

Black Birds Cry



Yvonne relaxed her grip on her car's steering wheel as she navigated the winding turns of River Road. She passed spare homes with tin roofs and modern structures along this path beside the Mississippi River. As a fashion designer with skills passed down from past generations of seamstresses, she enjoyed her career as a costumer in the expanding movie industry of Hollywood South in New Orleans.

Carefully passing a slowly moving truck, loaded with freshly cut sugar cane, Yvonne breathed a sigh of relief when she finally turned down the lane leading to the majestic plantation home of her latest movie project. Exiting her car, she marveled at the sight of this magnificent edifice with its wide gallery and ornate columns, surrounded by crawling oaks and the sound of a persistent, screeching owl. She could not see the dilapidated cabins behind the main structure, but knew they were there. The slave labor that had kept this place in commerce, echoed in her mind whenever she accepted a project along Louisiana's Plantation Alley.

To make this trip even more challenging, Yvonne was aware that this plantation was where her ancestors had lived before the Civil War. She had learned from older relatives and an ancestry website that she descended from a house slave named Rosette who had purchased her own child's freedom. She was rumored to possibly be the slave who haunted this mansion. Family lore had Rosette in constant battle with the mistress of the Big House over her child's

parentage and her influence over the master of the plantation. She was said to have suddenly disappeared from the mansion but returns in a ghostly form.

Later that night, Yvonne settled down in her assigned room in the old antebellum mansion. It had been a long day and it did not take long for sleep to come. She wasn't sure if it was the screeching owl or the sudden chill in the room. In any case, her large brown eyes fluttered open and then widened in disbelief. There at the foot of the bed stood the ghostly figure of a woman dressed in the period of the day for a house slave, including her head covered with a colorful wrap. The apparition gave a crooked smile; a prominent scar ran down her left cheek and her luminous olive-green eyes glowed and then dimmed as she slowly faded away. Yvonne did not know how long she held her breath, but she let out a rush of air from her lungs and rushed to the bathroom down the hall, where she stayed for the rest of the night.

Yvonne's honey-brown hands were still shaking and did not fully cooperate with any of the alterations she was given that next day. Her first impulse was to collect her things and scatter like the autumn winds that howled outside. As the day progressed, she managed to calm herself and decided to remain for the duration of her contract. Perhaps, she had heard and read too many stories about plantation ghosts.

As the long, busy day gave way to night, Yvonne tried to settle down for a good night's sleep. After much tossing and turning, sleep overtook her.

"Beware, mon petite...beware the birds' cry." The voice was a rich alto. Accompanied by the scent of roasted pecans, dipped in strong bourbon.

Yvonne's eyes flew open and scanned the dark room. With relief she saw there was no ghost, so she concentrated on slowing her breathing. I must be dreaming, she thought. Staring at the clock on the nightstand, she was restless for the rest of the night. Observing herself in the bathroom mirror the next morning, she frowned. She would need one of the movie make-up artists to get rid of the bags under her eyes. The almond-shaped brown eyes had no luster and her shoulders drooped over her petite frame.

Yvonne dragged through her day. Mindlessly, she readjusted hems to fit properly over boots. Took waists in or out, according to the actors that paraded before her. No one reported seeing any ghosts.

On her break, she googled information about ghosts and this plantation.

"She had these piercing, green eyes that glowed like they were lit by an inner fire," one guest had reported.

"The jagged scar down her cheek told a story, I'm sure," another visitor had observed.

A third simply commented, "Unfinished business is my guess."

Yvonne turned off her cell and was relieved that she was not spending another night here. Was it her ancestor, Rosette, or some other house slave? She was not staying to find out. She collected her check and waved goodbye to the cast and crew as she rolled her belongings to her car. Suddenly, the loud screeching of a flock of crows perched in a nearby oak tree demanded her attention. They peered down at her and seemed to emit a unanimous distress

call. Yvonne paused for a moment, remembering that sultry voice from last night, but she dismissed it with a nervous laugh.

“This is no Hitchcock movie,” she called to her movie comrades as she pulled out of the driveway. They all pointed to the squawking birds, laughed and waved as she approached the river road.

As she headed for home, Yvonne felt good about one job completed and another to start soon. Just as she was about to navigate a sharp turn in her convertible, a flock of animated crows flew low overhead, startling her. She over corrected and slid into a shallow ditch. Before she could get out of the car, a huge truck, spilling stalks of sugar cane, flew by on the wrong side of the road. The squawking birds circled over her and flew away toward the river levee. Shivering but unhurt, Yvonne took out her cell to call for help; her car had damage, but she was okay. Murmuring a stunned prayer of thanks, she watched the flock of black birds disappear.