotia with little but the clothes on their backs, if that. A small group of families from the boat had made their way from the ports to this small area of the swamp to set up new lives as fishermen, hunters and trappers. Up until about two generations ago, they spoke primarily French, and their children only learned English if they attended the occasional English-speaking school, often held in a small room adjacent to the church, and taught by the local priest. They had built cabins out of cypress wood, which was plentiful in the area, although the house in front of Hailey was not the original one her great great-grandfather had built. That house had burned down in a fire about a hundred years ago, and the house that was built to replace it originally was only a single story.

Then, her great-grandfather had added a second level to the house to accommodate his growing family of twelve children, most of whom moved away either to New Orleans or Lake Charles or to work on the boats in the Gulf. Hailey was pretty sure that she had something close to a hundred third and second cousins scattered around south Louisiana. The renovations had also included a wraparound porch under the roof which extended out, called a *gallerie* in Cajun French, and her grandfather, before he had left, had added many other modernizations to the house. Thankfully one of those had been electricity and indoor plumbing, as well as air conditioning. Apparently he had been quite handy up until his death only about three years ago, although Hailey had rarely seen him.

Her grandmother had kicked her husband out years ago and refused to say why, though she never insisted that her daughter Sandra or granddaughter Hailey not see the man. So Hailey had visited her grandfather a few times with her mother, but the visits were always short and awkward. He had not known what to say to her as a child, and she had not known what to say to him in return.

Hailey and her mother Sandra had moved back in with Hailey's grandmother when Hailey was six years old. Her own father had disappeared from her life, literally overnight, although she knew he worked on the offshore oil rigs, so he was not technically gone entirely, though he had not been around much before. It amounted to the same thing, however, for she knew her father had been unfaithful to her mother, which had preceded their separation. He rarely called and never visited. He showed little interest in Hailey's life, even when she had graduated from high school or college, and so she didn't think much about him either. It had just been the three females of the now smaller family that had lived in this house until Hailey left for college five years ago. She had to admit, she was glad to see it again, even if it was not by her own choice.

She pulled her backpack with her electronics on to her shoulder and grabbed a few bags. She simply didn't feel like unloading and unpacking tonight. She would deal with it in the morning. She threw open her door and jumped out, locking it behind her, and sprinted to the back porch out of the rain. She could have gone in through the front door, but it was customary for familiar visitors to a Cajun home to come in through the back door or the side door off the garage, which was the door Hailey chose, for it opened directly into the kitchen, where most people of the house would be hanging out if they were not in the living room. In fact, so little did some of the families of south Louisiana use their front doors that they had moved furniture in front of it and forgot it was even there. The only time front doors were used was on the feast of St. Joseph during Lent where the neighborhood would lay out a feast on their dinner tables in the form of a "Saint Joseph's Alter" and then throw open their front doors, inviting their neighbors in. Families would dress in their Sunday best, no matter what day of the week the feast day fell on, for school was almost always let out for the day, and the entire day would be spent wandering in and out of the homes of neighbors, eating at their tables and chatting about anything on their minds. It was a nice break in the middle of what was supposed to be the fasting season of Lent.

Hailey shook the dampness out of her hair and tried the knob. She sighed when she realized it was unlocked. She knew it drove her mother crazy that her grandmother never locked the doors, but it was not a habit in Robicheaux Bayou for doors to be locked. It was a habit Hailey had to develop while living in a city like Baton Rouge, where crime could happen even in some of the best places, and she had many a testy discussion with her roommates before she finally made a habit to remember to lock the door when she left.

Now, she let herself into her grandmother's house and gently lowered her bags onto the bench by the door, kicking off her soggy shoes that hadn't missed the puddles in the yard outside. In a humid, subtropical climate, even if the weather was decent, you were never really properly dry.

She hung her coat on the peg by the door made from an old horseshoe, and then turned around as the whiff of something delicious caught her nose. Her eyes scanned around her grandmother's kitchen, taking in the familiar and comforting sights. The last time her grandmother's kitchen had been updated had been in the seventies, and it showed.

The overall theme of the kitchen was dark wood cypress paneling, and faded gold linoleum floors that had been worn down from years of feet tromping in from outside. The appliances were rather drab, and even starting to sag in some places, and the cypress wood cabinets had some doors that didn't completely close. However, aside from the shabbiness of the kitchen, it was far from uninviting. Antique cast-iron skillets and pots that had been handed down from generation to generation, seasoned with many gumbos, hung on pegs near the stove, and bushels of herbs grown in the garden out back dried on convenient hooks along the walls and cabinets. Crocheted potholders dangled from several areas within easy reach, and comfortable, but worn, dishrags draped through drawer handles. The curtains in the window over the sink were handmade from Gingham and the double sink was an old porcelain double-sider that was impossible to find these days, but highly efficient and deep. There had been talk of installing a dishwasher somewhere, but her grandmother had scoffed at the idea, and claimed it would take up valuable pantry space, so the old dish drying rack took up one corner of the counter near the sink. The table in the corner near the other window was an old one with battered legs, and chairs that were missing an occasional decorative beam in the back, but was a comfortable place to sit. Scratches in the tabletop indicated where someone had neglected to use a cutting board preparing food. But the wood of all the furniture was worn smooth and golden from the oils of many hands, and rarely needed polishing. The only real concession to the modern age that her grandmother had willingly acquiesced to was the brand-new Whirlpool refrigerator in the far corner, and that was only because it had enough freezer space for all the gumbos, *etouffees* and 7-Up cakes that she liked to fix and bring over when someone was sick. Rather than fix a single pot anytime she heard someone was unwell, she preferred, instead, to spend a weekend making a large number of servings, freezing them and grab them on her way out the door. It also came in handy for times when she was just too tired to cook, which was more often these days.

If anyone had any doubt about the religious faith of Eunice Dubois, though, one needed only to spend about five minutes on her property or in her kitchen to guess. If they missed the grotto dedicated to the Virgin Mary, complete with statue, rosebushes and fountain in the front yard on the way in, then they would be lambasted with crucifixes and religious icons as soon as they walked in the door. Three different crosses of various styles adorned the wall, and a small painting of Jesus showing His Sacred Heart adorned another wall. On the Formica counter amidst all of the pens that didn't work or keys that had been tossed carelessly was an ashtray that had not been used in years that held three different rosaries. Scattered amongst the junk mail and bills in a basket on the counter or alongside it were various leaflets from the church of St. Andrews further in town, and various prayer cards.

Without a doubt, this was certainly a Cajun woman's cabin on the edge of the swamp. Hailey had grown up here, and the sights which would be odd to outsiders were perfectly comforting to her. Most of her memories of this room involved her grandmother stirring a pot on the stove or mixing up various herbal remedies for her clients in the sink, although at present, there was no sign of her grandmother.

“*Gramère, êtes-vous ici?*” she called out. (Grandma, are you here?)

When there was no answer, she turned and headed towards the living room, figuring her grandmother had fallen asleep in her easy chair again, but wanting to check anyway. Sure enough, when she drifted into her grandmother’s living room, there was Eunice, dozing lightly in her ancient easy chair that didn’t quite recline all the way back anymore. Briefly, Hailey wondered if she was okay until she heard the half snore that indicated that her grandmother was only dozing, for if she had been deeply asleep, her snore would have sounded like a chainsaw throughout the house.

With a smile, Hailey wandered over and gently shook Eunice’s shoulder.

“*Gramère, se réveiller, je suis ici,*” she said. (Grandma, wake up, I’m here.)

Eunice startled slightly awake, and then yawned and stretched slightly.

“I ain’t sleepin’,” she said, “just restin’ my eyes.”

“Sure you were,” said Hailey with a smile.

Then, as if only suddenly noticing that her granddaughter was present, Eunice looked up and smiled, saying “Well hey d’ere, dahlin’, glad ye made it home. Was a bit worried with that weather coming in an’ all.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty nasty,” said Hailey. “The drive over the causeway was interesting.”

With a weary sigh, she sank down onto the old sofa next to the easy chair and stretched out her feet along the other side. Her mother would frown on her and disapprove to see her feet up on the sofa, but her grandmother never seemed to mind.

“*Comment ca-va? Ca va bien?*” Hailey asked. (How are you doing, you okay?)

“You kin speak *anglais* if you want, you know,” said her grandmother. “It ain’t like I mind.”

“I don’t lisp as much when I speak French,” said Hailey somewhat grimly.

“You ain’t still let that bother you, are you?” asked her grandmother.

Hailey shrugged but didn’t answer.

“You had you some dinner yet?” Eunice asked. “There some corn bread in the bread box, and some gumbo on the stove. I ain’t had a chance to make the rice yet, though.”

“I’ll do it,” said Hailey, jumping up. “Mom will probably want some when she comes in from the hospital.”

She drifted back to the kitchen to cook the rice and serve up the gumbo in bowls as her grandmother sifted through channels and finally decided on Wheel of Fortune. She brought the food back into the living room and carefully set them on folding TV dinner trays in front of her grandmother’s easy chair and the sofa. Hailey ladled the gumbo into her mouth and closed her eyes, sighing in pleasure. Everyone made their own gumbo differently, and everyone claimed that their own grandmother’s recipe was the best in Louisiana, but Hailey knew not many could match her grandmother’s recipe. The funny thing was, her grandmother really didn’t do much differently than other people did, other than not put any okra in hers because she didn’t like it, and tending to put crabmeat in a chicken and sausage gumbo, as well as a seafood gumbo, but for the most part, she used the same seasonings that everyone else did. Hailey wasn’t entirely sure what made Gramere’s gumbo any different than anyone else’s. Maybe it was simply that her own grandmother had made it, and she could feel the care and love that her grandmother put into feeding her family more so than anyone else. As they settled in to eat, Hailey felt herself beginning to unwind.

Her eyes swept around the room, taking in the sight of her grandmother’s living room as she had done in the kitchen. Like the rest of the house, the last major remodel had been decades ago, and the style had not changed. Dark cypress wood paneling made up the walls and the floorboards, although up until recently, there had been matted and stomped down shag carpet left over from the

sixties. Hailey's mother Sandra had argued for taking it out, saying something about decades' worth of dust mites causing allergies. Her grandmother had not been too fond of the carpet anyway and had agreed, and since most of the wood in the floor was recycled from an old house that had been torn down not too far away, it was a good example in not wasting your resources in a community that didn't have many to begin with.

The room, like the kitchen, had changed very little in nearly forty years. Wood paneling had been the style of choice in the era that this room was last remodeled, and like the kitchen, was rather dark and dim, but far from uninviting. Rather than replace the furniture, most of it had simply been re-upholstered, making the cushions sag in all the comfortable spots after generations of bottoms sitting on them, and the corduroy worn smooth, with the last reupholstering job having been done before Hailey was born. The newest piece of furniture was her grandmother's old La-Z-Boy easy chair, and it too was older than Hailey. Her mother Sandra typically sat in the other easy chair that had once belonged to Hailey's grandfather, whom nobody really mentioned much around the house. When he had moved out, he had left the chair behind and, rather than throw it out, Sandra had claimed it. Several cardigans and sweaters were draped over the back end, and the small table on the side of it was littered with her bills and papers.

Like most houses built in swampy land, the house was raised a good two feet off the ground to avoid flooding, but the house had flooded once back in 1925 when there had been a great deal of rain and flooding all over the state and around the Mississippi basin. The water level had gotten to over two feet inside the house, and that had been one of the times the house had been remodeled and updated. The living room, like the kitchen, was a shrine to the family that lived in it, as well as to their Catholic faith. The wall was completely covered with photos of the family all the way out to second cousins, most of whom Hailey knew personally, along with religious icons, crucifixes and paintings done by a few local artists.

There were several photographs of Hailey at various ages, including one large picture frame that held thirteen photographs of her from preschool all the way through high school graduation. Another picture frame showed her standing with her grandmother on one side and her mother on the other holding her degree from Louisiana State University and wearing her cap and gown. It was one of the pictures that showed Hailey's proudest moment thus far, and she had set it as the background on her laptop. There were photographs of her mother Sandra as well, from infancy up to the present, the most recent picture showing Sandra accepting a nursing award in New Orleans. She had been a nurse for twenty years at that ceremony. There were also pictures of various extended relatives, second and third cousins that Eunice knew of and kept in touch with around the state, but noticeably absent from the photographs was Hailey's father, Sandra's ex-husband Jedidiah Foret, and her grandfather, Eunice's ex-husband, Jean Dubois. Hailey had a photograph of her father in a picture frame that she carried with her, but she rarely set it out. If her mother had one, she didn't know about it, and any of the photographs from her parents' wedding had been removed years before.

There had never been any pictures of her grandfather around the house for as long as she could remember. Her grandmother had forced him to leave before Hailey was born, and had removed all of the pictures shortly thereafter. Because it was not a topic that Eunice tended to talk about freely, Hailey was reluctant to ask why. She understood about her father's infidelities, which had caused her own parents' of divorce, but she had no idea what her grandfather had done, and the one time she had garnered up enough courage to ask her grandmother about it, Eunice only replied sadly that someday she would tell Hailey when she was old enough to understand, but it would not be for a while. It had simply seemed odd to Hailey that a woman as spiritual and loving as her

grandmother, whose life mission it was to be a spiritual beacon and healer to her family and neighbors, could hold a grudge in such a way as to completely vanish from her home the man she had stood before a Catholic altar and promised to love and honor until the day she died. Her own memories of her grandfather were of a taciturn man who didn't speak much and didn't get up out of his own easy chair in the trailer he had moved to on the few occasions that Sandra had brought Hailey by to visit as a child. But he had not seemed the sort of man who could have done anything so terrible as to cause Eunice to banish him the way she did. It was all very odd.

The photographs aside, there were also several bits of religious art work decorating the room as well. Various paintings depicting scenes from the Bible, such as the Sermon on the Mount and the feeding of the five thousand, some of them reproductions of famous artwork and some of them more amateurish, adorned the spaces in between the photographs on the wall of the living room. Paintings of the Virgin Mary and Jesus hung in the corners, along with a variation of different styles of crucifixes. More rosaries and prayer cards and saint medals could be found in the drawers of the various bits of furniture, and a four foot statue of St. Teresa sat in the corner. There was other artwork on the walls as well, mostly done by a local artist who took pieces of driftwood and painted nearby scenes of the swamps and the town to sell to tourists who came during the fishing season. The man who had painted them was a distant cousin of Eunice's and frequently gave her a good deal on one that she liked. Carvings of local wildlife made from cypress knees lined the shelves along one wall along with various knickknacks and artifacts from the few trips her grandmother and mother had made outside of the state, even out of the country. These were mostly pilgrimages to holy sites such as Lourdes and Medjugorje, although once her grandmother had gone on a cruise to Alaska with a group from church, and had brought back a couple of bits of Native American art work from the Pacific Northwest. A cuckoo clock from the Black Forest in Germany sounded in the hallway, which was a gift that have been brought back by the previous priest of the town, Father Jerry who had been a close friend of Eunice's. He had gone to Germany for a conference and had brought back the treasured piece that her grandmother faithfully wound every evening right before going to bed. The sound of her grandmother pulling the chains of the pine cone shaped weights that would drop throughout the day, followed by the distinctive sound of the cuckoo ringing out the last hour of the evening, were the sounds that often followed Hailey into sleep as a child.

Finally, all around the house, but especially in the living room, there were books. The librarian of the town, Pierre Boucher, often joked that if he ever ran out of books to circulate to the townspeople, he would send them over to Eunice's house. She had joked back only to send them if the patrons were interested in herbal remedies, romance novels, spiritual self-help, or crime fiction. The crime fiction had been Hailey's addiction as a teenager, which led her to the study of criminal psychology, and later to pursue writing herself in the genre of crime and mystery. She had not had much room for her extensive crime fiction collection back in Baton Rouge, and so had left them at her grandmother's house. The various books on herbal lore and religious self-help books belonged to Eunice as a reference for helping her various clients when her own remedies did not seem to be working. The romance collection of Danielle Steele novels and Harlequin novels, one of the few things her mother and grandmother agreed on, were passed back-and-forth between themselves, immune to Hailey's good-natured jibes about older women getting hot and bothered by such literature. What she never admitted to was reading them herself, as she often did, especially in her teen years. These days, she preferred to be seen reading true crime and educational materials, instead dropping the trashy romance novels on her Kindle where no one could see the cover of what she was reading.

Even if it was in the middle of nowhere and sagging under the weight of several decades of inhabitants tramping across the porches and floors, it was a cozy home, and Hailey was not sorry to have grown up here. She was not entirely sorry to be here now, for if she was required to move away from Baton Rouge to take care of her grandmother, there were certainly worse places a person could be. At least her mother had installed satellite TV and Internet last year after Hailey had gotten her addicted to Facebook.

She sighed and stretched out further on the sofa. At the sound of the sigh, her grandmother turned and looked at her.

"I'm sorry dahlin'," she said. "I know you ain't wanted to come back here. Told your mama it weren't necessary. I got my healing and my church group and my book group, and I ain't bein' wheeled around yet. I ain't no burden to anyone yet, and I don't need no looking after. I told her it weren't right to haul you back here for no reason."

"Gram, I really don't mind," said Hailey. "Not that much anyway. Maybe mom is right. Maybe I just need to step back for a while and head off in a new direction. The way things were going in Baton Rouge, I wasn't getting any time in looking for a psychology job or working on my book. At least here I'll have some time to work on it and kind of get my bearings straight. I might see about going down to the diner or to Diggers and see if they need any waitresses. I can always work a little bit while I'm here instead of hanging out around the house all day. And I plan to spend at least four hours every day working on my book. Hey, you never know. If I become as popular as Stephen King, it won't matter where I live. I can write anywhere. Besides, I don't think you're a burden, and there are worse things than spending the whole day hanging out with my grandmother. I was never one of those kids who made you drop me off a block away from the school 'cause I was too embarrassed to be seen with you."

Her grandmother laughed. "That's true. Still though, there ain't much for you here. Young girl like you should have more prospects in the big cities. Ain't even any decent men around here for you."

"Gramere!" Hailey said with mock shock.

"Well, it's true," her grandmother grinned with a brushing off gesture. "Seems like all you young folks lit out for the hills as soon as ye could with nothing but your taillights showing, as soon as graduation was over. Can't say I blame you all, and I knew most of y'all wouldn't be back. Some of the boys join the army and come back, but most stayed way. But not much is changed around here since I was a girl. That's not always a good thing. And what stuff is changing certainly ain't good. Can't keep the big world out much longer. Used to be you didn't have to lock your doors at night. Now we starting to get crime like any other town. You heard about that man they found out get in the swamp?"

"Actually, I had," said Hailey somewhat sheepishly, "It was on the news, but I don't know that much about it."

"Well, some alligator hunter checkin' his lines out on Daigle Bayou come across some feller that look like he been eaten by some animal. Coroner said it wasn't no gator or cougar, and it don't look like a bear attack. Don't know how they know all that, but Sheriff Frank said it looked right suspicious. But anyway, they're looking into it. If it was murder, that will be the first around here in a long time. Usually all we get around here are some drunk fools out at Diggers putting his hands on another man's girl and ending up fighting in the parking lot."

"Well, I guess times are changing everywhere," said Hailey.

“That they are,” said Eunice. “Well, the Lord’s ways are mysterious, and ain’t for us to figure out. He brung you back here for a reason, and whatever’s going on out in them swamps, I guess there’s a reason for all that too.”

Hailey only nodded and gathered up the bowls to head back to the kitchen to clean them while her grandmother grabbed the television remote and began surfing channels.

Her mind was racing from subject to subject as she cleaned the dishes and set them in the drying rack, so that she almost didn’t notice her mother coming into the back door, and shrugging out of her raincoat and rain boots, shaking off the damp from outside.

She looked over at Hailey and smiled wearily.

“Hey hon. *Ca va?* Glad you made it in. That weather out there’s right atrocious. How come you didn’t call or text me when you got in? I was a little worried.”

Chastised, Hailey hung her head. “I’m sorry, mom, I guess I just didn’t think about it. Besides, with the weather coming in so fast, and the rain hitting the windshield, I didn’t really want to take my concentration off the road. And cell reception is so crazy out here, wasn’t sure anything would get through in the weather.”

“They put a cell tower up on top of the hospital last year,” said Sandra. “Lots of folks are using cell phones out in the swamps now what with fishing. Between that and the Sonic and the McDonald’s, I guess we officially count as civilization now.”

Hailey smiled at her mother’s wry humor. Maybe they didn’t agree on a lot, but at least they found some of the same things funny.

“Y’all had dinner already?” asked Sandra.

“Yeah sorry,” said Hailey. “Gramere was hungry, but I made enough rice for you to have a couple bowls and bring some with you to work tomorrow.”

“Thanks, hon,” said Sandra, moving to ladle some of the gumbo into a bowl.

“I’ll be back down to help clean up,” said Hailey. “I’m going to go get set up in my room. Gramere’s ‘resting her eyes’ watching America’s Funniest Home Videos.”

Her mother nodded as she grabbed her bags and belongings and headed up the steep narrow stairs to the upper level of the house. The current house that was built on the site of the original house had been built nearly a hundred years ago, by Hailey’s great-grandfather, but it had been progressively added on to as his family grew, finally topping out at seven boys and five girls. The boys had occupied the four rooms upstairs, presumably where they could be obnoxious without bothering the rest of the family. The girls had occupied two of the four rooms downstairs, two of which were now occupied by Eunice and Sandra, with the other two turned into a small prayer chapel and home office. Hailey figured the girls had been settled across the room from their parents’ room to ensure nobody would sneak out to meet with boys in the middle of the night. Apparently, no such worry had been given toward the sons, who could easily have snuck out the upstairs window down the big cypress tree along the south wall.

The stairs were somewhat rickety and creaky, sloping steeply upward, and had a much sharper angle than an average set of stairs. This made them just short of being a ladder rather than stairs, given how steep they were. Many Acadian style homes in this region had similar designs in porches and stairs, although their staircases were usually outside of the house. Hailey was immensely glad that her great-grandfather had enclosed the stairs into the main portion of the house, saving her from having to go outside in the rain again. She reached the upstairs level and turned into the first room on the right that had been hers growing up. The room still felt like hers, even though she had not lived in it for five years, for she had visited often after moving to Baton Rouge. Her toys and other tokens of her childhood had slowly been moved into the other rooms or given away, but the

stages of her teenage years still remained in band and movie posters on the wall, gymnastics trophies and medals under the bed, and the stack of old high school notebooks and paraphernalia in the corner of the closet. She sat her bags down on the bed and slowly sunk down to a sitting position herself, listening to the rain pommel outside on the corrugated roof, a modern one sealed with green weatherproof paint that had replaced the old rusted tin roof a few years earlier, which had blown off during Hurricane Katrina. The wind howled outside and Hailey shuddered a bit.

She had been sixteen when the devastating hurricane had blown through this area of the Gulf, pushing floodwaters up the Intracoastal waterways and backing up the bayous. Although the house had not flooded the way it had a 1925 during the devastating floods of the Mississippi River that had also backed up the waterways, the water had come precariously close to the porch during Hurricane Katrina and had caused some damage to the roof. That event had necessitated replacing it with the more modern roof. Since the terrible storm, Hailey had hated the sound of the wind howling outside. It sounded like a vicious monster lurking around outside, waiting to snatch her away. She shook off the thoughts along with a slight passing thought of what it must have been like for her ancestors who lived in far less secure dwellings than this one.

Slowly she got up and wandered out into the hall and peeked into the other three bedrooms. One was kept neatly made up as a guest room for any time someone visited, or Eunice kept a client overnight for observation. One room was basically a storage room, where all of the unused furniture or things packed into boxes, such as old clothes Hailey had outgrown or old toys she no longer used that had not been donated, were kept. Because her grandmother really couldn't navigate the staircase anymore, and her mother didn't like to, Hailey figured at some point cleaning out this room was going to be one of her jobs. The fourth room was becoming its own junk room, as things that did not fit in the storage room had spilled over into this one. However, most of it was still clear of junk, and a sturdy desk that had belonged to a great uncle was parked in one corner. Hailey intended to use this room as a writing office, and made plans to move one of the standing bookcases in here to hold her crime novels, writing manuals and notes for her novel so they could be kept within easy reach. She should also be able to hear her grandmother calling her if she was needed. She also hoped that having a real writing studio would help her get past the writer's block she was feeling on her novel, but had told no one about. She knew nobody thought she'd do well with writing for a career, and didn't want to let anyone know that she had barely been able to write anything for two straight weeks. Having a special place to write was supposed to help with that.

The only downside to this arrangement was that this part of the house had been built long before indoor plumbing was a normal thing. In fact, the old outhouse still stood in the backyard, but it was used as a tool shed now. The indoor bathrooms had been added to the downstairs level back in the 1950s, and there were only two in the entire house, one just off the kitchen and one at the end of the hallway of rooms that her mother and grandmother used. Hailey would probably end up using the one off the kitchen as her own, for it was closest. She would have to move all her stuff in there later when she was done unpacking.

Of the four rooms on the downstairs level that used to be bedrooms, two of them still were being used by Eunice and Sandra. The third room was used as her mother's makeshift office, with the desk in one corner and the computer both she and Eunice used that was in dire need of replacement. But on the other side of the room was Eunice's healing area, with a small daybed for doing treatments on clients, and cabinets holding her herbal remedies that were not stored in the kitchen. The fourth room was a small makeshift chapel that, although was not officially consecrated, for home chapels were not unusual these days, served as a prayer room for her grandmother mostly. It held a small holy water scone on the wall right next to the door, as well

as a couple of kneelers and a small altar with a crucifix and a few statues of the holy family, as well as prayer candles and a notebook for all of those whom her grandmother prayed for on a nightly basis. In the more modern era, some people would think this was rather odd. But to the Dubois-Foret family, it was a perfectly normal part of life.

Hailey returned to her room, already making plans in her head to set up her writing office and to inquire in town about potential waitressing jobs. She may not be too successful in her chosen field yet, but she was certainly not going to be a freeloader, even though she knew very well that she could stay here rent-free as long as she needed to. By the time she had showered and sank gratefully into her bed, listening to the sounds of her mother and grandmother getting ready for bed themselves, some of her inner turmoil had begun to settle down, along with the feeling that she was not completely in control of her own destiny. As she drifted off to sleep sometime in the early morning hours, the storm blew itself out.

Jackson “Jax” Dupris groaned in protest as the early morning sunlight streamed in through the window and hit his closed eyelids dead on. He rolled over and tried to pull the covers over his head, but the sunlight splashed through the whitewashed room, making it impossible to ignore the bright day that was just beginning outside. Since the room he occupied was also over his parents’ freestanding garage and not well insulated, it was also rather stuffy, for the humidity of the day had not burned off from the storm last night, and the window AC unit only managed to keep the temperature in the space just above livable. Sleep firmly chased itself away and he threw back the covers, swinging his long legs over the side of the bed that had once belonged to his brother, rubbing his eyes somewhat irritably. The small excuse for a studio apartment had been built for his brother Drew when he had graduated high school, and Jax had still been a sophomore. Despite the fact that there was plenty of room for him and his brother in his parents’ house, Drew had insisted that he needed his own personal adult space after sharing a room with his kid brother for so long, and had constructed this room himself with a little help from their father Frank. It wasn’t much to speak of really. It used to be the attic above the freestanding garage, but they had built a set of steps outside leading up to a door they had installed in the insulation and sidewall. The floorboards were bare and sanded smooth and large windows took up two of the four walls.

A small sink set into a countertop with some cabinets underneath was in one corner, with a hot plate and a microwave serving as the stove and oven. A dormitory fridge sat to one side, and a small table with two chairs was situated nearby. In one corner was a partition closing off the old tub with shower curtain and toilet, serving as a bathroom area, and in another corner was a small desk where Jax set his department-issued laptop that he had brought with him. Since his parents had no Internet connection, he had been forced to bring an air card in order to keep in touch with his superiors back in New Orleans, although he had been pleased to find out about the new cell tower in town, which made things much easier for those who wanted to communicate with the 21st-century. A small secondhand television sat on a stand on one wall with a discarded loveseat parked in front of it. His brother Drew had spliced the satellite connection and run it to the small studio apartment, which was illegal, but not even their father, the town sheriff, had said anything about it.

Drew could probably get away with circulating child pornography and his father wouldn’t do much about it. In the eyes of Frank and Rheba Dupris, their oldest son Andrew was perfect. Their youngest son Jackson, however, seemed to never be able to do anything right. Not even his name was his own, for, like his brother, he had been named for the famed General Andrew Jackson, but

only after Drew had been named for him first, with Jax carrying on the second part of the name as an afterthought. It was why he preferred his nickname, Jax, after the beer brewery in New Orleans, since it was his own, not that his parents ever called him by that nickname. They simply didn't notice him for himself. Even if he had been any kind of serious student in school, bringing home straight A's, he was sure he'd have gotten nothing more than a glance and a sign on his report card, and not another word about it. But let Drew bring home B's and C's and they would be sure to go out to eat to celebrate. At least, that's how it had seemed to Jax.

He was fairly certain that his brother would still be living in the small apartment bringing home girls he had picked up at Diggers had it not been for the fact that he was a long-range truck driver and rarely home. Jax hoped his brother would not make an appearance while he was here investigating the strange death of the man out in the swamp. He wasn't one hundred percent certain his parents wouldn't force him to move out of the studio apartment for the short time his brother would be there and sleep on the couch.

The small but slightly more modern home that the Dupris family lived in only had two bedrooms, one for his parents and one he had shared with his brother. As soon as both boys had moved out, Frank had converted it to a home office and where he could hang up all of his LSU paraphernalia and watch the football games, rather than have it spread all over the house and have his mother commandeer the television during game time just to get his father's goat. It also gave his father a place to retreat when he was once again disagreeing with Jax's mother. It seemed to Jax that his parents didn't often get along, although they didn't actually fight and there was no talk of divorce. But their marital dynamic was odd, as they basically just existed in the same house without any real sign of affection between them, and it had been that way as long as Jax could remember. The one thing they could agree on was that Drew was the golden boy and Jax was a screw-up. But they acted more like coworkers or business partners than a married couple.

Jax had his own opinion about how wonderful his brother was. Andrew Dupris had been nothing but a bastard to him growing up, and even still as an adult. As the first child and only child for the first three years of his life, he had been horribly indulged and coddled, with the result that he had grown into a rather cocky and arrogant man. He had been popular in school, a star running back on their football team, and always seemed to have a knot of friends and girls around him. Drew was charismatic and personable, but he was also cruel in his own way. When he wasn't running the football and garnering admiration from the adults in the town, he was busy making life miserable for anyone who might be slightly different in their small school. Kids who weren't athletes, who were shy and quiet, or God forbid, overweight, were often the butt of his jokes, which could involve anything from mud slung onto the back of their shirts, to being shoved in a locker, to having their books knocked out of their arms, as Drew and his cackling friends had walked by. Sharing a room at home with a person like that had not done much for Jax's own outlook on life, emotional stability, or beliefs in a certain degree of human decency. He had been Drew's favorite target, and Drew was certainly not above rubbing it in how much more his parents favored him over Jax. The fact that his parents seemed to be proving it true did not help Jax in defending himself.

Drew was also always pressuring him to be the bully that Drew himself was. Jax didn't think he was naturally charismatic like Drew, but he always seemed to have a group of classmates willing to hang around him in order to be associated with Drew, and that meant bullying other kids as well. It has always sickened him afterwards, but with his brother looking on approvingly, he had teased other kids in his class, singled them out, and then gone home to hide in his treehouse and try not to cry. His brother had looked on approvingly at school, but would then come home to

continue teasing Jax, making Jax wonder why he had bothered at all. All too often, his brother had taken over their room, and kicked Jax out, so he would retreat to his treehouse, even well into high school, to do his homework and get some peace and quiet from his brother's loud rock music. Drew moving into the apartment meant that Jax had finally gotten the bedroom to himself, and it had been a breath of relief to him.

He never got off on bullying the way his brother had, but it had earned him a reputation as a bully as arrogant as his brother. It had meant that his only real companions were jerks like Drew, and the only comments he got from adults were that of disapproval from both his teachers and his parents. Eventually he had taken up cross-country running for two reasons: the first being that if he had not gone out for some sort of sport, his brother would have given him no peace, and the second being that cross-country running was not football, which was Drew's domain. Jax wasn't built for football anyway. He was muscular but leaner and wirier than his brother, and he fit into running quite well. Drew had tried to tease him about it, of course, claiming that only pussies who couldn't hack football went out for running, but that stopped after the one time he and Jax had raced, and Jax had beaten him by fifty yards. There was some talk of trying to get Jax to try out for the football team anyway, for speed like that would have made him a great running back. But he flat out refused to, even under pressure from his father, who wanted nothing more than another star football player in the family, even if he was second to the star brother. Jax was determined to make his own way after that, even when his parents rarely showed up for his track meets, and even when it seemed that they only gave him a short "Good job, son," but nothing more when he brought home trophies.

It had been at that point that he had realized that he did not have to try to live up to his brother and imitate everything that Drew had done. Every time he tried to live up to Drew by doing the same things, he was constantly reminded by everyone how he failed to do so. But the few times Jax had excelled in his own activities, such as running, it was something he valued greatly. He had to admit it was rather satisfying to look back over his shoulder and see his brother huffing and puffing nearly a full football field behind him with no excuse other than the fact that Jax truly was the better runner.

Everyone had assumed that Drew would follow his father Frank into the police force, and indeed Frank had pushed heavily for both of his sons to consider a career in law-enforcement. Drew made placating gestures to his father, assuring him that it was top on his list of considerations while Jax would only shrug noncommittally and say nothing. Probably the one true time that Drew had actually disappointed their father, and there was no excuse Frank could make for him, was when he declared he was going to truck driving academy to become a long-haul trucker. It had been the one time that Jax had ever witnessed his father and brother fighting, actually screaming at each other. His mother had said nothing as she usually did, and simply walked out of the house to leave them to it.

In the end, Drew got his way as he always did and took off for parts unknown, sometimes not calling for a month at a time, even though he had a smart phone and was perfectly capable of texting anytime he felt like it. No mention was made of the fact that Jax texted his mother every day after he had moved away, and called his father at least once a week. By the time Jax had graduated high school, he had decided in his senior year to knuckle down just enough to pass high school with a diploma, instead of needing to go for a GED and summer school, but his grades and averages had been terrible through most of his school career, and he did not qualify for TOPS. He had hoped like many of his classmates to use the scholarship to evacuate to the bigger cities, and never look back at the small town that had given them very little opportunity for a future in

adulthood. However, with college more or less out of his reach and being unwilling to take on a student loan, Jax did what many young men from a lower middle-class or poor backgrounds did in the south. He joined the military.

His father had proudly served in the Air Force and had also hoped that one of his sons might do the same, which was why Jax joined the army. He never really had much of a strong emotion about defending the nation or the honor of America, or all that stuff that got drilled into him during boot camp, but he had to admit that after the chaos and turmoil of his younger years, and the seeming disregard of his parents, that the rigid and ordered structure of the military suited him well. Eventually he became military police and was stationed in Kosovo, guarding the American base there and going out on “peacekeeping” missions. After two years of that, with seeing more action than he wanted to speak of, he was honorably discharged and sent back home. But he wasn't ready to return to Robicheaux Bayou yet.

Instead, he applied to the state trooper academy of Louisiana, and was accepted due to his exemplary service as military police. He spent a year on patrol before applying to become an investigator, and had gone through the program with a true interest. He had been assigned to Troop B in Kenner, outside of New Orleans, where he had lived for the past several months in a tiny little studio apartment smaller than this one. He and his partner Will Grady had investigated only one case unassisted before the call came from Leesville about this temporary transfer to investigate the strange death of the man found in the swamps outside of his old hometown, which his father had insisted was a murder.

Jax had protested forcefully to his supervisor about his father pulling strings with his old friend Jacob Marquet in Troop I in New Iberia to get him assigned to investigate what was likely an animal attack when any other person could do it. However, his father had insisted, and his supervisor had pointed out that it would be good practice for real investigations later on. Frank Dupris might be convinced that this was a homicide case, but the likelihood of that being true was very remote. Essentially, Jax was simply there to look over the file, check out the supposed crime scene, and rubberstamp this as unresolved, then go back home to New Orleans.

He wasn't sure what he would find when he got back there, for his partner Will Grady was subleasing his apartment at the moment, having been kicked out by his girlfriend two weeks prior. Patricia had been the person Will had ever dated the longest, a full three months, and they had moved in together far too soon. Will and Jax, like many young single men in New Orleans, had spent their free time carousing for women in the various bars and dives around the French Quarter. Jax wasn't exactly proud of his cavalier approach to women in the past, and figured it was probably time for a break anyway. He just hoped his mother wouldn't find out. He wasn't sure he wanted to endure yet another lecture in how disappointed someone was in him.

Speaking of his mother, she would probably be cooking breakfast right about now. He padded over to the small kitchenette area and sifted through the meager cabinet that served as a pantry, and one look in the small dorm fridge that only held Dr. Peppers told him that he would have to seek breakfast somewhere else anyway. He changed out of the pajama shorts he which he slept, into some basketball shorts, and went down the stairs outside to the garage underneath that held a punching bag. He went through about thirty minutes of different punching combinations and kicking drills, working up a decent sweat and waking himself up enough to consider not going back to sleep. In the military, he had taken up mixed martial arts fighting on the base, and when he had been assigned to New Orleans, he participated in several of the open tournaments in the area. He had managed to talk his partner Will into it, and the two often sparred to stay in shape. Jax had only been back in Robicheaux Bayou for two days, but already he missed his wisecracking

partner. On the job, Will was completely professional and serious, but off-duty, he could have been a standup comedian. He was a sharp contrast to Jax's is more brooding, serious nature.

Jax was, inherently, an introvert, although he was able to interact with people and act outgoing when needed. He preferred, however, to be more on his own, either exercising or reading, mostly biographies of people who interested him in some way, such as military generals or the occasional boxer or professional fighter. He wasn't a big fan of fiction or literature, although he liked Stephen King well enough. The military had taken Jax in as an arrogant, and somewhat sarcastic, teenager and had turned him into a serious young man who didn't often joke, but instead, attacked life the way he might have the enemy, with seriousness and focus. Although he had not seen much action while deployed, since he served mainly as a prison guard at the detention facility at Camp Bondsteel, he had lost a couple of friends to improvised explosive devices on the sides of roads in Bosnia when hostilities flared up, and it had sobered him to how fragile life truly was. At twenty four, Jax already understood, on a deeper level, some things he knew his brother would never grasp.

There were times when his emotions threatened to rage out of control over his frustration with his family, the realities of life in a militarized zone he had faced in the military, and the continuing problem of poverty, gang violence and crime in New Orleans which, although he loved the job, could wear on a person after a while. Taking everything out on the punching bag or an opponent in the ring was how Jax stayed sane. When that wasn't possible, having a good run in the park, or finding a one night stand in the bar, usually served as a good substitute. But he recognized that he couldn't keep this up forever, since it wasn't healthy emotionally, and half wondered if he should be seeking some kind of therapy.

He could almost hear the shrink's diagnosis now: "youngest child syndrome coupled with battle fatigue, even though he had never really been in ongoing battle, followed by severe issues with self-esteem and self-worth, topped feelings of inadequacy from constant negative reinforcement from parental figures." They would probably recommend he spend an hour every day paying a hundred dollars a session to have a shrink listen to him talk about his mother, after which they'd suggest to take a vacation and come back to work ready to go. As far as he was concerned, MMA lessons and tournaments were cheaper. With a final kick and follow through punch, he stood breathing heavily and sweating slightly, watching the bag swing back-and-forth. He turned and went back upstairs to the small studio apartment and drew the curtain around the tub for a shower.

His father had run the line from the main line at the house, which meant that the water almost never got warm enough for a true shower, for it had to travel quite a way from the water heater to reach the dinky little shower. Still, in the heat and after his exertion, the cool shower actually felt pretty good. It probably wouldn't be quite so refreshing in the winter, but Jax didn't plan to be here by then. Moving away from his parents and finding his own way in New Orleans had been exactly what he needed, and he was far from ready to give that up. In fact, he was quite ready to get back to gang crime in New Orleans, where at least his superiors listened to him and valued him, for the last thing he wanted was to have his father hovering over him reminding him of how he was doing everything wrong in the investigation. Even though Jax had become a police officer like his father, apparently he had not even done that right. Frank had hoped one of his sons would follow him into law enforcement, but it was not the son Frank had wanted to succeed him at the department here in Robicheaux Bayou. Frank had wanted Drew, the son he was proud of, and Jax knew he was a poor substitute in Frank's eyes. It was why he couldn't fathom why his father had insisted that Jax be transferred here to investigate the case when anyone else could've done it. They had been

waiting three days for the coroner's report and for the photographs taken at the crime scene to be developed, because Frank's department still used film and hadn't bothered to get a digital camera. And apparently nobody had thought to use their phones.

Jax had spent the last two days at the station in an unused office, tapping away on his laptop, filling out reports on the case, though there wasn't much to report yet, and trying to set up an arrangement to have somebody with a boat take them out there to have a look at the crime scene, which was probably completely useless now after the storm. The man had been found a week ago, and a lot changes in the swamps in the spring. Jax fully intended to investigate to the full extent of his abilities, but he honestly expected to rubberstamp this one and be back in New Orleans by tomorrow or the day after.

Stepping out of the shower, he dried off and pulled on his clothes, then shouldered his messenger bag carrying his equipment, locked the door behind him and headed over to the main house to see if there was any breakfast. When he walked into the back door, sure enough, his mother was in the kitchen scrambling eggs and brewing coffee. Several links of boudin sausage were on a plate nearby, and a bowl of grits sat steaming with melting butter. His stomach lurched at the sight of the *boudin*, as he had never liked it, but the grits looked good.

"Mornin' son," his mother said, not looking up from the eggs, but in a friendly enough voice. They were not a demonstrative family, but it did warm Jax's heart a little bit to know that his mother truly was happy to see him. She may prefer Drew, but he knew she loved both of her sons.

"Hey mom," he said, giving her a one arm hug around the shoulders and heading over to the coffee pot. He had to admit, his mother made one hell of a pot of coffee. When he had been stationed in the military, several of the old officers, grown hard from years in the military, used to brag that they like their coffee strong, but would brew up that Folgers instant crap. Jax found the stuff inedible. But in Louisiana, the brand of choice was Community Coffee, a local-based company that made coffee good enough to rival Starbucks. In fact, Starbucks had stiff competition from CCs chains in the area, and many people would say that they preferred CC's. When Jax's mother had sent him a care package that included a pound of light roast from Community Coffee, he had brewed some up for his commanding officers the way his mother did for his father, nice and strong with water that had come to a boil rather than just been heated.

The grizzled officers had crowded around the coffee pot, claiming it was the best damn coffee they had ever had, and joked that you could grease engines with it. If Jax was a bit more of a man who cooked, he might've made beignets with it, like at Café Du Monde in New Orleans, but he didn't want a reputation as a pansy, plus his cooking skills were suspect. But he had told his fellow soldiers about how Café Du Monde had been in operation since before the Civil War in New Orleans, and their coffee recipe hadn't changed much. They brewed one of the few combinations of coffee and chicory that was drinkable, aside from Community Coffee, and back during those times, farmers used to leave at three in the morning to go sell their wares in the French Market, and would often stop at Café Du Monde for coffee and beignets before heading over to set up their stalls. Even to this day, people at South Louisiana liked their coffee thick and strong, and occasionally with chicory.

Jax poured himself a very large cup and dumped five sweeteners into it. His mother looked on in something close to horror.

"Five sweeteners? You know those things give you cancer right?"

"Everything gives you cancer," grumbled Jax. "Life gives you cancer. Living in south Louisiana with nothing but chemical plants all up and down the river gives you cancer. Besides,

the whole thing about saccharine giving you cancer was after some researcher fed some rat fifty of them. Well yeah, I'd get cancer after eating fifty of them myself."

"I don't always remember you being so cynical, Jackson," his mother sighed.

He shrugged. "Sorry mom. You know I'm not a morning person."

She deposited the dishes in the sink and told him, "Your father has already left for work. He says he wants you down there sometime soon, by eight."

"Don't know what he's complaining about," said Jax. "The last two days since I've been here, I've been in the office at eight o'clock every morning. It's only seven thirty now and it's not like we have heavy traffic in this town. And we're supposed to be heading out to that crime scene where they found the guy. Odds are the boat owner won't even be up and awake or sober until after noon anyway."

"Think you could figure out who did this?" asked his mother.

"Sure if I thought anybody did anything," said Jax. "I'm not exactly sure what dad is expecting me to find. A guy all tore up found in a swamp eight miles outside town? During alligator nesting season? I'm expecting the coroner to say he got chomped on by a gator after dropping dead drunk into a nest, to be honest. But if that's not what it is, then I'll find out."

"Your father doesn't think so," said Rheba. "And he's been at this job for over forty years."

"Yeah, but how many murders has he investigated?"

"A couple, Jackson," said his mother. "Your father is a policeman. Just because you didn't hear about all of his cases doesn't mean he never had any."

"I know, but I also know Robicheaux Bayou, and even if this town can be a little weird at times, we just don't get a whole lot of premeditated murders they could dump in the swamps around here. Even that serial killer, Derrick Todd Lee, was dumping his victims out in the Atchafalaya, not in Atakapa parish. This place is just not too easily accessible for someone driving around with a dead body to dump."

"Well, promise me you won't write it off," she said, finishing her work at the sink.

"Mom, seriously?" asked Jax, annoyed. "Dad isn't the only dedicated law-enforcement official around here, you know. Yeah, I want to get back to New Orleans, but I don't intend to do a piss poor job. If I think the man was murdered, I'll investigate it. And I'll do it well. And I'll catch the bastard who did it. If I think he was gator chow, then I'm going to say so. Kind of sucks to think that you don't think I take my job seriously enough to do it."

"Jackson, please," said his mother, shaking her head. "No arguments this early in the morning. I take you seriously. Eat your breakfast. I'll see you tonight for dinner."

"Okay, mom," he said, digging into his grits and ignoring the *boudin*. His mother sighed and dropped the sausages into a container, then dropped them in her own lunch bag. He felt bad that she had cooked them and he didn't eat them, but hadn't she ever noticed that he had never liked *boudin*? He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten it. He just knew that at one point he had taken a mouthful of some and thought it was disgusting, and never ate it again, and that must have been ages ago. As for his mother's words, well, they stung a bit, but Jax actually thought this conversation had gone well, compared to others. Conversations with his parents usually went like that. He was used to it. He finished his breakfast and headed out to his truck, one of the few things he had splurged on with the money he made as an investigator, that didn't always translate into clothes and living arrangements. The souped-up black pickup truck sat on a chassis slightly higher than most trucks, with wheels and suspension that had been upgraded for off-roading, and a decent sound system. He was as proud of his vehicle as he was about anything. He swung up into the cab and headed into town to the sheriff's station.

As Jax drove into town, he noticed that very little had changed since the last time he had lived there. The small bayou town citizens were often up well before the sun, as many of them worked off the land, either in some form of farming or fishing or out in the plants and refineries an hour away up the river. There wasn't much solid land in the area of the town to sustain a large farm, although the Harrison's dairy farm just outside of town was more of a local family operated thing than commercial. Another family operated a salt grass harvesting operation on the outskirts of town, harvesting the salt grass that grew in the edges of the swamp and marshes for resale to farms around the state. Sugar cane fields lined the roads leading up to town, but the sugar cane was often processed in another parish. Those who operated businesses were often there before sunrise, getting everything ready for any customers who might wander in, and anyone who worked in New Iberia or Houma had to be on the road early to make it to work in time, for it was around an hour's drive to the closest bigger town. But it was the fishermen who really were the hard workers. Whether it was shrimp season, or crawfish season, or alligator season, these men, who had likely worked alongside their fathers since they were children, were down at the docks and boat launching slips getting their tackle and gear ready for a day out on the water by three in the morning some days. Robicheaux Bayou was part of a very large, crisscrossing network of waterways that spider webbed across south Louisiana, eventually emptying into the Mississippi River or Intracoastal waterways, and then out into the Gulf. Many homes were built on the edges of bayous and creeks with wooden docks for front yards and a couple of motorboats tethered up.

For many of the people who lived in these dwellings, the commute to work was a climb into a ten foot boat and pattering out into the waterways as the sun came up. Some might stop at Chris Landry's diner, "Parrain's" for breakfast, or others might eat a bowl of grits and boudin before heading out, but most would be carrying a couple of biscuits in a lunch pail or ammo box serving as a lunch pail, often with a cooler full of beer and Cokes, and a very large thermos of strong black coffee. Another ice chest would be filled with bait, and another one would be filled with ice to preserve the day's catch.

By the end of the day, and late afternoon, they could be seen chugging back in up against the current to the boat slips and docks to unload and sell their day's catch at Ritter's fish market. There were only a few eating establishments in Robicheaux Bayou, but the ones that were there served food grown and caught locally. Most of the seafood harvested in this town was bagged up, iced and trucked into Houma or New Orleans for sale in the markets there, as they had been for generations. Not many of the fishermen would come in during lunch time, preferring instead to eat out on their boats, usually with leftovers from whatever their wives had fixed the night before, or a napkin filled with hush puppies: balls of corn meal rolled in batter and deep fried, often with a sandwich of roast, corn beef, or fried oysters or fish, or fried *boudin*.

Jax's teacher had once told the class that the term "hush puppy" had come from when hunters had been out hunting in the swamps and made camp for the night around the campfires with their hunting dogs. Often the dogs would bark and yap at the sounds of wildlife around him and so the hunters would roll cornmeal into balls, fry them in the fire, and toss them at the dogs, saying "hush puppy." Jax didn't know if it was true, but he thought it was an endearing story anyway. From the looks of it, he could see that the town had already been up long before him, and the last of the fishing boats were already pattering out towards Lake Veret and the Intracoastal waterway for the day. The town's two school buses had already picked up all the children who needed a ride and brought them to the single school on the north end of town, the one Jax had attended, about an hour ago. The town was settled in well for the day as Jax pulled into his father's sheriff's station.

He gulped down the last of his coffee to steel himself for the encounter he knew was coming. Every conversation that Jax could ever remember having with his father often felt like climbing the Stairmaster on the highest setting. His father's method of communication was to find something wrong in everything you said, correct you, and then contradict even that a couple of sentences later. Although he was never intentionally belittling or demeaning or forcefully authoritarian, his method of talking to you often came across that way. If Frank Dupris had been a woman, he likely would have been called a know-it-all or busybody. Jax could honestly not remember a time where he had been engaged in conversation with his father and walked away feeling uplifted and good about himself. He was pretty sure he could be President of the United States, and his father would be highly critical of pretty much everything he was doing, and would let him know exactly what he was doing wrong, and how he should fix it. Jax could honestly say he enjoyed being in law enforcement, even though he had struggled against it out of principle, because he knew it's what his father wanted him to do from an early age, even if Frank would have preferred Drew instead. But it wasn't enough that Jax was in law enforcement, because, according to Frank, Jax was a state trooper and not a sheriff, therefore he was in the wrong kind of law-enforcement. Even doing what Frank wanted him to do came with criticism.

Jax sat in his truck for a few moments, wondering what barrage of "you did this wrong" his father was going to subject him to in the next few minutes. Gritting his teeth, he grabbed his coffee mug and messenger bag, and slid out of his truck, heading towards the station entrance. He walked inside, noticing that Maureen Harrison, his father's desk clerk and relative to the dairy farmers, a woman who had been working the desk since before Jax, was born, was absent, although he could hear her in the back kitchen area puttering around, likely making coffee. There was no sign of his father's two deputies, Jason Picou or John Bellanger, and also no sign of his father, though Jax figured he would probably be seeing all three of them fairly soon.

The small substation was one of the more modern buildings in town, recently updated through funds from the legislature to modernize the building. There were three cells in the holding area and one interrogation room with a closed circuit video system. There were three rooms that could serve as offices, one occupied by his father, and the other two deputies shared a second. The third held the filing and record system cabinets, but also had a small desk, which was where Jax went now to set up his laptop. The upgrades had included digital cable Internet access, which had cost a pretty penny to run all the way out here, but also meant that Jax had a decent Internet connection to check his work email from New Orleans, and some of his favorite news sites. As he was scrolling through his emails, the receptionist knocked on the door and leaned her head in.

"Hey Jax," she said in a friendly way.

"Hi, Miss Maureen," he said, looking up with a genuine smile. She had always been kind to him and he appreciated it. She set another steaming cup of black coffee at his elbow.

"You're going to need that," she said with a little sympathy. "Your father just got back in from having the patrol car serviced at the garage, and he wants to see you in his office, pronto."

"I live to serve," said Jax, somewhat resigned. He pulled his tablet computer out of his messenger bag, grabbed the coffee and, with another grit of his teeth, went down the hallway to his father's office.

Frank Dupris had been the sheriff of Robicheaux Bayou for over thirty years, and his office was a small measure of organized chaos. To the untrained eye, it would appear that the office was in total disarray, although Jax knew that his father could have told you where every single piece of paper was and what it contained. The real problem was that the office was really too small for

all the paraphernalia and paperwork that Frank had built up over the years. His desk, however, was fairly organized and clear.

Jax's father, Frank Dupris, was standing behind his desk reading a file. Jax stiffened a bit, and then walked in.

"Hey dad," he said almost wearily.

"Bout time you wandered in here, son," said Frank not looking up from his file.

Jax looked over at the clock on the wall, which he knew would be in perfect time. It was still three minutes until eight o'clock. Jax shook his head but said nothing. Especially about the fact that his father's two deputies were apparently going to be running late.

"Is that the case file?" Jax asked, indicating the file in his father's hands.

"Yep. I got old Fred Murphy to agree to bring us out to the crime scene in his boat. We leave in twenty minutes. Here, look this over before we go."

Jax took the file. He fought down the urge to remind his father that something was only a crime scene if it could be determined that a crime had actually taken place there, and they had no proof of any such thing, and that he wasn't some green rookie right out of the academy, so kindly not treat him like one. But Jax had learned long ago how to pick his battles with his father, and sometimes just saying nothing and swallowing his pride was better than the argument that was sure to follow.

Jax turned his eyes to the file his father had handed him and began to skim the information. According to what the coroner had been able to come up with, the man had obviously been badly mauled and nearly ripped apart by some sort of predatory animal. Given this bit of information, Jax wondered why his father kept insisting on referring to this as a crime when it was obvious that whoever this was he had stumbled into some sort of wild animal, which had been the cause of his death. Or did his father think that someone had set a trained pitbull on the victim and this amounted to murder in some way? He was about to look up and asked Frank this very question when something else caught his eye.

"Identity of animal in question unknown."

Jax twisted his lips into a deeper frown. How could that be? He read further, seeing that the coroner had reported that indeed some sort of tooth and jaw compression had caused the fatal wound to the victim, but that the bite marks and type were in a spacing not previously identified or on record. Jax knew from his training as an investigator with the state troopers that there existed at several universities around the world a database of animal hair DNA, teeth, and jaw samples of nearly every known animal on the planet. Often, during cases like these, investigators would send scans of the wounds to such universities and have the universities run them through their computers for a match to a known animal in the database. More often than not in North America, these findings came back as either some form of bear, wolf or wild dog, or mountain lion, all of which were the primary predators that could take down a human being or anything bigger. To have something cause this kind of damage, but not be identifiable, was odd. Jax was half expecting the result to show either an alligator, bear, cougar or panther. If you were to ask the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries about whether or not big cats were present in Louisiana, most of them would claim that no, they were not, although every hunter Jax knew had seen one. Admitting to big cats in the area would also be an admission that some sort of control methods were needed, and the state simply did not have the budget or the inclination. Big cat attacks almost never happened, and so the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries did not see much need to do anything about it or issue to any kind of alerts.

Most of the hunters that he knew and talked to agreed that it was only a matter of time before a big cat attacked and killed someone, and when he had heard about this case, Jax had initially thought that this would be that time, a big cat kill that he could then bring to the Department and force them to acknowledge big cats in the state. Either that or issue, once again, another ineffective alert warning people to stay out of the swamps, or at least on the banks, during alligator nesting season.

But an animal that was unidentifiable? Well, the only thing that Jax could gather from that was that the coroner had not done a thorough enough job. This case had made the news state wide, mostly because there was nothing major going on at the time, and the newspapers needed to fill some blank spots on the pages. The fact that the body had been in such bad condition and found so far out had led to speculation, but it had not raised too much of an alarm for, sadly, murders happened every day in cities like Monroe, Baton Rouge and New Orleans, and the occasional oddball death of a fisherman or hunter was also not unheard of. Given that the state's motto was "sportsman's paradise," and some eighty percent of the population was some kind of outdoorsman, the law of averages said that, at least once a year, somebody was going to get eaten by something. But if the animal in question in this case was not identified, then it meant that either the coroner was incompetent, or they had some kind of a predator wandering around the swamps near the town that nobody knew to look for.

Jax was more inclined to believe the first theory, but he kept reading anyway. It appeared that the wounds were made by some sort of predator that was most closely related to a canine of some kind, but the teeth marks were too widely spaced, and the snout would have been longer than any known canine currently in the North American region, to be identified. The closest match that could be made was a similarity to a hyena bite, but the shape of the teeth was wrong for a hyena, and Jax doubted that hyenas were running around Louisiana swamps, even escaped ones. Furthermore, the creature in question had been extremely powerful, far more powerful than any known canine.

The force of the bite was about seventy five percent that of a crocodile or alligator bite, although stronger than any dog or red wolf more common to the Louisiana region. A small amount of fur had also been recovered at the site and under the fingernails of the victim, and DNA analysis was not yet complete on the fur, but the hair pattern did not match up to any hair sample in the hair database at the university where the sample had been sent, although once again at first glance it appeared to be closely related to some sort of canine. This had prompted the researchers to send the hair samples to the ASPCA, which maintained a database of canine DNA to track illegal dog fighting rings, and the results would not be back in for a week. The presence of fur and similarity to canine bites pretty much ruled out an alligator as a likely suspect, but Jax was still not entirely sure. It was equally as likely the man had been attacked by an alligator, and then later canine predators had scavenged the body.

"Dad, all of this is very fascinating," said Jax, "but the only thing we really have here is that the coroner couldn't identify what animal killed this man. Obviously, we need to send this to someone else for a second opinion. Maybe someone up at the forensics lab at LSU. None of this tells me why you think this is a homicide, or why I'm here investigating it."

Frank pointed at the file. "Look at the pictures we took at the scene."

Jax flipped the file over to the back section, pulling out the photographs. He wasn't squeamish, by any means. He had been stationed in a war zone and had seen plenty of people brought in from combat, and the Discovery medical channel was one of his personal favorites for background noise. The sight of vital organs violently exposed to the daylight was nothing that

made his stomach turn. Not like the site of red boudin usually did, for some reason. So the sight of the victim laid out on the ground in a full-color photograph, completely torn apart while shocking, didn't turn his stomach. But while he was investigating the pictures, he tried not to appear confused, still not entirely sure what his father wanted him to see.

"Look there at the tracks in the mud," said Frank, pointing to another photograph. Jax let his eyes skim over the picture.

There were indeed paw prints in the mud, but there was something very odd about them. Frank stood tapping his foot with his arms crossed, obviously waiting for his dimwitted son to catch on. Then Jax saw it.

The paw prints weren't made by a quadruped. The spacing of the tracks in the mud was that of a bipedal creature. The ruler laid down next to the tracks in the picture indicated that the stride length would have meant the individual was over six feet tall, but still within human standards, if a bit large. The individual in question would have been the size of basketball player Shaquille O'Neill. The main thing that no one could get around, however, was there was no way these prints could have been made by a man. The prints were most definitely that of paw prints, but there were no other impressions in the mud indicating that anyone was putting down weight in a normal footprint the way a man would. Even pranksters who like to hoax Bigfoot prints made sure that the prints they left behind were bigger than that of a man in order to disguise the fact that the human was leaving the prints. The giveaway was usually that the depth of the impression in the mud was usually not deep enough for the weight a Bigfoot creature would have had to have been to leave such a large footprint. But these prints had the opposite problem.

They were too small to distribute the weight of a man who would have had to been as tall enough to leave the stride length of these prints. And yet, there was nothing in the mud to indicate that somebody was walking on paw molds on the bottom of shoes, like the imprint of a shoe left around the paw print, or on stilts with paws at the bottom of them. Besides which, why would anybody go to that kind of effort to hoax leaving bipedal wolf or dog prints at the site of a murder? One of the advantageous things about the swamp, if you happen to be the sort of person who went around killing other human beings, was that you really didn't need to hoax anything to cover your tracks. Drop a human body in a bog somewhere well off the beaten path around this time of year, and within two weeks, the humidity, damp, bacteria and predators of the swamp would have gotten rid of most of the evidence for you. So what exactly were they looking at here?

"What is this, Dad?" Jax asked, looking up.

"Evidence that a human being is involved in this man's death, among other things," said Frank. "The bite marks aren't from any recognizable animal, and the tracks are from something bipedal. Obviously this man was killed and someone is trying to cover up for it. Once the crime lab in New Orleans is done running his prints, and maybe some DNA, hopefully we will know who he is if he has a record. Maybe his background will tell us why he was found chewed up in the swamp."

"Well, I suppose you probably have a theory?" Jax asked, "one that explains why he was left above ground where he could be found, even if it was eight miles away from town, instead of tossed in a bog where nobody would ever find him? That would be my personal way of destroying a body if I was going to leave it in the swamp. And why anybody would go to the trouble making it look like he was attacked by an animal but not bother to hide the fact that the prints are bipedal?"

"To be honest," said Frank, "I doubt that the perpetrator was thinking that far ahead. If he was too dumb to hide the body in a place as good for body disposal as a swamp, then he probably didn't realize that we can figure out that leaving dog prints in the mud by walking on two feet could

even tell us that something was walking on two legs, not something walking on four. Or he could have had a dog with him.”

“I admit, it's strange,” said Jax, “but this is an animal attack. Even the coroner agrees that these wounds were made by some kind of animal. What exactly are you thinking happened here if it wasn't an animal attack? Someone got his dog to chew up this man and then he dumped them in the swamp? Then what did he do, leave fake tracks around to make it look like his dog was walking upright? That just doesn't make sense. You want to kill a man down here, you take your hunting rifle and shoot them to the heart, then you dump them in a bog where he won't be found. God only knows how many thousands of people are at the bottom of the swamps throughout the years that we're never going to find, much less identify. In the tropical heat down here, a body breaks down pretty quick, scavengers find it and scatter the bones. I just don't see anything here that looks like evidence of a homicide.”

Frank reached over and flipped a page in the report and pointed to a line in the report.

“I guess you missed this part,” he said. “We found a couple of bags of cocaine and about a thousand dollars in cash in his pockets. That's possession with intent to distribute if he were alive when we found him.”

“Agreed on that point,” said Jax, “but how does this fit in? Seems like anyone who killed him would have at least taken the money. Unless they didn't know he had it on him.”

Frank carefully sat down after glancing up at the door to make sure it was closed.

“This is why I really wanted you down here,” he said. “I think that this death is tied in with some other strange things that are happening around this town lately. I think I may have a problem with some group running drugs up these bayous. It's gotten to be a problem down in Pierre Part and Lake Charles. Fishermen are going out to the Gulf with their boats, but they're not coming back with fish. The fishermen that work out in the Gulf head further out to meet boats from South America, well outside of the Coast Guard patrols, or around them. They disguise the drugs as fish, even putting it under some actual fish they caught, and then bring it in. Some of these markets by the coast that buy catch off these fisherman have been fronts for drug running operations.

No need to risk going through customs, the ports, or have anything searched. The National Guard is getting better at spotting small planes coming in off the coast, so that avenue's drying up too. Most of these people have known each other all their lives. The man he played football with in high school isn't going to be searching your boat when you come in off the Gulf if all you're doing is selling him fish, but roundabout two in the morning, some pickup trucks with no license plates show up at the docks and they unload the second cargo. Men in smaller fishing boats can run them up the bayous to places like Lafayette and Breaux Bridge, where truckers pick it all up and bring them all over the country. These waterways down here are a prime source of transportation out of the eyes of highway patrol and border patrol. Given what we found in the guy's pockets, I'm thinking he's probably one of those drug runners.”

“You say you've had evidence of this in town before?” asked Jax. “What specifically?”

“Nothing I can put my finger on,” said Frank, leaning back. “Mostly it's just odd behavior. Most folks in this town are in bed by nine o'clock in the evening, if there ain't a football game on TV or out at the school. And yet, there's been some trucks nobody recognizes driving down the streets at two in the morning, and I heard reports of men out at the boat slips right about that same time too. I think someone in town is giving them a hand though, because every time I get in my car to head down there and check it out, they're always gone. I figure I leave the house or the

station here and drive right by whoever's tipping them off. Like I said, nothing concrete and nothing I have evidence of, but I know these kinds of things go on in the small towns, and I'm worried that it's happening here in Robicheaux Bayou. Now I got a dead man with drugs out in the swamps nobody but fishermen, and maybe drug runners, would ever go to."

Jax stroked his chin, frowning. He had to admit that his father had a point. Drug running in the bayous was indeed a serious problem. It was made worse by the fact that the economy had basically tanked in Louisiana, long before it had the rest of the country, and the swampy communities dotted along the coast and the waterways were poor to begin with. The housing bubble and devastating hurricanes that had savaged the Gulf coast during the first decade of the twenty-first century had not done much to aid the struggling fishing communities, many of which were becoming ghost towns like Robicheaux Bayou.

In fact, following these devastating events which brought the American economy to its knees, most of the residents of Louisiana had developed a bit of gallows humor about the whole thing, joking that they had hardly felt the economic pinch, since in Louisiana, the economy was already in the gutter to begin with. In response to the shock of the rest of the country experiencing the economic hardship, people from Louisiana would only smile grimly and say, "Welcome to our world." The result of this was that any chance for recovery of the communities now was even slimmer than it was before, and communities that were struggling were now positively dying. The younger generation moved to the bigger cities, desperate for work, for none was to be had in their own hometowns, and fathers who had expected their sons to follow in their fishing footsteps, as sons had followed fathers for generations, now were faced with the prospect of watching those children move away or take jobs offshore to make ends meet. The devastating oil spills out in the Gulf had nearly killed the fishing industry and fishermen were having a hard time feeding their families if no one wanted to buy potentially contaminated seafood harvested from the Gulf.

The choices for these fishing communities and their inhabitants were pretty slim: either move away from the land where your family had lived for generations and the lifestyle you had grown up with and adopted as your own, thereby leaving everything about your heritage and culture and who you are behind, or find some other way to make money. Most of the men of the small communities had gone to work in the oil refineries and plants when they could get a job, ironically supporting through necessity the very industry that was killing their heritage, but managing to remain fishermen part time throughout the year. Others went to work offshore and others swallowed their pride and lived off the government check. This did little to dispel the stereotypical notion of the Cajun as an illiterate, lazy bum who didn't speak English properly, which was why, even despite efforts to teach Louisiana children French in school to reclaim the original language of the state, speaking French was still frowned upon and a sign of not being too high class. Jax's mother had taught him and Andrew some French, and occasionally spouted a French phrase, but his father hated it when she did that. It was unfortunate that Cajun men found themselves in this sort of bind, but it explained a lot as to why many of them had taken up drug running.

Few people knew the waterways and swamps the way these fishermen did, and even the most trained law-enforcement official had a hard time finding them in the swamps. If a man could make a couple thousand dollars on a single drug run moving illegal cargo around in his boat versus making a couple hundred dollars off of a week's worth of catch of fish, then Jax could certainly understand why many chose to abandon fishing for drug running. Still, it was a crime and, sympathies aside, drugs destroyed families worse than economic hardships did. Louisiana law enforcement had been carefully monitoring the situation, but the short fact was that they were

undermanned and the border patrol was too busy looking at the Mexican border to be of much help.

His father's theory that the death might be tied to a drug operation was not an unusual one, or even an unlikely one, but it still didn't explain how a homicide could be made to look as if it had been done by an unknown animal or why anyone would choose to make it look that way.

"We'll head up there before the sun gets too high in the sky," said Frank. "You can decide for yourself. But I can tell you this, I know I don't have much to go on here, but if it turns out this man was murdered and it was because of drugs, and we do have a drug running operation going through Robicheaux Bayou, I am sure that me and my boys aren't equipped to handle it. That's one of the reasons I want you on this. If we can't get border patrol to help us out around here, then we're going to need state trooper help.

"Okay, Dad, I get it," said Jax, without as much irritation as he normally would have shown. He could see now that investigating the death would not be his only job, but also investigating his father's suspicions would likely be part of the deal too. Truth be told, his father had a legitimate need to worry, and Jax was concerned himself. He didn't intend to leave town without knowing for sure whether or not there was such a problem in Robicheaux Bayou.

Frank took a deep breath, as if he was steeling himself for more bad news, and then looked squarely at Jax.

"We got another situation," he said.

"More than drugs and murdering alligators?" asked Jax, trying to crack a joke. It fell flat.

"Not exactly," said Frank. "I got a phone call the day before yesterday from the state Attorney General. Seems his daughter went to school with a girl from here who has recently moved back. She's some sort of criminal psychologist and she's writing some book. When this case made the news last week, right about the time she was looking to come back here, she asked her friend's father for a favor."

"I don't understand," said Jax, "what kind of favor?"

Frank rolled his eyes, clearly annoyed with the situation. "Like I said, she's writing a book and apparently she wants to tag along the investigation to see how actual investigators look at crime scenes. Ordinarily, I would say no way in hell we want a civilian tagging along on one of our investigations, but most people don't go to the state attorney general to ask for favors. Seems the attorney general is of the mindset like you, that this is probably not a homicide, and there's probably no danger involved, so why not let the girl come along? I tried to argue my way out of it, but no deal. So it looks like as a favor to him, we gotta let her come along when we head out there this morning."

"That's ridiculous," said Jax. "If you're right and this is a crime scene, we don't need a civilian tromping around out there, I don't care who she knows. Besides has she ever been out to a crime scene? All these academic types who study crime from a book in a classroom always think they know as much, if not more, than we foot soldiers do. They only end up getting in the way and screwing up evidence while throwing all sorts of useless theories at you while you're trying to investigate. No way in hell, dad, just tell her no."

"Or maybe I could actually help," came an irritated feminine voice from the doorway, soft but with a strong edge to it, clearly annoyed.

Jax felt the blood drain from his face. It had been several years, but he knew that voice. It was a voice he had grown up with that had grown richer and slightly deeper with maturity, and also had a halting lisp to it, made worse than usual by a deep Cajun accent softened a bit from having lived in a metropolitan area for a few years. It was the voice that Jax occasionally heard in his head

when he tried to sleep at night, its strident tones telling him what an ass he was or worse, bursting into tears from the times he had been cruel to her in school. No doubt this was divine retribution for his sins that she probably was the one who now stood in the doorway behind his chair.

He turned slowly and looked at the figure standing behind him.

Sure enough, the stern form of Hailey Foret stood there. Her arms were crossed and her moss green eyes flashed with irritated fire. The expression of disapproval she often wore when she had looked at him had changed very little, even as she had changed from a gawky adolescent into a woman. In the five years since Jax had seen her, however, she had changed more than she had stayed the same. Her hair was still that same odd color that the French speakers in town called *châtain*, that didn't know if it wanted to be blonde, brown or red, depending on what kind of light in which she was standing. The top layer of her hair was honey colored blonde with reddish highlights, but the under coat was brown. Her green eyes were flecked with gold and she was around five three, coming to just under Jax's chin if he had been standing in front of her. As a child, she had always been slightly overweight, although certainly not fat as Drew had prompted Jax to call her repeatedly. But fully grown to her adult height, although she was not slender, she had, instead, redistributed her weight onto an adult frame, giving her a round, comfortable curvy figure that looked as if she probably did some working out in an attempt to stay in shape, but was far from too thin. He remembered that she had done gymnastics in school. She probably did some sort of dance aerobics now. The image of her in a workout outfit flashed in his mind, and he mentally slapped it away.

Now that he was staring at her, Jax did remember his mother mentioning something about Hailey becoming an author and living in Baton Rouge on his last visit at Christmas, but he had not paid much attention. She had been talking about several folks from his school class whom he had no interest in seeing again, but whom his mother apparently still thought were his friends. Although the two of them had grown up together and had been in the same class since preschool, they had never gotten along. He had always felt a strange pull towards her emotionally, but every interaction between them had been hostile, and he had not been sorry to see the back of her or this town when he left for the military. He had also resented that she had been the better student than he, and had easily gotten the TOPS scholarship when he hadn't. That she had gone into the criminal psychology field so similar to his own was also slightly irritating, for he knew she was probably better at it, at least academically. But this was not a classroom, and he was in no mood to babysit her. He also knew that there was going to be an argument if he tried to stop her from coming with them. Her eyes locked with his and they stared for a full moment before she finally gave him a somewhat sardonic smile.

“Hello, Jax.”