

VOODOO AT THE JITTERBUG

Hélène opened the door, leaned a hip against it, took the cigarette from her mouth and looked her sister up and down.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Hello to you too, soeur,” said Chloé.

“Soeur? Hell, honey, we ain’t never really been sisters. What do you want?”

“I’m here to see Grand-mère Cécile.”

Hélène looked Chloé up and down one more time. “What? You think we don’t both remember this is an anniversary? A date that marks the saddest day of our lives? The day our husbands died defending your honor outside that ridiculous shop you left your home to run? What the hell kinda name is Jitterbug, any damn way?”

“I lost my husband that day a year ago too, Hélène. Did you forget?” Chloé replied.

Hélène looked at her sister for a few long seconds before saying, “I’ll see if she’s receiving.”

And slammed the door in Chloé’s face.

Chloé dropped her head, shook it from side to side. “Oh, Hélène” she whispered. “You haven’t changed a whit, chère. Who can hold a grudge longer than you?”

Chloé smoothed her cotton dress under her as she sat on the rough unpainted porch steps with her feet on the dirt. “*How many times over the years did I sit in this very spot, looking out over this same view wishing I could be anywhere else but here? Careful what you wish for. That’s what Grand-père Abélard always told me. How was I ever supposed to know that getting one dream could cost so much? One with the sweet silly name of Jitterbug?*”

It had been twenty-eight years since Josette Cormier dropped her two young daughters off at her parents' home one hot August afternoon saying she was going to pick up some boudin at the little store down the road and would be back in two shakes.

"I believe dat be the last we sees a her now," said Cécile.

Her husband Abélard looked at her with his eyes wide. "You tink?"

She nodded.

"Cho! I got an ahnvee for some boudin."

Cécile looked at her husband in astonishment. "Fool! Boudin! That's all you care about when I jus' tol' you your girl pro'ly on her way gone for good an we got des two yong'ns to look after?"

"Well, beb, ain't like we ain't been 'spectin' it."

They looked over at the two little girls squatting at the edge of the shallow bayou water, poking around in it with sticks, stirring up mud and tadpoles while zirondelles flitted between them.

"Dos two," said Abelard. "Dey gonna be okay. Better here den wit dey mama."

Cécile nodded. "But will dey be happy? Or will dey want more? Like dey mama?"

Hélène and Chloé were happy.

Until they weren't.

There were a lot of growing up years during which the girls roamed free as the white tailed deer they watched graze peacefully in the area surrounding their home on the bayou.

They filled their days fishing with Grand-père Abélard or helping Grand-mère Cécile tend the garden or standing next to her at the stove learning the magic of roux used in the many soups and stews their grandmother served up.

As Hélène became as good a cook as her grand-mère, Chloé became more intrigued with another side of Cécile's talents.

While Hélène perfected her Maque Chou and Pain Perdu, Chloé was spending time in a small room off her grandparents' bedroom studying old and elaborate bottles containing roots, powders and herbs Cécile used in making potions she sold to bayou residents. Potions for healing, she said.

Following the halcyon childhood years came the time-honored and not unexpected years of teenage rebellion when the bayou was no longer enough. The music from the big cities seemed to waft across the bayou on a whisper, calling their names.

Abélard and Cécile could hear the whispers too. They were the same ones that tempted and finally won their daughter Josette. Would it take Josette's daughters away from them too?

They decided it was time for a party. A fais do-do like this bayou hadn't seen in years. A party to bring in some of the young folks for Hélène and Chloé to catch up on local gossip. Many of whom would never consider leaving the bayou and a lifestyle they loved. Maybe help remind the girls what they loved about their bayou home.

What started out as a party for the girls ended up being a huge source of pleasure for Abélard and Cécile as well. As the cooking and plans for music and dancing progressed, so did the clearing out of an old barn that hadn't been used for a party in a long, long time.

By the time neighbors and far flung friends started arriving, there were tables spread around for food and drinks, chairs scattered around outside and in the barn. More tables set up for eating and the ever-present, never-ending games of bouree.

There was a stage for the musicians which would include probably half the people showing up. The band was an always changing group of people, but the music was a constant.

The dance floor was set and poles for stringing lights were erected.

This was, indeed, going to be a fais do-do to outshine past and future fais do-dos, without a doubt.

When all was ready and the time came, Yee Haws and cat calls signaled the first wave of pick-up trucks as they approached the house.

Abélard and Cécile stood smiling on the front porch as Hélène and Chloé ran out into the yard to see who was arriving, welcoming their guests with hugs and laughter.

Hélène gave out a squeal as a group of handsome young men began jumping out of the back of one of the trucks with more piling out of the cab. “Hey, how many coonass Cajuns can this truck hold, anyways?” she hollered.

“Cho, Beb!” asked Matthieu Ducet as he swung Hélène wrapped in a bear hug. “Who you callin’ coonass Cajun? Don’ it take one to know one? Even if she is one gorgeous Cajun woman!” When he put her feet back on the ground, she kept her arms around his neck, smiling up at him. He couldn’t seem to let go and grinned back down into her face, lost in those green eyes of hers.

“I have missed you, you ol’ fool.”

“And I you, you evil witchy woman. You dun put a gris-gris on me, girl.”

They laughed with one another and walked off arm in arm. They had a lot of catching up to do. Matthieu had grown up just down the road, but had moved to The Island and had found steady work with a group of guys he'd met up with and formed a band. They played a regular weekly gig at one of the fancy downtown hotels and had made a name for themselves.

Chloé walked shyly towards Justin Moreau, hanging back watching while he carefully removed his fiddle case from the cab of the truck. She watched him sit on the running board, open the case, take his fiddle out and start strumming it, stopping to tune it a little as he played.

“That always was your favorite thing to do, strum that ol’ fiddle of yours.” Chloé said.

Justin looked up. “Chloé,” he said softly.

They looked at one another for what seemed like forever before Justin finally stood and opened his arms. Chloé walked into them and felt like she had come home.

He held her and kissed the top of her head gently. “I have missed you, bebe.”

“I was afraid you wouldn’t come.”

“I tried not to. You underestimate your hold on me, mon petit. Always.”

They were still standing that way when they heard a few whispers and harumphs behind them.

“Are you going to stand there holding that wee gal all day, or are we going to make us some zydeco, beau?”

Justin threw back his head, laughed loudly, and yelled “Laissez les bon temps rouler!”

And, so it began.

Over the next three days, people constantly came and went, most bringing food and beverages of every sort. There was cooking over an open pit, bouree games being played at more than one table, and raucous laughter from every corner. And the music never stopped.

Even as people slipped into tents at night, the music continued. Someone might be sitting off alone at the edge of the bayou playing a sad and lonely tune, making a trumpet sound so forlorn a body just wanted to die.

Hélène and Chloé loved sitting on the front porch at dawn so they could watch their world come alive as the sun came up. As all the swamp creatures began to stir and the birds began their morning songs, so did the boys lift their heads from their pick-up trucks, brushing aside mosquito netting, wiping the sleep from their eyes.

“I wish they’d stay forever,” said Hélène.

Chloé nodded.

“Justin is just as smitten with you now as he was before he left for New Orleans. Think he’ll move back?”

Chloé bent her head to drink her café au lait. She didn’t want Hélène to see the tears in her eyes. “He says he’s going back today.”

Hélène put her arm around Chloé’s shoulders. “I’m sorry, soeur.”

“And Matthieu? Is he going back?” Chloé asked.

“He is, but we both know it’s only going to be temporary. The bayou is in his blood. He knows he won’t be able to stay away. He wants to make some money, put it away, then come back and open a place. A restaurant. A bar. Someplace for music and dancing.”

“Here?”

“Not here, but close. Closer to town.”

The girls sat quietly drinking their coffee, watching and listening to the morning sounds. Each wrapped in thoughts of their future.

After her sister slammed the door on her, Chloé sat on the cold steps for so long she drifted into a half-sleep before she felt a tap on her shoulder. A little harder than necessary. She looked up and Hélène was looking at her with a strange expression in her eyes. “Chloé? Are you okay, girl?”

“I guess. Who knows? Right?” Chloé held a half-hearted smile as she got up from the steps. “Just drifted off to a long time ago, is all.”

“And a land far away, as we used to say?” asked Hélène.

“Ha. So you do remember some of the good times?”

“Oh, yes. I remember. I remember when you were only dreaming about that little shop in New Orleans you always wanted. You always said you’d name it Jitterbug after that crazy book you loved so much. And it just makes the hard times harder. You know?”

“I do.” Chloé walked over and took Hélène in her arms. “I have missed you.”

After hesitating, Hélène hugged her sister close. “I have missed you, soeur.” When she stepped back, Chloé saw the tears in her eyes.

As they stood looking at one another, searching for words to say to ease past hurts, they heard Cécile’s voice.

“Ah, chil’ren, chil’ren – come in da house. Do not be ignoring your ol’ grand-mère”

Holding hands, the women walked into the living room where Cécile sat like a queen in the old chair Chloé always pictured her sitting in. The chair that had been there even before they were dropped off to spend the rest of their growing years in this house with their grandparents. The chair from which Cécile ruled her small kingdom and where she held both her girls in her lap as she read to them, taught them and sang to them.

Chloé ran to her grandmother, fell to her knees, dropped her head into her lap, and sobbed as though her heart was breaking into a million little shards of past hurts and mistakes.

“Shhh. Shhh, bebe, We gawn make it all right,” Cécile whispered as she rocked her girl as though she were the youngster she had once been. “Shhh, now.”

Once Chloé had cried all the tears she’d been holding in her heart for so long and fallen into an exhausted sleep, her sister eased her off Cécile’s lap onto a pallet she’d made up of soft feather pillows on the floor, slipped a pillow under her head and covered her with one of the faded and threadbare quilts that were scattered about the house.

When Chloé woke up several hours later, the house was in darkness except for the dim light from a single old lamp sitting on a table in the front window. The same lamp that had been sitting on that same table in that same spot since before Chloé was born. There was comfort in knowing that some things could be counted on to stay the same. This house wrapped its comfort of sameness around Chloé, and she felt safe for the first time in months. Since the sudden brutal death of her husband, love of her life, and best friend since childhood, Justin Moreau.

“Oh, Justin.” She whispered. “We should have stayed here. Right here. You’d still be with me, and we would have all the years we thought we would have still ahead of us.”

Chloé bowed her head and cried. Again. No amount of tears were ever going to ease her broken heart.

When she woke again, the sun shone through the windows and she heard Cécile and Hélène in the kitchen.

She wrapped the quilt around her shoulders and walked into the kitchen, following the smells of café au lait brewing and beignets cooking.

Her grandmother hugged her close. “Good Morning, chère.”

Hélène ignored her until she walked over to wrap her in a hug. “Good Morning, sweetie. Please don’t stay mad at me. Life is too hard to have to live with you mad at me too.”

Hélène hugged her back.

“I am so sad about your Matthieu,” Chloe said. “And Grand-père. And my Justin. We should not be missing our men like this, and I would give everything I am, everything I have ever been, to have them back. Alive. Sitting around that table making music like they did so many times. Is it my fault they’re dead?” She looked at her sister and her grandmother. “Dear God, is it?”

Cécile moved toward her granddaughter and looked her in the eyes. “No. No, bebe. And you must stop tinkin’ like dat.”

Chloé looked at Hélène with a question in her eyes.

Hélène shook her head. “No. But I needed to be angry at someone. How else can I stand this? How else can I live? I do not want life without him.”

Then Hélène looked at both her sister and her grandmother. Her eyes hardened and her face set like stone. “It may not have been your fault, soeur, but you two knew you were playing at something dangerous. I tried to tell you, but no – you insisted it would be all right. Well. It wasn’t. You both need to own and take responsibility for playing with fire. Selling “pretend” spells and potions in the city at that ridiculous shop, Jitterbug, to tourists may have been a good way to make money, but look at the price. Look at the price!” Her breath caught, she put her hands in front of her face and ran out the back door.

Later that evening after a day of all three women going about their separate business quietly and alone, they joined around the kitchen table with café au lait and left-over red beans and rice.

Chloé straightened her back. “Hélène is right. And now, now we need to do something to make it right. I’m here so you can help me figure out what that is.”

Hélène snorted. “You gawn work one a your spells, girl, and bring back our husbands?” She asked with derision as she lit a cigarette and walked away from the table. She stood with her back to them in the doorway staring into the distance.

Cécile spoke quietly. “We cain’t bring dem back, but I sho can work a spell. Not a pretend one neither. I get dese bad people botherin’ Chloé to back off. Dey wish dey hadn’t ever heard a’ New Orleans voodoo. Wish they hadn’t spent all dey mama’s money on pretend spells and den be mad ‘cause dey didn’t work. Fools! What dey tinkin’? Dat you can buy ready-made gris-gris at the cahner sto’ like bread and milk? Chloé dun tol’ dose peeshwanks she wont sellin’ de real ting. Jus’ for fun stuff to take home. Souvenirs. Like da glass beads, little voodoo dolls wit’ pins, all dat junk, jus’ bags a’ swamp dirt was alla was. She tol’ dem dat!”

“She might have told them that,” said Helene. “It might even have been on that sign hanging on the wall. It might even have been printed on the bag the stuff was packaged in. Don’t matter. They were still upset enough ‘bout it not doing what they say it was supposed to do that they felt the need to come back and raise a little hell. A little hell that got out of control and ended up with people dead. One of those coonass fools and all three of our husbands. Drunks and guns. What have we come to that every redneck boy in the south can’t go out anymore without his gun? Give him a gun and a beer and he loses every bit of sense he might have had. A good

man trying to talk sense turns into the enemy and ends up dead. Lying in a New Orleans street in a puddle of blood with a fiddle still in his hand.”

“What do you want to do, Grand-mère?” asked Chloé.

“This,” said Cecile.

The three women sat around that table drinking coffee and talking all night.

Cécile did indeed have a plan.

For a woman who had done nothing but good with her knowledge of voodoo and magic her whole life, her plan was dark and it was evil. The women started tasting vengeance sitting around that table, and it began tasting sweet.

By the time the sun came up, they each had a list in front of them of their individual tasks they needed to take care of before the plan would be complete.

Hélène and Chloé were instructed to go their separate ways. Chloé into the woods and into the swamp. Hélène to an old cemetery a few miles on the other side of town. They were told not to come back until they found every item Cécile needed, but to bring her everything as soon as they had collected each item on their lists.

When Chloé returned late that night, she found Hélène and Cécile in the little room off her grandparents’ bedroom. The same little room where she had learned so much from her grandmother so long ago. A room which she now saw through different eyes. She now realized how much power was contained in the boxes and the bottles. How much those written words in the old books could actually do. Hélène was right, she had played with fire. Stupidly. It had ended in a way she never could have dreamed. Three good men dead just so she could “play” and make some money in a funky little shop in New Orleans selling doo-dads and gee-gaws.

Harmless junk sold with what she thought was just a fun air of magic and mystery. Just another harmless Crescent City tourist trap. Pretend voodoo.

“You found everything, Chère?” asked Cécile.

Chloé nodded and placed the filled burlap sacks on the floor.

“Good. Now, you bot go clean up and gawn to bed. Leave me to my work.”

Both women, tired to their bones, did so without argument.

Hours later, Cécile woke both women with a gruff, “Up. We gots work to do. No needs to git dressed. Nobody gawn sees you where we goin’.”

Hélène and Chloé followed Cécile out to her old truck and climbed in still barefoot and wearing only their nightgowns. They snuggled against one another and went back to sleep. Neither of them surprised when they saw where Cécile had brought them. They were in Saint Louis Cemetery No. 1.

Climbing down from the truck, they followed their grandmother to an old crypt in the far corner, the oldest part of the cemetery where stately old live oaks dripping with Spanish moss towered over the crypt. Without speaking, Chloé and Hélène sat on an ornate concrete bench a ways from the crypt while Cécile stood close to it, whispering words they didn’t even want to hear. They watched her pace and whisper and wave her hands. They watched her stoop down and leave a gris-gris bag and a bottle of whiskey. Watched when she stood, marked an “X” on the side of the tomb, knocked on it with her fist, made three turns and yelled for help to do the right thing. When she turned and walked away they followed her, went home and back to bed, sure there must have been a reason why their presence was needed, but they didn’t ask. They knew they had just paid a visit to The Queen. Voodoo Priestess Marie Laveau.

When they woke up, Cécile and the truck were gone. There were scraps of fabric and string, organic debris that looked like tree bark and dirt and a few half empty bottles they recognized from Cécile's little room off the bedroom on the kitchen table. Chloé and Hélène exchanged glances, silently deciding they'd have their café au lait and cold couche-couche on the front porch this morning rather than at the kitchen table.

“Should we be worried?” asked Chloé.

“Probably,” replied Hélène.

It was after midnight when Cécile returned. The sound of the front door opening awakened Chloé and Hélène. Their grandmother ignored them and went straight to her room. When she didn't return, Chloé and Hélène went to bed.

The next morning when Chloé and Hélène entered the kitchen, the table had been cleared and cleaned, two steaming cups of café au lait were on the table but there was no sign of Cécile. They looked to see if the truck was gone and it was.

Again, Cécile returned after midnight, and once again went to bed ignoring her granddaughters.

The next morning when the young women went into the kitchen, Cécile was at the stove making beignets and greeted them with a cheerful good morning.

It wasn't until they were settled around the table that she told them they would be going into New Orleans when they finished. To go put on their “goin' to da city” clothes.

When the three women pulled up in front of the closed and locked door to the little shop Chloé had been running for the past several years, the first thing they each noticed were all the

flowers piled on the old wooden stoop. Then they noticed pictures of Grand-père Abélard, Matthieu and Justin taped to the storefront windows. Then they heard the music. The street was soon filled with second line parade folks made up of old friends. They played their instruments, they shook their tambourines and they hollered and waved to Cécile, Chloé and Hélène as they passed, wishing them all well, marking the anniversary of walking their husbands back home in finest New Orleans fashion.

“Did you plan this? Asked Helene. “Is this what you’ve been doing the couple days you’ve been missing?”

“No, Chère. I only hear ‘bout dis early dis morning.” Cécile answered. She took her granddaughters’ hands. “Les walk. Get a bite and some café.”

Hélène and Chloé both noticed their grandmother seemed to be looking for someone as they passed one café after another. Chloé heard Hélène’s stomach growl and giggled. “We should stop at one of these places, say, rather than walking by them all till we’re back home again.”

Hélène put a hand against her noisy stomach. “Good idea, yes.”

Cécile ignored them and continued walking until suddenly stopping with a strange look on her face. A tall man walked out of the café towards them, took Cécile’s hand, kissed her on both cheeks and whispered in her ear. She squeezed his hand as he led them towards the café and pulled out chairs for each of them. A waiter showed up with café au lait for each of them, another showed up with a basket of hot beignets. Each kissed Cécile’s cheeks and smiled at her lovingly as she introduced each of them to her “girls.”

Once they were left alone, Cécile pulled out a bag and took a deep breath. She reached in and handed each of them a small doll, and placed a third one on the table next to her coffee.

Hélène and Chloé studied the dolls, which were dressed as young men. But as they looked closer they saw details which made them uncomfortable. They were mean-looking, dressed in scraps of dirty clothing, and they had stains on them that looked like blood.

“Shush, now!” said Cécile. And she pointed.

At a table at the end of the patio were three young men.

Chloé and Hélène looked at them, looked at their dolls and looked at the men again.

“Oh, no” whispered Chloé.

Hélène shook her head. “Are those . . .?”

“Yes,” said Chloé. “Those are the men who killed our husbands. Shot them dead in front of me. Because they said I sold them “cheap shit.” Cheap shit that didn’t do what it was supposed to do. They came in drunk and rowdy and dirty after trying to murder their own father with “pretend” gris-gris they bought for \$50.00. And then spent hundreds more on other stuff. Stuff I told them was just souvenir junk. Not the real thing, and pretended I thought there was no such thing as the real thing. That voodoo was just made up and not to be believed. They said their mother said I was a liar and she wanted them to get her money back. That she didn’t get the kind of return on her investment she was looking for. But there was a fourth one with them. When he tried to calm his brothers down, one of them shot him. It was an accident, but dead he was as I was opening the cash box to return their money. Then all hell broke loose and our men ended up dead in the dirt beside the boy. Right where they were just sitting on the stoop playing their fiddles and singing. Shot dead by drunk fools while making music.”

By now all three women had tears rolling down their faces as they watched the three men at the end of the patio. Watched them eating beignets and drinking café au lait as though

everything was still right in the world. They didn't seem the least bit saddened by the loss of their brother and probably had given no thought to the men they had killed.

The police had arrested them, but their rich mommy and a crooked lawyer had them out on bail in no time. In time, a jury would decide their fate.

In the meantime, Cécile wanted them to suffer.

Hélène wanted to go get a gun and shoot them on the spot.

Cécile said no.

“We make dem suffer. If dey end up in jail fo da rest of dey lives, we still make dem suffer. It's da right ting.”

With those words, she put a pin in the stomach of the doll she was holding. The meanest, dirtiest of the three dolls. As they watched, one of the men at the table they were watching grabbed his stomach and bent forward. As Cécile pushed the pin a little harder, the man screamed a bloodcurdling scream. Others on the patio looked up and watched as the man fell out of his chair and began writhing in pain. They watched and never moved.

Hélène, Chloé and Cécile watched also.

They finished their coffee, put their dolls into their purses and walked back to their truck.

They drove by the café on their way home. There was an ambulance parked in front and the young man was being placed inside it. Just as that was happening, Hélène and Chloé pushed little pins into their dolls. One of the men grabbed his head and fell to the ground screaming. The third man grabbed his neck. He also fell to the ground screaming. Hélène and Chloé waved to the other patrons on the patio, who waved back, nodding and smiling.

“Hear me now, girls. By all dat is holy in da name of The Queen, we is fini wid dat “pretend voodoo” stuff. Dat Jitterbug place? It now be da real ting.”

Chloé shook her head, “NO . . . ”

Cécile raised her hand and looked at her granddaughter sharply. “Shush, you. I have made a promise. A promise not to be broke. A promise made to the spirit of Madame Laveau. We gawn keep dat promise. You had no bidnes playing dose games you played. Dat’s over now. Y’all hear me? Over!”

“Yes, ma’am,” whispered Chloé.

Hélène and Chloé both suppressed shivers as they turned into the gates of Saint Louis Cemetery No. 1. They were here to draw a circle around the “X” they had left on Marie Laveau’s crypt earlier. Drawing the circle signified their favor had been granted, and they now had a deal. That deal was binding. Anyone not believing it so was a fool.

Leaving the crypt Hélène stopped suddenly and grabbed Chloé’s arm. “Did you hear . . . ”

Chloé paled. “I heard. But surely to God, Marie Laveau did not just say to us from the grave ‘*pretend voodoo my wrinkled old ass.*’ Did she?”