

LYNN EMERY

THIRD  
SIGHT  
INTO DARKNESS

A LASHAUN ROUSSELLE MYSTERY

BOOK  
5

## Chapter 1

LaShaun could feel three sets of eyes watching her stomp around the kitchen. Almost a week of rain had her in an awful mood. Cleaning up messes left behind by a five-year-old, the family dog, and Chase didn't help. She let out a huff of air at the puddle around Beau's water bowl.

"Is it too much to ask that you people not wreck this house on an hourly basis?" LaShaun grumbled as she made angry swipes on the floor with a paper towel.

"Sorry, Mama," Ellie chirped.

She sat in her yellow child's table with matching chair in a corner of the family room. Her pert expression showed little repentance and even less interest in her mother's foul disposition. She continued adding purple, green, and pink to a rainbow with firm strokes. The page torn from her favorite coloring book would be her new masterpiece.

Beau, their Great Weimar, sat at Ellie's feet. He gave a soft woof as an apology. His attention was divided between the television and his family moving around the house.

"I picked up my dirty socks and towels in the bathroom. So, don't include me in your rant," Chase said. He drank more coffee as he continued to scan the news on his tablet computer.

"Try not putting them on my new rug in the first darn place, Chase Armand Broussard," LaShaun retorted. She closed a cabinet door with a solid thump to punctuate her admonishment.

"Well I—"

LaShaun cut in. "Excuses is all I get. We spent a bucket of money on a quality wool rug, which is beautiful, to decorate the master bedroom. Use that high-tech clothes hamper you had to have. Why else did we spend over a hundred bucks on the thing?"

Chase turned to Ellie and Beau, a less-hostile audience. They watched him with interest. "Whisper-quiet, opens at the touch of a button on top or the foot pedal on the bottom. Mama wanted it just as much as me. Y'all remember, right?"

"Whisper," Ellie repeated. Then she shrugged and went back to coloring. Beau followed her lead. He shuffled over to his comfy bed and settled in with a second soft woof. He seemed to say, "Leave me out of it."

"As for you, Joelle Renée Broussard, I'd better not see any more drawings on your bedroom walls. Or anywhere else in this house," LaShaun added when Ellie's mouth opened to object.

"In my playroom, Mama." Ellie waved an arm out; at the end was a chunky green crayon. A corner of the den had been converted into a play area just for her. The desk, a small bookshelf, and a toy chest made it Ellie's second-favorite space. Outdoors always came in first.

"No, not on the walls of your playroom either, missy," LaShaun shot back.

"The washable paint. See?" Ellie pointed to a spot where she'd drawn daisies and a squiggle that she insisted was a butterfly.

Chase barked a laugh, then smothered it at a look from LaShaun. "It came off super easy, just like the guy said it would."

"You're old enough to start household chores. Next time I'll hand you the scrubbing sponge." LaShaun crossed her arms and stared at her offspring.

Ellie blinked, then shook her head. She wagged a tiny forefinger at her pet. "No more messes, Beau."

"Ha, that's my girl. Spread the blame around." Chase got up from the counter, coffee mug in one hand. He crossed to Ellie and gave her a kiss on the forehead.

"Humph. You three," LaShaun said.

She scrubbed at a sticky circle left by apple juice. Before she could add it to her complaints, Chase's arms around her waist distracted her. He pulled her against his body and wiggled his hips.

"Why are you fussing so much, hmm? Maybe a little loving will smooth out those rough edges," Chase murmured close to her ear.

"Think highly of your charms." LaShaun enjoy the solid feel of him. Warmth began to intensify into heat when he kissed the back of her neck.

"If that little one wasn't watching I'd give you a sweet attitude adjustment. Right here, like them times before she was born. Remember?" Chase tightened his embrace a tad to make his point. "Made our own art when I had you on the counter and..."

"Stop it, you." LaShaun jabbed him with an elbow. She glanced over at Ellie, who now focused on bouncing TV cartoon characters.

"I can drop her off at day school early. Miss Gloria opens at six. Only take a few minutes. Then I'll come back here and still make it to work on time." Chase kissed another spot on LaShaun's neck.

"I'm not done being annoyed with you," LaShaun breathed. She relaxed into his embrace. He fingers teased her through the fabric of her t-shirt.

"Put that energy to good use in other ways," Chase joked and gave her butt a playful pat. Then he moved away.

LaShaun groaned at the cold air that seemed to sweep over her when he stepped back. Chase grinned at her, arms outstretched. She slapped at him with the kitchen towel. "Devil in disguise."

Chase grinned. "You still can't resist me after six years. The Broussard magic, baby."

"Oh please." LaShaun rolled her eyes. "You know what will get me hotter than a truckload of pepper sauce?"

"Name it, sugar." Chase wiggled his eyebrows.

"Load the dishwasher, rinse them first, and mop the kitchen," she replied and nodded at the dirty breakfast dishes.

"You coldhearted, woman." Chase laughed as he followed through on what he'd have done anyway. "I know what your problem is."

"Do tell." LaShaun spoke over her shoulder as she wiped down the breakfast bar section of the counter.

"Beau Chene and Vermilion Parish have been too quiet for you. No spooky happenings or demons creepin'. Nothing but what the rest of us call normal life. Maybe you're bored."

"Very funny," LaShaun retorted.

"No, but think about it. It's been over a year since we chased down crazy folks who followed a so-called demon. We were in Mexico with lots of boom-bang action. Before that it was a cult, and before that—"

"So, you're saying I'm addicted to supernatural drama? No way," LaShaun objected.

Chase dried his hands on a paper towel. He balled it up and tossed it like a basketball pro into the trash bin. When Ellie applauded from across the room, he waved.

"Aw, c'mon. You miss hanging out with your witchy friends. Give 'em a call. Y'all can have lunch and discuss good versus evil or something," Chase said. He refilled his mug with hot coffee.

"The comedy just keeps on coming. I seem to recall you were happy to have my 'witchy friends' pull the fat out of your fire on several cases. And stop calling them that, for the one hundredth time." LaShaun poured cream into his mug for him and set the small pitcher back on the counter.

"I'm just saying life has settled down and you're trying to adjust. This could be it, babe. No supernatural stuff. Just lunches with Savannah, or my sisters, playdates, and such." Chase sighed. "It's nice dealing with normal criminals at work, too."

"I'm fine with 'normal' life, Deputy Broussard."

Chase eyed her over the rim of his mug. He took a long sip and nodded. "If you say so."

"I do."

LaShaun turned from him, glad he wasn't psychic. Yet they were so close, it bordered on the supernatural. Chase joked she'd been created from his rib like Adam and Eve. If she lingered too long under his scrutiny, he'd see just how close he'd come to the truth. She didn't want trouble. Definitely not the kind they'd faced in Mexico with Ellie at risk. Still, she couldn't help but wonder what the Third Eye Association had been up to for the past year or so. Their investigations into global paranormal indicators fascinated her. By mutual agreement after the scare with Ellie, LaShaun had withdrawn from active membership.

LaShaun noticed Beau pacing to and from the hall leading to the back door. She let him outside and returned to the kitchen. She watched him bound across their expansive backyard. Then she faced Chase, who still leaned against the counter sipping coffee.

"And?" Chase's sexy mouth lifted at one corner.

"Nothing. I'm going to meet Katie and Adrienne for lunch today. See? Ordinary is my middle name these days. We'll swap preschool stories, recipes, and talk about... nothing *witchy*." LaShaun enjoyed spending time with Chase's youngest sister and his brother's wife. His oldest sister kept a distance to placate their mother.

"Good. My sisters love you and Ellie," Chase said, breaking into her thoughts.

"At least Adrienne knows what it's like to be the despised daughter-in-law," LaShaun quipped.

"Hey, be fair. Mama has come around a lot in the last couple of years. Or months maybe," Chase added when LaShaun snorted in response to his assertion.

"Yeah, right."

LaShaun decided not to say more. In truth, she couldn't totally blame Elizabeth Broussard for still being upset about their marriage. To say their union had been unconventional would be a laughable understatement given past events. LaShaun might feel the same way if she had a son. Maybe one day she'd know. She placed a hand on her belly.

Chase gasped and stood straight. His eyes were wide with excitement. "Hey, are we..."

"Damn. Are you sure you're not able to read minds?" LaShaun snatched her hand away. "I'm not pregnant," she mouthed the last word and looked at Ellie.

"It's just you had a habit of rubbing the old tum-tum even before you knew for sure with Ellie. I've got some great boy names in mind." Chase's dark eyebrows raised. He stared at LaShaun as though he saw the next Broussard growing inside her.

"No baby on board, Chase. And keep your voice down. Ellie is obsessed with having a little sister or brother. I don't need to hear her going on about it for another two weeks. She would not let it go. I got her off the subject when school started." LaShaun glanced at Ellie again. Their daughter remained absorbed by the television.

"Maybe one day," Chase said softly.

Her heart melted at the look love he wore as he gazed from Ellie back to LaShaun. Their family, household messes and all, made life wonderful. They were happy. In spite of her antagonistic mother-in-law, whispers from townspeople, and other challenges.

"Yeah. One day," LaShaun murmured. She was about to say more when a horn blew outside.

"Yellow bus is here," Ellie squealed with glee. She grabbed her purple and pink schoolbag with a princess on it.

LaShaun glanced at the wall clock. "Miss Annie is a little early today. It's not seven thirty yet. Hold on, little lady. Wait for Mama."

LaShaun scurried to catch up as Ellie bounded to the side kitchen door that led to their driveway. Minutes later, Ellie waved good-bye before she bounced up the steps to the small bus and greeted her

friends. Chase joined LaShaun. They watched the bus pull back onto Rougon Road on its way to Bright Start Day School.

"Hmm, I think the early bus is a sign. We can start working on making Ellie's wish come true." Chase closed the space between and hugged LaShaun from behind.

"How much time you got before you have to report to the station? All those late hours you been working mean my appetite has grown, mister. I'm gonna need more attention than a quickie." LaShaun spun around and ground her hips against him.

Chase groaned as she moved. "Oh yes, we got a good two hours. I'm gonna make the best of every minute, too."

He pulled her back toward the house, urging her to keep up as LaShaun giggled at his antics. He yanked the door open and pushed her up the steps. Before she could speak, Chase's mouth covered hers while the storm door banged shut. Beau's bark interrupted them. LaShaun let the dog in while Chase reached under her t-shirt to cup a breast.

"Don't get me naked in view of the world," LaShaun said with a delighted laugh. She squirmed with pleasure as his fingers traced fire on her skin.

"Our nearest neighbors can't see this far. Doing it on the floor sounds good to me, woman." Chase had his long-sleeved t-shirt off in one motion. He pushed down his sweatpants with the other hand.

True to his word, he undressed them both in frantic motions. He lifted LaShaun up, and she cooperated by wrapping her legs around him. She moaned when Chase pinned her against the wall. For the next hour, they forgot about laundry, dirty dishes, and in-laws. They made love like the passionate dating couple they'd been years before. Later, they lay tangled in the sheets of their king-sized bed. Fall sunlight played across the wall of the master bedroom. Chase massaged LaShaun's thigh as she lay sprawled across him.

"After all that we ended up in here? How?" LaShaun mumbled against his chest.

"Don't ask me. My mind is mush after that whipping you put on me." Chase exhaled. "Breakfast of champions."

LaShaun laughed and rolled onto her back. "I have to get outta this bed. I've got errands before I meet Katie for lunch. You're a bad influence."

"Is that a complaint?" Chase joked, his eyes closed.

"Not at all, Deputy Broussard." LaShaun gave him one last kiss on the lips. She got out of bed and stretched.

"So wonderfully normal, babe." Chase grunted and turned over. He yelped in protest when his cell phone went off. He read a text message. "Hell. Duty calls."

They showered together, discussing the routine of the day that stretched before them both. LaShaun got dressed first since Chase had to get into his work clothes. She hung his dark-blue slacks and white shirt with the Vermilion Parish Sheriff's logo on the closet door. Then she padded into the kitchen and made a fresh pot of coffee. The smell perked her up. Her stomach growled, reminding LaShaun she hadn't eaten much that morning. She'd been too busy getting Ellie fed and ready for her day. Chase strolled in buckling his belt as she started on her second biscuit.

"Nothing too serious?" LaShaun asked around a mouthful of bread and nodded to the phone clipped to his waist.

"Nah, the usual crooks. Tell Katie I said hello. Maybe we should all get together for Sunday dinner. You know, to celebrate school starting or something. And yes, I mean my parents as well." Chase cocked his head at LaShaun.

"I didn't say a word about excluding your dad. You know how I adore *him*." LaShaun gave Chase a cheesy smile.

“Okay, smartass.” Chase pointed a finger at her. He started to say more, but stopped at the sound of an engine. He strode to the window and looked out. “There’s a green Jeep Wrangler in the driveway. I don’t recognize it.”

“Probably lost tourists.” LaShaun led the way outside.

Two women climbed out as she and Chase approached. They’d parked behind LaShaun’s Forester. The taller woman had reddish-blond hair. She wore red sunglasses, a red tank top and cropped denim pants. Her white skin had tanned patches, the skin peeled in places. LaShaun guessed she’d used too little sunblock. The other woman’s hair was dyed ash-blond. Her tan was more even. The taller woman darted anxious glances around the landscape. Her companion stared at them from behind sunglasses. Then she took them off and squinted in the sunshine. LaShaun and Chase exchange a glance.

“Morning. How can we help y’all?” Chase spoke up first.

“We’re looking for the psychic. Ms. Rousselle,” the ash-blonde said in a crisp Yankee accent. She mispronounced LaShaun’s name as *Russell*, common for those unfamiliar with Louisiana French surnames.

“And you are...” Chase put a protective arm around LaShaun’s waist.

“It’s her. I recognize her from pictures online,” the ash-blonde said to other woman. “Look, I know who you are.” The blonde breathed hard as she stared at LaShaun as though Chase hadn’t spoken.

Chase frowned at them. “We still don’t know your names and why you’re here.”

“Melanie, dial it down a few notches, okay? We’re out in the middle of nowhere with these people.” Her companion spoke the last sentence low.

“We got directions in town. People know we came out here, for God’s sake, Dru,” the blonde snapped.

“Unless you start making some kinda sense real quick I’m gonna escort you off my property,” Chase rumbled. He took a step forward, one hand nudging LaShaun to stay behind him. Beau trotted down the driveway and stood next to Chase, all four legs spread wide. The big dog stared at the women as if to announce reinforcements had arrived.

LaShaun stepped around Chase and Beau. “Okay, guys. Let’s not jump to fight mode yet.”

“What a beautiful dog. I have a Mini Pinscher at home. My sister is taking care of him,” the woman with reddish hair called Dru said. She blinked hard when Beau didn’t warm up to her. “Longtime dog lover, that’s me.”

“Still waiting to hear why you’re in our driveway this early in the morning,” Chase said, his tone crisp as dry crackers.

“I’m looking for my brother. The day Garrett left home, he uploaded an entry to his online vlog that he was coming to see *you*.” The ash-blonde continued to scrutinize LaShaun. Her blue-gray eyes burned with intensity.

“I haven’t talked to or heard from any strangers in the past month at least.” LaShaun gazed back at her with interest. The contained anger and suspicion in the woman’s manner didn’t annoy her. Instead, it made her curious.

“They saw him in town,” the woman shot back.

“You got an answer. Take a left off this road. Six miles southwest and you’ll be back in town. Down Highway 82. Have a nice day,” Chase drawled.

He caught LaShaun’s right hand and turned to walk away. Beau didn’t move. LaShaun let Chase pull her along, but not because she wanted or intended to leave. She knew the women were anxious to talk to her. They hadn’t traveled so far or driven from town if they didn’t believe she’d met with the man. No way would they watch her walk away. She was right.

“Wait. Please.”

LaShaun tugged against Chase's movement toward the house. He turned around, one dark eyebrow arched. At a silent signal between them, he stood still with a granite expression for the women. LaShaun faced them as well.

The reddish-blond rubbed her friend's shoulder once and started to follow. Beau's low bark stopped her. "I'm Drusilla Rotterdam, and this is Melanie Johansen Yawn. Ahem, we're looking for Garrett Johansen, Melanie's brother. Oh, you can call me Dru."

"Uh-huh," Chase replied with a grunt. When LaShaun took her hand from his, he crossed his arms across his chest.

LaShaun moved to Beau. She rubbed his head until the tension eased from his body. Beau gave a soft woof, acknowledging he wouldn't pounce. For now. "I didn't talk to or see Mr. Johansen. Why was he coming to me?"

"He was researching a story, some local legend about pirates," Dru said. She looked at Melanie for guidance.

"You've heard of pirate and Battle of New Orleans hero Jean Lafitte, I'm sure," Melanie said. Her stiff expression radiated suspicion.

"Oh, for the love of—you've got to be kidding. More tourists on some hare-brained search for gold that doesn't exist." Chase laughed as he waved a hand at them.

"Lafitte earned his wealth by trading in slaves, so he's no hero in my book." LaShaun shrugged and hooked her fingers in the pockets of her knit pants. "Any gold he might have had is bloody and long gone. People have been hunting it for over two hundred years. Your brother is after a tired story that's been recycled and debunked a thousand times. He probably figured it out and went home."

"He's missing. We haven't heard from him for two weeks. And he's never away from home longer than a week at a time. Not now that his mother's health is going down," Dru said, her voice insistent.

"We've talked to the Louisiana State Police. They referred us to your podunk sheriff's department. They were even less help," Melanie snapped.

"Oh really?" Chase drawled, his Cajun accent more pronounced.

LaShaun gave him a brief side-eye and suppressed a chuckle. She had a hard time keeping a straight face as she looked at Melanie. "Who did you talk to?"

"It doesn't matter. They were all dumb as country dirt." Melanie's reddened face screwed into a frown of disgust.

"Mel, c'mon," Dru snapped. Then she looked at LaShaun. "Actually, they took the information we had and said they'd contact the last place he stayed. The Sleep Inn, a small motel in Abbeville. At least that's the last place he mentioned on his vlog."

"I'm pretty sure the deputy you spoke to will check with our local bed and breakfasts. We have three in this area. And there's a small motel on Mossy Oak Lane," Chase said.

"Oh yeah, and you know this how?" Melanie crossed her arms.

Chase tapped the small logo on his shirt. Then he pulled a business card from a back pocket. "Chase Broussard. I'm a lieutenant in the Criminal Investigation Unit. Vermilion Parish Sheriff's Office, aka Podunk Squad."

Dru gasped and her eyes widened after she stared "Oh, I didn't... I mean, I hadn't noticed you were..."

Melanie's face turned a shade of red LaShaun didn't think was possible, even with exposure to Louisiana's subtropical sun. Dru sputtered a series of not-quite-coherent apologies. Chase stood with both hands on his hips, an impassive expression on his handsome face. He seemed content to let them squirm. After about fifteen seconds, LaShaun decided to rescue them.

"My husband will make sure your report gets the correct follow-up. I know how frustrating it is when you're concerned about a loved one. We get it. Right, Chase?" LaShaun glanced at him sideways.

She tried to give him a look to behave, but he didn't return her gaze. *If he puts on a swamp country hick accent I'm gonna lose it.*

"Sure thing." Chase drew out the words.

Dru broke into a relieved smile. "Thank you so much. Obviously, the South isn't so backward. I mean you're a mixed couple and..." She blinked hard, and her voice trailed off as she gazed at LaShaun. Her smile wilted.

"Lord." Chase finished his commentary in whispered Cajun French.

"Honey, don't start," LaShaun smiled. "Look, we'll check with the station and make sure someone gets back to you."

"That would be great. See, Mel? Garrett probably got so involved running down clues he forgot to check in. Thanks for taking time to talk to us." Dru looped an arm through Mel's and tried to head for their rental car.

Mel didn't budge. She pulled free of Dru's hold. "Wait a minute. This is listed as the address of LaShaun Rousselle. So, that's you."

"Yes, but like I said, your brother never got in touch with me." LaShaun worked to keep irritation from her voice.

"Garrett wouldn't have mentioned you if he wasn't going to follow up." Melanie puffed out a breath and took off her eyeglasses. "Look, I'm sorry for coming on a bit strong. I'm worried. At least let me tell you about him, and why I think he's not just too distracted to call. He's so into this stuff about history, paranormal legends, and—"

"Buried treasure," Chase broke in.

"It's not just about the money," Melanie replied with heat. Then she blinked as if holding back tears. "Please. Hear me out."

LaShaun gazed from Melanie to Dru and back again. "Come inside. I got fresh coffee and biscuits. If y'all haven't had breakfast, I mean."

Chase turned to her, his voice low. "Honey..."

Beau gave a friendly bark and wagged his tail at them. LaShaun stepped close to her husband and gave his solid body a reassuring nudge. "See? They've got the Beau Broussard 'Seal of Approval.' "

Chase glanced at his wristwatch, a present his father had given him when he got his first promotion at the sheriff's department. He pulled LaShaun aside. "I gotta go to work, babe."

"I'll be fine," LaShaun said low, then louder to their visitors, now guests, "This way, ladies."

LaShaun didn't give him time to raise more objections. She motioned for them to follow and headed toward the house. The women exchanged a brief glance. Melanie strode forth first despite a look of trepidation from her friend. Dru scurried to catch up after a brief hesitation. Chase followed after a muttered oath, again in Cajun French. Beau bounded ahead of them all. He got to the door first and waited patiently until LaShaun opened it. Then he trotted inside. He took up a position in a corner near the breakfast table.

"Have a seat, ladies." LaShaun pointed to the chairs around the table in a nook with a sunny bay window. "Hope you like strong coffee. Pretty much the only way we make it here."

"That's fine," Melanie replied. She seemed to be working to use a more civil tone.

LaShaun suppressed a chuckle at the effort. She filled two cups and placed creamer and a sugar bowl on a tray. Once she placed them on the center of the table, she put the biscuits in the microwave. Then she got them small plates and silverware.

"Don't go to any trouble," Dru said.

Seconds later the bell pinged. LaShaun grinned. "That's about all the work it's gonna take."

"Humph." Chase said in a soft grumble. He refilled his mug from the coffee pot and leaned against the counter.

LaShaun placed a platter of buttered biscuits before them. A small bowl of mayhaw jelly was still on the table, as it was Ellie and Chase's favorite. "Tell me your story."

Melanie seemed lost for words now that she had gained her goal of talking to "the local psychic." She stammered, cleared her throat, and looked at her friend for help. Dru pulled a sheaf of papers from her backpack. Chase crossed the space between them to take a look. LaShaun gave him a knowing grin. She knew he'd lose the disinterested pose. Chase squinted back at her with a quick eye roll. Still, he paid attention.

"Here. Garrett is retired. He's always been a history buff, even back when we were in college. I met Mel through him when we were all at Penn, the University of Pennsylvania."

LaShaun took the copy of an online article with Garrett's picture from Dru. "He looks young to be retired."

"Garrett started his first tech company when he was a senior in high school," Mel put in. She lifted her chin with an expression of pride. "He sold it two years later to a Silicon Valley outfit. He went on to start two more businesses. He was a millionaire by the time he got his MBA at the age of twenty. When most kids were applying for jobs, Garrett was running his own company. Top executives listened to him."

"But he never gave up his favorite hobby, history," Dru said.

"It's more than a hobby," Melanie said. Her tone held more than a trace of defensiveness. "He became an expert in early colonial America. In the last couple of years, he developed an interest in the Louisiana Purchase."

"An obsession," Dru added. She shrugged when Mel shot a sharp look at her. "It's all he talks about. His study is piled high with old maps."

"My brother is focused. He likes to excel at everything he does," Melanie said. She sat straight.

LaShaun studied them. "I see. Your father and mother were successful. You both come from mainline families in Pennsylvania. Yet a branch of yours ended up in New York state?"

"The famous voodoo skills, I assume," Melanie's thin lips slid sideways.

"The University of Pennsylvania has a healthy percentage of students from wealthy families. Your accent isn't just northern, but sounds, hmm... east coast upper-crust, I wanna say. Plus, your brother had resources to go college and pursue his tech interest, but that's a guess. He could have simply been a phenom who was resourceful and went to school on a scholarship. You're not that much older than him, so unless you both got scholarships I'd say your folks had money to support two kids in college. I save the real visions for a full moon at midnight." LaShaun gave them a grin and sipped from her mug of coffee. Mel blinked at her as if unsure how to react.

Dru sat back and laughed. She picked up a warm biscuit and put in on a plate. "Well played, Miss, sorry, *Mrs. Broussard*."

"You're not psychic? I guess that's what we get, believing what we read online and in news articles," Melanie said. She rubbed her forehead the fingertips of her right hand. "So, you can't help me."

Chase put his mug down. He wore a more sympathetic look. "We take every missing person case serious, ma'am. I can't promise that we've found out anything, but I'll call you later today with an update at least."

"Thanks." Melanie didn't look encouraged.

Dru wore a brighter expression. She took out a small notepad. She scribbled down two phone numbers and an address as she talked. "Any information will be a huge help. Really. We haven't been able to find out much up until now."

Chase took the small pink square of paper from her. "No problem."

"You didn't tell us why your brother came to Vermilion Parish," LaShaun put in. She could tell Chase was on the verge of herding them toward the door.

“Jean Lafitte, remember? I’ll make sure to get in touch.” Chase gave LaShaun a *don’t get them started* look.

“The more we know, the better leads you’ll have when you look for Garrett, honey,” LaShaun said. Then she turned back to the two women. “I love history, too.”

“Well, Garrett didn’t go into a lot of details on his vlog or even to his friends,” Dru started.

“He didn’t want them beating him to the prize,” Melanie broke in.

“Right. He simply said he was headed for the Deep South, into a state with a rich and exotic history. We went to his house in Brookville, New York, and found lots of info on this area of Louisiana in his office,” Dru continued.

“If he’s so rich, why is he after gold?” Chase asked.

Dru winced. “The truth is, he’s gone through a lot of his money in the last few years. So his history hobby—”

“Garrett isn’t broke, Dru. I can’t understand why you keep telling people that,” Melanie snapped, giving her friend a glare that could melt steel.

“He’s impulsive, Mel. Even you have to admit he is. The other side of his willingness to take risks is, sometimes he’s in over his head. Winning so often has made him think he’s invincible. He’s exciting, has a sharp sense of humor, and can be very thoughtful when he puts his mind to it.” Dru’s voice softened as she spoke. “But...”

LaShaun didn’t need psychic skills to figure out Dru was low-key in love with the guy. “So, Garrett might ignore warning signs he should back off that others might see.”

“You don’t win big if you’re too scared to take action. My brother wins more than he loses.” Melanie lifted her chin. “None of that matters right now. Just find him.”

“Knowing a bit about the temperament and personality of a missing person matters,” Chase said. “So, let’s review. Your brother can go off half-cocked on wild goose chase if he thinks he’ll strike gold. Cashing in means he can recoup some of the wealth he’s lost.”

LaShaun spoke up fast to cover Chase’s less-than-diplomatic summary. “He’s adventurous, used to getting his way. For some reason, Garrett was convinced he had the clue to finding a treasure hidden by the pirate Jean Lafitte.”

“Any names of contacts here he might have connected with once he arrived?” Chase plowed on in full cop mode. He seemed not to notice the ice-cold anger on Melanie’s face.

“No, all he said was a psychic was going to point him the right direction,” Dru answered. She cast a glance at the growing storm that brewed next to her. She put a hand on Melanie’s arm as a warning. “Here. This is his last entry on his YouTube channel.”

Dru pulled a slim tablet computer from her backpack. The case had a built-in stand, so she set it up on the table. LaShaun helped her connect to their Wi-Fi as a guest user. Moments later they watched the missing man in living color. The timer showed the video was twenty-five minutes long. His mop of curly brown hair was slicked back, yet he had to keep brushing a thick tendril back. He wore a black t-shirt with “I’ve got the code to life” on it. Dru gasped as she gazed at his every move on the eight-inch screen. Her smile contained a potent mixture of worship and lust. Melanie watched her brother, both hands closed tight as the seconds ticked by.

LaShaun studied them while listening. Then she turned her full attention on him. He was good-looking, tall, and successful. No doubt he’d been drawing women like bees to a honeycomb for a long time. Garrett used wit and brains to entertain his unseen audience. For the first ten minutes or so, he gave a short recap about Jean Lafitte. Then he went on to talk about Louisiana history and Lafitte’s life in the southwestern section of the state. He gave tantalizing hints about delving into the supernatural to aid in his search.

LaShaun also got flashes beyond what the camera made plain. Garrett had a quick temper. He didn't like being wrong, and carried grudges against those who proved him so. Arrogant, self-absorbed, he turned on the charm when it suited his purpose. He would turn it off just as fast.

"You're the psychic he's talking about," Melanie blurted while the video still played.

Dru hit a key to pause the vlog. "Melanie did a search and read up on your previous cases. The Blood River Ripper, the teenager found hanging from a tree, and werewolves."

"Yeah, right. Anyway, I'm willing to pay your usual hourly fee." Melanie took out her cell phone.

Chase looked at Melanie. "LaShaun doesn't—"

"Two hundred fifty," LaShaun said. She avoided Chase's stunned gaze. Still, he kept quiet.

"I'll pay for eight hours up front. Then we'll discuss if you continue. If you give me your details, I'll transfer money to your account." Melanie looked at LaShaun with a determined expression.

"I accept online payment at LRB1740@bayoumail.com. I'll tell you about progress four hours into my investigation. Then you can decide if you want me to keep going." LaShaun stood. "I'll also email you my standard agreement. Payment indicates acceptance of the terms."

"Agreed." Melanie didn't look up from her phone. She tapped the screen, then showed it to LaShaun. A message on a payment processing app showed confirmation money had been sent.

"I'll be in touch no later than, say, ten tomorrow morning." LaShaun replied.

Chase cleared his throat as if he needed extra seconds to recover. "Uh, I'll call you this afternoon once I check with my staff."

"Well, we're making progress," Dru said with a smile, which faltered when Melanie gave a soft grunt of derision.

LaShaun walked with them out of the kitchen and down the driveway to their car. When she got back, Chase stood in the door. He stared at the women as they turned the vehicle around and drove off. Then he nodded in their direction. LaShaun followed his gaze. Visible through trees, the car had stopped at the intersection with Rougon Road.

"What do you think?" Chase asked.

"Dru is most likely telling Melanie to clean up her attitude. Melanie arguing that direct is better. She's saying something about us Southerners being too slow." LaShaun shrugged. "Whatever."

Chase backed up as LaShaun came up short steps into the kitchen. "What the hell, baby? Now you're a private investigator with an hourly rate and a standard agreement?"

"Yes." LaShaun grinned at him as she brushed by.

"LaShaun. Seriously." Chase put his hands on his waist, head cocked to one side.

"Melanie Johansen Yaun understands paying to get what she wants. She would have been even more difficult if I'd said no charge," LaShaun quipped.

Chase shook his head as he drew out the words. "Un-friggin'-believable."

"They would have been back, Chase. I just decided to skip ahead and save us the trouble. This way she won't be telling the world I snatched her brother and *ground his bones to make my bread*." LaShaun pitched her voice low and raspy as she rubbed her hands together. "You know, the usual voodoo witch-woman nonsense."

"I don't think this is gonna turn out well." Chase's cell phone chimed and he took it out of the case on his hip. "Huh, calendar reminder I have a meeting this morning."

"Go, meet, don't worry. I probably won't find anything, and you professionals will take over." LaShaun crossed to answer the ringing landline phone. She greeted the caller and listened for several seconds, saying "I see" a few times. Her amused expression transformed into a tense frown.

Chase walked over. "What's wrong?"

"Hold on a sec." LaShaun hit the mute button and turned to Chase. "Ellie's teacher. Seems she thinks I should pick her up from school. No, she's not sick or hurt."

"Okay, so?"

“She wants to talk to me. Go to your meeting and don’t stress about it. Like I said, Ellie’s not hurt or anything. It’s just... Ellie’s been telling the other kids ’bout a boogie man in Black Bayou. One of the mothers complained.”

Chase grunted. “Pop and his Cajun ghost stories.”

LaShaun waved him to keep quiet, unmuted the phone, and listened to the teacher again. She agreed to pick Ellie up early and hung up. “I don’t think we can blame your daddy this time, hon. Ellie said something about a rich man trapped by the spirit of a demon. She even described what the man looks like. It sounds like Garrett Johansen.”