

Inside the Boat

“Say Thibodeaux. How many pounz of écrevisse [crawfish] you think we done got so far?” Boudreaux asked his partner as they idled along the peaceful Atchafalaya Basin.

Thibodeaux cut the engine of the bateau [flat-bottomed riverboat] and the pair were quietly drifting toward the next orange tape wrapped around a floating cork that marked where the traps rested at the bottom of the swamp. “Tweny pounz maybe. Now grab hola dat cypress knee,” he then instructed Boudreaux who was at the front of the boat.

Boudreaux grasped the first then pulled them along from one stump to the next. When he could reach the flag, he leaned over and pulled the mesh trap up by the attached twine. As the water spilled from the holes, they could see thirty or so red mudbugs in the bottom. Boudreaux unwound the wire holding the top flap shut then Thibodeaux opened the half-full ice chest so that he could dump them inside.

“Woowee. Look at dat one,” Thibodeaux said as an alligator floated by.

“Das a big one,” Boudreaux said as he secured a fresh cut of beef melt inside the trap. “But you know what Thibodeaux? Dey don’ botha me so much no more. Guess I got use ta ‘em bein’ ‘roun’.”

“Das very brave of you Boudreaux,” Thibodeaux skeptically said. Then he started the motor again after his partner dropped the trap back into the muddy water.

Thibodeaux recognized the area where the next trap should have been. But they both searched and didn’t see any orange tape.

“You sure dis da spot?” Boudreaux asked.

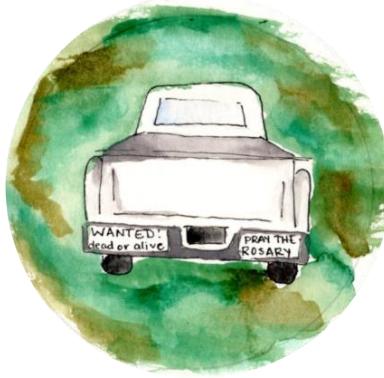
“One hundred percen’ sure. Dat same moccasin was sunnin’ on dat same log when we drop da trap here yestaday.” Thibodeaux cut the motor again and they glided until he grabbed hold of a tree limb and stopped them. “Why don’ you climb out da boat an’ wade ‘roun’ till you bump da trap wit’ your foot?”

“You want me to wade ‘roun’ in dat wata?”

“Jus’ till you bump da trap wit’ your foot.”

“What ‘bout dat gata we saw earlia?”

Thibodeaux laughed. “It always easia to be brave from inside da boat.”



Coward

Vince had gotten up very early and gone for a walk on the levee while the heat was still somewhat bearable. After a shower, he rejoined his wife in bed. There was no good reason why he'd avoided something that felt so good for so long.

It was the first Wednesday of the month and shortly after 9:00 a.m. He had almost talked himself out of returning to the barbershop. But Anna would hear nothing of it. And she was right to have pushed him. While Genie was his favorite sister, Laurent had been his best friend. But then he'd abandoned him too, though through a process of gradual irrelevance rather than cold turkey. He convinced himself that he'd been justified because otherwise, Laurent would have continued blindly following him wherever he went. It was only mildly annoying when it was just about going to parties and meeting girls. But when they both flunked out of college, his presence became a constant reminder of a string of failures that had left Vince even more discombobulated.

An indistinct white pickup truck was parked a few spots over. Vince silently read the two bumper stickers on the front: *WANTED DEAD or ALIVE* and *PRAY THE ROSARY*. Then he adjusted his rearview mirror so that he could see the front door.

“Can I look at *The Amazing Spiderman* again?” Gabe asked.

He'd brought his son because he was really enjoying the time they were spending together. He'd also noticed that his company settled him. And he needed settling. “What?”

“*The Amazing Spiderman*.”

Vince just kept reading the bumper stickers over and over again.

“Can I read *The Amazing Spiderman*?” Gabe asked a third time.

“Yes, okay,” he snapped. “You can read whatever you want.” Vince closed his eyes in guilt. Of all the people to take out his issues on, he picked the least culpable and the most defenseless. What did that say about him? When he opened them again as the sun was just rising above the trees ahead. “I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

“It’s alright, daddy. Mommy says you’re feeling a little dazzled lately.”

“I think you mean frazzled.”

“Frazzled,” Gabe repeated as he reached as far as he could toward his father’s hand on the seat until his seatbelt stopped him.

Vince unclipped his buckle then pulled his son's skinny body over onto his lap. *What the hell is wrong with me?* he reproachfully muttered as he leaned his face forward into Gabe's curly hair.

His self-disparagement ended with voices. When he looked up he saw Carlo holding the door open in his rearview mirror and another figure flash by his side mirror. He adjusted the controls on the armrest and followed the man until he paused to watch a train speed by. The way he stood with his thumbs hooked beneath the waistband of his jeans, shoulders slouched and head turned slightly to the left which he'd done ever since an ear infection had taken away some of his hearing in that ear. It was definitely him. Vince took a deep breath. "Would it be alright if I introduced you to someone?" he asked his son.

Gabe nodded.

"He's my brother. Actually, my cousin. But he seemed like a brother to me. His name is Laurent. Uncle Laurent."

"Uncle Laurent," Gabe repeated.

Vince opened his door and slid them both out the driver's side. Then with his son held close, he approached his best friend whom he hadn't seen in twenty years from behind. "You always did like trains."

"Vince!" Laurent exclaimed. When he turned, his hands shot up in the air. Eventually, they reached forward and grabbed Vince by the forearms as if to ensure he was real. "We heard you was in town."

The smile on his face along with the tears in his cousin's eyes frazzled Vince even more. "I'm writing a book about Louisiana Folklore," he managed to get out.

"We love your books."

Vince suddenly felt the weight on his arms. "This is my son."

"Gabriel." Laurent smiled fondly then affectionately patted his nephew on the shoulders. "You look jus' like your daddy. Jus' like him." Then he returned his attention to his cousin. "Iss good ta see you Vince. You don' know how good it is ta see you."

"It's good to see you too Laurent. What have you been up to?"

His cousin laughed. "Iss been a long time hasn' it?"

"A long time," Vince agreed.

"I sell insurance. Actully, I'ma regiona' managa wit' Prudential."

Vince nodded. "Genie told me that."

"You seen Genie?"

"My wife, Anna, has been keeping in contact with her for years. We had her and her son Michael over for dinner the other day."

"How's she doin'? How's he doin'? I feel so bad I ain' kep' up wit' 'em." His bright eyes momentarily turned sad. "It wasn' right how we treat 'em. Eitha of 'em."

"Well they're doing fine now."

"Das good to hear. Das real good."

"You remember the Sandbar Plantation on River Road?" Vince shifted.

"I do. 'Memba dat time when you caught dat big white catfish? Dat was right near dere."

"I remember the fish. But as I recall, you were the one that caught it."

"Das not da way I 'member it."

Laurent had a way of doing that, of deflecting credit for nearly everything. Maybe that's what happened when you grew accustomed to always playing second fiddle. "So how's your family?"

“You remember Camille Prejean?”

“Of course.” He decided to let his cousin go on because of the sincere smile that had accompanied him saying her name.

“You took her ta senior prom. She like you back den. Thought you was da good-lookin’ one. She tol’ me dat.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“She got divorce from her firs’ husban’. I ran inta her at da grocry store one day. We hit it off an’ got married.”

“I’m happy for you. She was a sweet girl.”

“Still is. She also a great mother. Great wife. I couldn’ be more bless,” Laurent continued. “I was pretty down for a while der. She fix all dat.”

“Das...” Vince began then caught himself. “That’s great.”

“We got four kids. Two boys. Two girls. Dey was all hers from before. She got an annulmen’ so we could marry in da church. Dat was importan’ ta her. Me too I guess. But more to her.”

Gabe leaned his face into his father’s neck and he could feel the heat from the sun coming from his son’s cheeks. “Say Laurent. You wouldn’t happen to have time to come by for lunch? I’m sure Anna would love to meet you.”

“I’d love ta meet her an’ your two daughtas too.”

“That’s right. Heather and Melissa.”

“Jus’ leme call work.”

“Why don’t we go on ahead so I can give Anna a heads-up,” Vince suggested. “You can meet us there.”

Though he’d driven quickly, Vince still heard the mashed shell in the driveway crunching beneath his cousin’s truck tires as he raced with Gabe up the front steps. “Anna, Hun. Where are you?”

“The girls and I are making divinity,” she called back from the kitchen. “How was seeing your brother?” she then asked as she appeared in the doorway wiping her hands on an apron.

“Funny you should ask.”

The sound of a car door slamming shut drew her attention in that direction. “He’s here?”

“I’m sorry.”

She untied her apron and tossed it onto a chair. Then she briefly surveyed her reflection in an Audubon picture of a blue heron grooming its feathers which hung on the wall next to the phone. “Don’t be silly,” she said as she straightened her dress. “Your family is always welcome in our house. I just hope he doesn’t mind things being such a mess.”

A mess, he thought. The truth was that he hadn’t once caught her in one that he hadn’t created and that she hadn’t ultimately cleaned up. She would do the same here. Suddenly that was beautiful. She was beautiful.

Boots clomping up the front steps shook him back to the present. “He works in insurance and recently made regional manager. He’s married...”

“...to Camille, a girl you went to senior prom with. It’s her second marriage, his first. And they have two girls: Grace and Mary...” she took over until interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Should I just let him in?” Vince whispered.

“Of course.”

"Oh, I invited him for lunch. And don't be surprised if he's a bit rough around the edges."

"I married a jack-ass. So having lunch with a coon-ass should be easy," she said and winked.

Both girls appeared at the mother's side. "Who's at the door?" Heather asked.

"It's daddy's cousin, Laurent," Anna replied.

"Uncle Laurent?" Melissa followed.

"That's right. He's having lunch with us."

Vince stepped around Gabe who'd been so quietly standing behind him that he'd forgotten he was there. He opened the door to find his cousin waiting patiently with sweat running down his face. "Come on in."

"I was right. It was right 'cross da levee dere where you caught dat great big white..." He stopped mid-sentence when he saw Anna and the twins staring at him. "You must be Miss Anna," he greeted as he walked up and without hesitating, gave her a hug. Then he stepped back. "Why you are jus' as lovely as Vince said you was."

"That's kind of you," she replied.

"An' you mus' be Melissa an' Heatha," he continued as he knelt in front. "Such fine lookin' young ladies."

He still sounded like a hick, Vince thought. But he'd clearly copied some etiquette from Camille.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Anna asked. "Lemonade? Ice tea?"

"Yes, ma'am. A glassa wata would be nice."

"Please call me Anna," she requested as she glided into the kitchen. "I hope you like brisket. That's what we're having for lunch. Oh, and pecan pie," she loudly said not realizing that the others had followed her.

"I like brisket. An' Penny can tell you whata sweet tooth I got. But I don' wana be no trouble."

"It's no trouble at all. In fact, we will have to find a time to have Camille and the kids over sometime also."

"She'd like that."

Laurent was in no hurry getting back to the office after lunch which was fine with the girls who were fascinated by their uncle. That meant they peppered him with nonstop questions which he gamely answered. Eventually Anna excused all three kids after they cleared the table.

"You 'memba dat time we was sleepin' on da porch an' dat spida climb in your ear?" Laurent reminisced as he and his cousin settled onto the two rocking chairs on the back porch. When Anna brought out a dining chair from inside, he sprung up. "Let me get dat." Once she was seated, he turned both chairs, Vince's with him still in it, to face her.

"Please continue with your story," she requested.

"Penny musta felt it in dere 'cause he bolt upright an' let out a shriek dat woke us all up. He pullin' at his ear," Laurent acted out. "An' all da while Dickie kep' teasin' him sayin' it gonna built a web 'roun' his brain. Eventually, Genie brought a paira tweezers from da girl bathroom ta pull it out."

Vince's recollection was that it was actually a stink bug. But his cousin was laughing so hard telling it his way that his eyes were watering.

Anna handed him a napkin.

"Guess I got a little carried away."

“I loved it,” she encouraged hoping for more. “Vince doesn’t talk much about his past.”
“Das ‘cause he was too busy writin’ in his notebook instead.”

She turned to her husband. “Genie mentioned that too.”

Vince shrugged. “It was another phase. It didn’t last long.”

“Only through high school,” his cousin maintained. “You brought it ta LSU too.”

“I’m pretty sure I didn’t bring it to college,” Vince disputed.

“Chasin’ girls an’ writin’ stories ain’ lef’ no time for goin’ ta class,” Laurent joked.

Vince abruptly got up. “This tea is running right though me. Hopefully we can find something else to talk about when I get back.” He stopped just inside the back door. Maybe the notebook was a bigger deal than he wanted to admit. But it was just a phase. A few months, maybe a year. Certainly not several years.

“I didn’t mean ta get unda his skin,” his cousin said.

“He’s just a little sensitive about college,” Anna suggested.

“Who care ‘bout college when you a famous writa.”

“I know. But there are things that still bother him about his past.” Then her voice got so quiet that he could barely make out what she was saying. “Did something happen...”

“Can I get anyone a refill?” Vince called out through the doorway far too soon to have gone to the bathroom and returned.

“No thank you,” Laurent replied.

Anna cleared her throat. “I’m good as well.”

The pair were silently staring out at the cane field beyond the grass lawn when he stepped past them back to his chair. He didn’t like whispering. But in this case, he liked the silence even less. “I was just remembering that time you and I wanted to watch that Army-Navy football game.”

“Père said we couldn’t watch it ‘til we plan’ two hampas of peas,” Laurent recalled. “An dere was no way ta finish ‘em before noon when da game start.”

Each man hesitated to see if the other was going to finish the story.

“What happened then?” Anna encouraged her husband.

“He dropped us off with instructions to dig holes three inches deep and twelve inches apart along the pre-plowed rows. ‘Put three peas in each hole den cova ‘em wita thin laya a dirt. I’ll be back ‘roun’ noon ta check an’ see how iss comin’.

“After digging and planting, digging and planting for about an hour, we could see we weren’t going to make it. So we decided to get as far as we could. Then just before he came back, we kicked around the dirt on the rows we didn’t get to, then scattered all the remaining peas in a nearby ditch.

“How you boys do?” he asked through the rolled down window of his truck.”

“I fel’ like I was gona pee my pans,” Laurent added in. He had moved to the edge of the rocker and looked as though he might be holding back the same urge now.

“He was skeptical at first when we told him that we had finished,” Vince continued. “He looked at the empty hampers and out at the disturbed dirt along the rows. Then back at us. Then he wiped his forehead with his shirtsleeve.

“Bes get back ta dat game den’.”

Laurent was clearly enjoying this as much as Anna.

“You ‘member who won Penny?”

“Army. 21 to 17.”

“Das right. Army scora touchdown wit’ ten secons ta go.”

“Twelve,” Vince amended.

“So did Père ever find out that you dumped the extra peas?” Anna asked.

Laurent picked up the story from there. “For weeks, he brag an’ brag ‘bout how well we done. ‘Dem boys plan’ two hampas fulla peas in less dan three hours,’ he tol’ anyone who would listen. Mons lata, he drove us back ta da fiel’ when it was time ta pick da new peas. We was real nervous when he slow down at da ditch. ‘Dam,’ he said. ‘Dere more peas in da ditch dan da fiel’. Penny an’ me hel’ our breath as he lif’ his hat an’ scratch his head. ‘I’ll be dam if da rotten peas you toss off in da ditch didn’ grow betta dan da good ones,’ he chuckled. ‘You boys got some pickin’ to do.’”

“Do you think he knew?” Anna asked.

“Probably. But he never said anything more about it,” Vince replied. “And don’t you know that those peas kept sprouting up in that same ditch for years. Dad kept telling the story of the *Rotten Peas* for years too. ‘Neva give up on rotten peas,’ he’d say.”

His cousin was laughing like a hyena, just like he used to do when they were kids. It got to be embarrassing when they were in college. But it sure sounded good now.

“Mommy,” Gabe said softly from the doorway.

She held out her hand and he immediately ran to it. Then he started crying.

“What is it, baby?” she asked, pulling him onto her lap.

“Heather and Melissa keep finding me when I hide,” he whimpered into her neck.

“Were you playing hide-and-seek?”

He nodded.

“Well they’re supposed to try to find you in hide-and-seek,” she explained.

“I know. But they find me too quick.”

She brushed aside the curls above his small round face then kissed him on the forehead. “I think you’re just tired because it’s past time for your nap.”

She stood with him held in her arms and carried him back inside.

“He’s a sweet boy,” Laurent noted once they were gone.

“Yes, he is,” Vince agreed. After she rounded up the girls, they could hear their footsteps tramping about upstairs. “Can I get you anything stronger to drink?” he offered.

“I don’ drink no more. Do you?”

“Not much,” Vince understated. Besides, he had something else on his mind. “Listen, Laurent. Genie mentioned what happened to Mario.”

“Dat wasa terrible thing.”

“Genie said he was having spells.”

“He had ‘em before.”

“I know. But I thought they were getting better.”

“Somethin’ like dat be hard ta forget.”

“You don’t think it was over Genie and Michael then?”

“Gettin’ excommunicated from da church couldna been easy. Famly movin’ ta a new town. Can’ ‘magine what dat musta fel’ like.”

“But?”

“Things worse when you spendin’ too much time alone. Wonderin’ if dere somethin’ you coulda done diffrent. People tellin’ you it was your fault.”

“How could it be his fault? We were just kids for Christ’s sake,” Vince blurted. He could feel his emotions crowding against his throat.

““Magine how hard it musta been when he came back.”

“Who came back?”

Laurent cleared his throat. “Da *Loup Garou*. He came back.”

The phone ringing punctuated the ending of the conversation. Anna, who had paused to listen in moments before in the exact same spot as her husband had earlier, answered it. “Hello?”

The two cousins joined her in the kitchen and both placed their glasses in the sink.

“I’m afraid you have the wrong number,” she informed the caller.

“Laurent needs to call his wife,” Vince told her after she hung up.

After handing over the receiver, she followed her husband out onto the front porch.

“Everything alright?”

Even with his back to her, the change in his mood must have been obvious. “The day we had lunch with Professor Baudoin, he told me there are three reasons why legends endure. The first is to disguise our own faults. The second is to explain the unexplainable.”

When he paused, she asked, “And the third?”

“The third is because a principle part of the story is true.”

The front door swung open. “I didn’t realize how late it had gotten,” Laurent announced.

“I hope we didn’t worry Camille,” Anna sympathized.

“She was jus’ remindin’ me dat I’m spose ta drop da kids off at catechism dis evenin’. I really should be goin’. Thanks for lunch Miss Anna. Vince said you was a great cook an’ he weren’ exaggeratin’.”

“You’re very kind. I hope we’ll be seeing you again soon?”

“I’d like dat.”

After they watched Laurent leave, Anna turned Vince toward her and passionately kissed him.

After a long few seconds, he asked, “What was that for?”

“I liked the way you looked at me when you came inside earlier. You don’t often look at me like that anymore.”

When it seemed as though she was going to kiss him again, he pulled her in for a hug instead. But unlike this morning, he could barely feel her there. The visit with his cousin had gone better than he could have imagined. But the things it had stirred just before it had ended – he felt himself drifting away from the present again.

She reluctantly allowed the moment to pass. Then after parting, she recognized a familiar distant look in his eyes. “Laurent called you Penny?”

“Vin-cent,” he explained. “Cent, penny.”

“That’s clever.”

“I guess. Not many people called me that. In fact, just him.”

She picked a flower from an azalea bush that had grown between the porch balusters. “Well, the kids and I really enjoyed meeting Uncle Laurent.”

“Yeah, it was good seeing him again.”

She glanced down toward the flower. “I heard you ask him about Mario.”

Vince’s entire body shuddered.

“Who is he?”

“Michael’s father.”

“Genie’s Michael?”

He nodded. “He was a friend of mine. A good friend actually.”

“What happened to him?”

Vince found himself staring at the flower twirling between her fingers. When he reached for it she let it go. "He committed suicide."

"Oh no."

Crumpled flower petals fell from between his clinched fingers.

"When?"

"I'm not actually sure."

"So you didn't know?"

"Genie told me when she was over for dinner."

"I'm so sorry for you. And for Genie." She grabbed his hand.

He pulled it away though. Then he tossed what remained of the flower out onto the grass. "Stuff happens to everybody. Some people can let it go. Others can't."

"What stuff?"

"Just stuff. Forget about it." He hardly felt her hand press against his back.

"Please don't do this again," she pleaded.

"Do what?"

"Close yourself off."

"That's what cowards do. We run away and hide."

"You're not a coward. You're a good man."

He shook his head, knowing that was a lie. "I need to go check on something," he impulsively announced.

"What?"

"Research. I need to look something up."

"Now?"

"I'll be back for dinner."

Her hands were still on her hips as she watched him get in the car, aggressively back out and turn southbound onto the River Road. During the drive, his other emotions had consolidated into an anger that he was very close to losing control over. He sped the entire way to The Church of the Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ, randomly parked the Seville beside the base of the tall tower then dashed inside. The first person he came across was a janitor whose greeting he ignored. He then shoved the door to the administration office open so hard that it slammed into the wall startling a nun in a habit sitting behind the reception counter. "Is it true?" he demanded.

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"Is it true? Is he back?" he shouted. When her bewildered eyes flashed in the direction of the still open doorway behind him, he turned half-expecting to defend himself from some sort of security ready to bounce him outside. Instead, he found a composed young man in jeans and a black shirt with a Roman collar.

"It's okay, Sister Katherine," he said calmly. "I'll handle this."

The nun was clearly relieved. "Thank you, Father."

"You don't recognize me. Do you?"

Although they were facing one another, Vince's mind had been preoccupied with assessing whether this guy was a potential enabler or just guilty by association. Now that he looked closer, his hooked nose and deep-set dark eyes did remind him of an old classmate.

"It's okay," the priest excused when Vince didn't respond. "I was a few years younger than you and Laurent. George. George Allemon."

“Erik’s brother,” Vince confirmed. He, Laurent, Mario and Erik were in the same grade and had all gone through confirmation together. All things considered, this was quite a coincidence. “So you’re a priest now?”

“I am. Maybe you’d like to go for a walk,” he suggested.

Vince glanced over at the nun who immediately looked away. He should apologize later. But for now, it was probably best he just leave. “A walk. Sure.” He was relieved when Father Allemon headed out the exit instead of toward the confessionals. It was warm and bright outside and neither man said a word until they approached a bench beneath a crepe myrtle tree that neither sat upon.

“It’s good to see you back in town,” George finally stated. “You’re the closest thing we have to a celebrity around here.”

“I don’t know about that,” Vince brushed aside. The more his anger receded, the faster those other emotions, especially guilt, started to return. “How’s Erik?”

“Good. He lives in Beaumont now. Still working for Exxon. Wife and two kids. We don’t see them much.”

“Too bad.”

“Why don’t we get right to what’s bothering you.”

Vince was all for that. “I want to know if he’s back?”

“Care to be more specific?”

“Do I need to be?”

George looked around. Then he pulled out a cigarette, put it in his mouth but didn’t light it. “I’m trying to quit. It helps to have something in my mouth,” he explained. Then he lit it anyway and took a drag. “I’ll warn you that you’re probably not going to like the answer.”

“Is he back?” Vince insisted.

“Not here of course. A couple of years ago, he got reassigned to a church in Henry Louisiana south of Abbeville.”

“How is that possible?”

“I’m not privy to that sort of information.”

“We were told he’d be punished. They swore that he’d never be around kids again.”

“I know. Believe me, I know. I was an altar boy too. Three years after you and Erik.”

“Then you should know how wrong this is.” Vince immediately recognized George’s dark eyes withdraw.

“I do.”

“Did you say anything?”

“Did you?” The priest unflinchingly held his glare. “Look. I’m sorry. It was very upsetting to me when I found out.”

“How could the church let him return? How can you work for an institution that would do something like that?”

“I work for God, not an institution.”

“A God that made a monster like Gilbert Gauthier?”

“God doesn’t make us evil. We individually choose to do evil things.”

“That’s a cop-out and you know it. An almighty God that cares about people would never let such a thing happen.”

“God is perfect. We are not.”

“He made us imperfect then. He made us capable of all these horrific things then washes his hands of it? If there is a God, then He’s a coward.”

“Please, Vince. I can see that you are troubled.”

“Actually, I’m pissed off. Do you know what happened to Mario?”

“I never left,” George reminded him.

That was careless, Vince realized. “Well, he’s got to be stopped.”

“God alone will judge Gilbert Gauthier. And he will receive his just punishment.”

“Not soon enough.” Vince could feel his anger surge straight to the boiling point this time. But Father Allemon was no more to blame than the nun earlier. He left without another word.

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There was probably one that was closer. But the West Baton Rouge Parish Library just off the highway in Port Allen was the one Vince had gone to growing up.

A bored librarian pushing a cartload of books recognized him the moment she looked up. After a brief introduction, she insisted on walking him over to a display of his books where she had him autograph a stack of about a dozen that were being raffled off for their annual fundraiser. He quietly complied until she not so subtly speculated how much more successful the drawing might be were he to attend.

“Where are your microfilm readers?” he asked, ignoring the suggestion.

“In our reading room.” She pointed to a secluded area beyond the display. “Can I help you find anything in particular?”

Vince hesitated. Although familiar with the machines that he’d used many times to research articles relating to his books, he’d always had help retrieving the film from storage. But the subject this time was far more sensitive. “I don’t want to trouble you. Maybe I could use your catalogue?”

“It’s no trouble at all,” she said then headed back toward her desk. “Wait till I tell the other librarians that I helped Vince Hébert do research for his upcoming book. Now what’s the topic?” she asked as she sat behind a bulky monitor. “Wait. Let me guess. Marie Laveau. Or what about John and Wayne Carter?”

“I’m not familiar with the last two?”

“Brothers who lived in New Orleans in the 1930s,” she enthusiastically elaborated. “One day a young girl stumbled into a police precinct claiming to have escaped captivity from a French Quarter apartment. She removed bandages on her wrists and showed them slits that she said the brothers used to suck blood from her. When the authorities went into the apartment, they found four other bound victims with their wrist similarly cut. The brothers were caught, tried and executed. But years later, their vault was opened to bury another family member only to find John and Wayne’s tombs were empty.”

“You sure know a lot about it,” Vince observed.

“I work in a library.”

“Well as you know since you’ve read my books, I’ve done two vampire tales already. What I’m really looking for is information on the *Loup Garou*.”

“The Cajun werewolf,” she identified as she started typing on a keyboard in front of her.

Vince let her continue. Though he hadn’t entirely thought things through, he hoped his next request might get lost in her excitement. “Actually,” he said once she’d jotted down a list of identifiers and stood up from her chair, “I wonder if you might look something else up also.”

“Sure,” she said as she sat back down. “What elusive monster is it this time?”

“Gilbert Gauthé,” he replied.

Her excited smile quickly vanished and her fingers seemed to labor over the keys this time. He could tell by her repeated attempts that there were far fewer hits this time.

“Will that be all?” she asked when finished.

“Yes.”

She returned ten minutes later and handed him a stack of film. “The werewolf ones are on the bottom.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have a pen and paper I could borrow?” he asked.

In a nearby drawer, she dug up a legal notepad and a short pencil which she set atop the film.

Once alone in the reading room, he went straight to the top reels. Gilbert Gauthé’s name first appeared as a supplement to garden-variety stories about weddings and other local events. But eventually he found a brief article about Gauthé being reassigned to a church in Florida. The narrative seemed oddly restrained. And the purposefully vague accusation that he’d licked two young boys across their faces was creepy but not condemning enough. The church merely said that it had been a misunderstanding. Nonetheless, they were still going to transfer “Reverend Gauthé in the best interests of everyone involved.”

The next roll, along with those below it, were all stories about the Cajun werewolf. Vince ripped the sheet with his notes on it from the pad, folded it and then stuck it in his pocket. Then he sat back in his chair and shook his head in disbelief. Mario had done the bravest thing he could imagine. He’d told his father that a revered priest who baptized children, anointed the sick, received confessions and absolved sins – who represented goodness and faith, led a congregation in worship, and connected a sinful people to a forgiving God – had raped him in the church rectory. The act was as horrific and unbelievable to think about now as it had been nearly thirty years ago. Suddenly the reading room seemed cramped, confined, suffocating.

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The passenger side door of the Seville opened then the car rocked as Anna sat beside him. Then she set a glass of ice water on the dashboard, and for several minutes, they sat there in silence in the driveway.

“You might want to roll down the windows at least,” she eventually suggested.

When he finally processed her words, he became aware of the streams of sweat soaking his body and clothes. Still, he just stared straight ahead.

“When you’re completely exhausted from being alone, know that I’ll be here to help you,” she assured him. Then she went back inside.

