



Follow the dress.

*The
Legend
of
Abigail Rose*

Jessie Jones

A NOVEL BY ELSIE HEDETNIEMI CARR.

*The Legend
Of
Abigail Rose*

Who was she?

Why was she?

One woman

Two lives

Two centuries

Three families

By Elsie Hedetniemi Carr

The Legend of Abigail Rose

Who was she?

Why was she?

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However, the discovery of the Hart manor house in "the suburbs of Atlanta" is directly based on the author's personal experience with a property in the historic village of Pendleton, South Carolina. The Carrs discovered and purchased the building known as Harris Hall in that charming township, about 130 miles east of Atlanta, in 1985, and six months later, opened Liberty Hall Inn. The large home had been built in the 1840s, and had set empty for over twenty years. Elsie and Robert moved into one room and bath while restoration of the deteriorating manor progressed, and watched and waited for Miss Orpha.

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Prologue

It was in 1965 when Abigail Rose didn't come home.

He would never forget that horrifying day.

2004, New Orleans

Tim

As Tim sank into his favorite chair, the smell of the supple tan leather, as always, was soothing. Its softness was comforting, and so familiar. His lean yet muscular body was weary. He began to relax with the certainty the stress of the day's work would subside in only a few more minutes. This haven always had that effect on him, when these moments late in the day were his, alone.

His blue eyes gazed through the huge expanse of glass and over the familiar landscape below him, and the knowledge he had been involved in creating it all gave him immense pleasure.

What a ride it's been! he thought to himself. *They've been amazing years—months—days--hours. Nothing less than unbelievable.*

Far beneath his penthouse, over the roofs of the buildings spreading out like fingers in all directions over his and his brother's company's rambling complex, the sparkle of streetlights already outlining the maze of streets, through the parking lots filled with vehicles of shoppers and residents, then the carefully planned green spaces, and on to the Riverwalk with its expensive yachts secured to their moorings, the mighty Mississippi continued its unrelenting course southward to the Gulf. The water shimmered as the last rays of the setting sun shone on its surface, quiet this evening, leaving the river at peace.

He was pensive tonight, more so than usual; however, there was never a day when he didn't think about it all.

As he relaxed, he began talking into the tape recorder, again, for the hundredth, or was it thousandth, time? How many tapes were in the boxes stored in the top of his closet, some just a few words, others long, involved, complex, all incomprehensible?

“They loved Mardi Gras, but more importantly, they loved New Orleans.

***She** loved New Orleans.*

It was 1965. My mother wasn’t quite twenty-seven, I think, because they told me later I’d already seen six of those Mardi Gras years. Even at such a young age, I remember that time as if it were only yesterday.”

Then he was silent for a few moments, meditative, attempting to put into order what he wanted to say next. He turned the recorder off, rewound it a bit, replayed the last paragraph and continued:

“But--that year she didn’t come home.

That year all of our lives would be changed, inexplicably and forever.

I remember how excited she had been, the entire week before they flew south from Atlanta. She hummed while she flitted around the house, making preparations for the trip she had talked about all year long. Her descriptions, so detailed and colorful, of the previous year’s festivities had begun on the very first day after their return home from the city which seemed to mesmerize her, twelve long months ago.

Dad used those words: ‘the city which seemed to mesmerize her,’ and it was true.

While she packed, it was as if I weren’t there. I watched silently, trying to understand the change in her. Thinking back, it seemed to me she was in a different place, imagining, or perhaps remembering another whole world. Her eyes would sparkle, and she’d be humming to herself, strange, jazzy tunes from a different place, and a far different time I knew nothing about. She seemed deliciously, desperately out-of-step with the reality of the current time.

In that, my seventh year, being a little older and much wiser, I thought, than the last year, my head already was full of a short lifetime of stories about Mardi Gras. I could just see my mother all dolled up in those colorful costumes she was carefully folding and placing in her suitcase, but I could only imagine her face made up as unnatural as the frightful clowns in the circus which came to Atlanta every year, and throughout my life I would harbor those memories. I wasn't sure I liked being old enough to imagine her with an unfamiliar mask covering her beautiful face, the face I knew and loved so well.

However, I was old enough to wonder how many more years it would take for me to be old enough to become a part of it all.

What I didn't know then.

Her name was Abigail Rose Hart--my mother--Abby.

More vividly than anything else about her, I remember her hair. It was long and silky, a deep honey-gold yellow like corn silk when it's ready to pick. It had just enough curl in it to make it wispy when it blew in the breeze. She liked that word, wispy. She'd wrinkle her nose, close her eyes and laugh when I'd say it.

I can still hear her chuckle, a tiny, soft mini-laugh often turning into rolling laughter when 'somethin's ticklin' my innards' she'd say. I knew almost anything I came up with, in my limited sense of humor, could tickle her innards, and I'd start it. We'd roll in the deep, fragrant grass, or on the soft Aubusson carpet downstairs in the parlor, or on the thick quilts on my bed, giggling and laughing as if we were both four- or five-year-olds, each trying to see who could find the other's most ticklish spot first.

Dad was just a little older, about twenty-nine or thirty then, I guess. He's Jerry. They had met at the university, while both were attending architectural school, but Mom never did finish. She had an inherent eye for fine design Dad bragged about, for years. He told me he constantly encouraged her to go back after I was born, to get her degree so they could work together in the family architectural firm--but she never did. She said she didn't need a piece of paper to do what she loved, and could do so well.

My mother's artistic talent was inherited. Both of her parents had passed all of their creative abilities on to their only daughter.

Her father designed the complex insides of automobiles. His innovative ideas seldom came to fruition in 'today's' new models--'before its time,' he would assure his young family--yet more often than not they were incorporated into new designs several years later.

'Follow your dreams, Abby, always follow your dreams,' her father told her over and over; 'never give up on your dreams, or yourself-- you can make them come true.'

Her mother was a fine artist, as well as designer and producer of romantic Victorian-style fashions. Always white, with lace and ribbon decorations, tucks and pleats; always soft and feminine. She loved to wear her mother's creations, and Dad told me Mom often said she had been born into the wrong century.

During her teen years, Mom was quiet but popular, especially with the boys. However, once they discovered she wasn't "easy" she found herself with many friends, but few dates. She was satisfied.

Since she had built dollhouses all through her childhood, not surprisingly, she naturally followed her passion of architecture in college, and she surely put that talent to good use in her short life.

My parents were forever working on the big, old clunk of a house we lived in, as I thought of it when I was young. There was always something torn up and a mess somewhere--another project, more workmen, sawdust all over the place. People packing up things, moving or covering furniture, the sound of saws and hammers, the dank smell of newly cut lumber or fresh varnish were ever present. It never stopped. As soon as I could walk, I imagine I got in the way a lot, but everything about the root of the hubbub fascinated me. My mother's patience with me was inexhaustible.

What I learned from her shaped my life.

I watched as she made elaborate drawings of everything she wanted done on our house, from projects as simple as a threshold, to as complex as the staircase railing and balustrades. She drew detailed plans of entire rooms, showing where furniture and accessories were to be placed, niches for objects of art, height between bookshelves, and sizes and sketches of paintings she would ultimately paint herself and hang.

Of course, there was the cozy corner nook where she would eventually be able to curl up and sink into the soft cushions

of the built-in seats. There she would read from the vast collection of books she swore she'd have in their own library, one day, soon.

Oh! my mother did adore books, mostly books on history and architecture, old homes, decorating, antique accessories and fashions of years past. They all intrigued her. She was fascinated with anything old, and I sometimes wondered if everything in the world that was of value was old. Dad joked her books kept her occupied and 'out of trouble' when she wasn't helping him, as if she needed to be kept out of trouble. I believe they opened her doorway to another era.

Her favorite book was a small and musty-smelling manual on homes of New Orleans, a kind of early travelogue and "how-to" book put together, written long before either was the rage. Entitled Homes of the Era and Area, Visit and Build Your Own, the date of publication and author's name had unfortunately been obliterated from years of use, or perhaps misuse. I knew it must have been ancient though, because of how fragile the pages were.

She had found it on their very first trip to New Orleans.

It was an fascinating story to me, even as a youngster: how she had walked right into an out-of-the-way antique shop, straight to the shelf in a bookcase tucked away in the back room, and put her hand on that particular book. It was stacked with other dusty volumes, which had probably been on the same shelf, untouched, for years. 'It must have been hiding there, waiting just for me,' she'd laugh.

How often I have thought of that story in my later years. It was a kind of an early travelogue and "how-to" book put together, written long before either was the rage. She told me she never left home again without it, taking it with her on each trip to New Orleans, using it as a guide to the city and its hidden treasures.

Still today the book has its own very special place on my nightstand, and I love to hold it, open it, my fingers tracing a paragraph or a page, just knowing it had been in her hands, and her heart.

That year, 1965, Dad later told me, was the best Mardi Gras ever. She loved the whirling throng of partiers. The music seemed louder, the sweeping masses of revelers more jovial, the costumes more vibrant, and the festivities more spirited than they had ever been before.

Thinking back, Dad described New Orleans to me as a city of rich cultures, where he and Mom listened to clear, strong

voices sing seductive love songs and soulful melodies, joyful jazzy tunes and deep bluesy folk harmonies. A profound sense of whimsy and mystery pervaded every nook and cranny of the old city. Nothing could be the same anywhere else.

The food--New Orleans offered some of the finest cuisine in the country. I have to tell you now, it still does. Every food one ever had heard of, or could imagine, was available any time of the day or night. My mother was determined to taste every new dish she could discover. She left the cooking chores at home to our cook, Lily Oaks, most of the time anyway, but how easily my mother discovered mouthwatering recipes in the countless cookbooks she brought home with her, and how well she gave directions.

'Maybe she practices in her sleep,' Lily would say to me laughing, as I often supervised from my special stool in the kitchen, watching as she created Mom's latest discovery.

She wanted to experience it all, and learn everything she could about the history of the fascinating city of New Orleans. Dad's descriptions were colorful, to say the least. They watched, captivated, as visitors shed their normal personalities and became characters they could only dream about at home. Fantasies became reality, if only for a short time. He thought the frenzied noise didn't suit her gentle nature, and he often wondered, he told me, what drew her to that place. He learned early on not to question, so he indulged her whims, and they lost themselves to the time and place, as they slipped right in with the rest of the fun-loving and possessed souls in the city.

'Your mother was in heaven there,' Dad said to me. 'She seemed to be another person in another world.'

'I think I'm misplaced in time,' she would often tell him.

How often she told me of vivid dreams, of a different time, different places, with spirits of different people, all intertwined within her own soul.

Oh, by the way, I'm Tim Hart--their son--and I had never made the trek to the city she loved so much, and the city where she was to die.

I was waiting at home in Atlanta, with my grandparents, on that fateful day ... of that fateful year.

Book One - Abby

Chapter One

1965, New Orleans

During Mardi Gras the city drew visitors like honey attracts ants. After the first taste, they're hooked. They swarm. They gorge themselves.

So it was with the Harts--Abby and Jerry Hart.

Mystical. Mysterious. Enchanting--and irresistible. That *was* New Orleans.

It was the city she loved--and the city where she died on that horrible day.

Daytime hours attracted the curious, those tourists seeking to join in an atmosphere of carnival which never ceased. Nighttime brought out the best, and the worst, of the city, most of which was often impossible to tell apart. Most local folks stayed away then. Every night was party night in New Orleans, but Mardi Gras was the craziest time of year. As darkness fell, the air came alive as Bourbon Street blossomed with the chaotic atmosphere visitors came to the city to experience. The mishmash of humanity milling about everywhere was enticing, but intimidating, often hostile to the unwary. Liquor and urine flowed from the sidewalks and gutters into the streets, and music mixed oddly from the street musicians into the sounds of performers on the stages of bars and restaurants.

Aromas drifted through the city, as the sweet, sickening scents of the French Quarter rested malodorously in the streets and alleyways. Dinner at 2:00 AM was considered normal, if normal could describe anything in this metropolis of exotic costumes, trendy music, and spiraling Cajun dances. Traditions could change from one block to another, each with different customs, different ways of life, different worlds.

New Orleans' residents welcomed its visitors with open arms, and expected them to open their pocketbooks in return, and the local business owners were not disappointed, especially during Mardi Gras.

Nothing escaped the attractive young couple. Abby and Jerry took part in every gasp of excitement, every parade, and every impromptu concert in Jackson Square. They stopped at gatherings in front of squirrely musicians, eccentric artists, and soothsayers consumed by their mysticism and wanting to share it with every passing body.

Abby wanted to experience it all--and they did.

On this particular day, their energy spent, the couple sought the solitude of the more quiet neighborhoods they had come to know so well during past visits. It was time to leave the rollicking bedlam of Mardi Gras to the remaining throngs of revelers, whose vigor had not yet been exhausted.

The striking husband and wife strolled leisurely down narrow brick-paved streets, sprawling like tentacles from the center of the city. Leaving the hustle and bustle behind, they were soon far away from the carousing and into more peaceful surroundings, strolling hand in hand as new lovers.

"Ah, finally, peace and quiet," she whispered, snuggling up to her husband's shoulder. He towered fully a foot above her blond head. Her tiny hand was encased in his, tucked into the pocket of his jacket. It was sunny, pleasantly cool but comfortable, a welcome change from the ice storm they had left behind in Atlanta.

"Yes." He nodded, mouthing the word with no sound. A smile upward from her blue eyes, sparkling in the crisp air, and a smile downward from his dark brown ones were all that was needed. They knew each other so well.

Overhanging branches of the centuries old oak trees arched out over the streets, forming a canopy to enfold and protect visitors. Sidewalks, were well worn with the use of ages, and uneven. They stepped carefully over gnarly roots thrusting themselves through the bricks, extending relentlessly like bony fingers over curbs to invade the streets.

How many people, through the centuries, have stepped on these same bricks? Were their carriages waiting? Where had they been going? How had they been dressed? Did they have children with them? Abby wondered to herself.

She had always been such a romantic, often imagining herself swathed in the excitement of a stimulating, earlier time.

They meandered down lanes lined with a blend of styles of historic buildings, each wrapped within its own unique façade. Homes in these quaint neighborhoods originally had been built as private residences in the early 1800s, some earlier, some later. Still elegant and stately, they featured wrap-around porches, delicate ironwork and second-and third-story balconies. Private courtyards hidden behind brick walls or intricate wrought iron fences were covered with clinging vines, thick from years of growth spurred on by hot temperatures and high humidity.

Peering through iron gates into shady piazzas, cooled by the shade of towering trees reaching for the sun, and smelling of green lichens and the mustiness of old brick, they felt as though they were staring into another existence.

However, years ago, trendy and pricey restaurants, elite boutiques, fine museums and galleries or small, intimate inns had displaced scores of families living there, their homes turned into profitable business space. Other owners, who were wealthy enough to be able to remain, had often opened their homes and patios for daily or weekly tours, to offer visitors a glimpse of the intimate world of generations of the families who had lived in these grand homes so long ago.

As they strolled, shop windows lured Abby, and Jerry patiently lollygagged behind, allowing her to gaze at the countless displays. She spied the unusual; he spied the useful. Sometimes they entered, but often paused only long enough to point to, and most often laugh at, the multitude of weird and wonderful items jammed in the windows. Then they tried to figure out how they could use “this” or “that” in their house in Atlanta. Her collection of eclectic accessories had swelled through the years, as the number of boxes in the attic steadily grew, safely stored there until a special place was ready for them as space was finished in their home. Each year, they’d swear: “no more, no more,” however her treasure trove magically increased after each visit to this city of diverse tastes.

She continually kept a sharp lookout for certain items, and Tim’s collection of antique toys had grown by leaps and bounds. Begun at first with old teddy bears, as he grew older, all kinds of metal toys and banks with intricate moving parts had joined the menagerie. Yes, he did play with them, but very gently, as his

mother had instilled in him, from a very early age, the intrinsic value of these old and often fragile things. His toys watched over him in his younger years from bookcases in his room, then, as he grew older, perched on shelves on the bedroom wall, high above his bed, always a reminder of his mother's love for them ... and him.

When Abby and Jerry tired of window-shopping, they often tarried at their favorite outdoor café, and so it was this day. With its attractive tables and round-seated chairs of wrought iron, they chuckled at how uncomfortable the seats were--still. "We'll tell the owners they need soft cushions to protect their customers' delicate derrieres," they had laughingly agreed on every visit, but they never did, and, again, did not on this day.

Maybe next year.

They lingered over the most delicious beignets, sweet golden brown delights piled high with powdered sugar. Mounds of the white stuff swathed the floors like miniature mountains of snow. Cavernous mugs of hot, frothy New Orleans chicory coffee stood ready to rinse away the sweetness left in their mouths by the pastries. They were relaxed. They weren't rushed. Time stood still, if only for an hour or so. They felt at home in this place.

This year, as always, New Orleans was full of opportunities to discover something new about the mysterious city. The challenge Abby and Jerry had made to each other, year after year, was to find one new neighborhood to explore in depth. Their goal was to investigate its stately homes and hidden gardens abloom with the subtle colors of winter, to explore sheltered paths meandering into oblivion, or to just peek into alleyways dark and impenetrable.

On every visit, Abby yearned to reach into residents' memories for long-forgotten tales of the families who had lived there in centuries past. To discover as much information as she could about the history of the buildings was paramount. From the homes constructed more than a hundred or two hundred years ago, to the large industrial complexes built during the previous century along the river, every property boasted its own building techniques, details and individual stories, and she sought to discover them all, to absorb the rhythms of the neighborhoods.

"Your mother inhaled the aura of lives of the past century," Jerry told Tim later, "as if parts of it were the reason she was in that city--her reason for being."

On this visit to New Orleans, the neighborhood they discovered was similar to others they had seen in previous years. This particular street, narrow and paved with river stones, veered off of Decatur Street at an odd angle, creating a v-shaped building at the corner, with a pleasant little park at the tip of the triangle. They looked at each other with glee. Dodging slow-moving vehicles, a bus stopped on the corner, and a horse-drawn carriage overflowing with sightseers, they hurried across the intersection and into their newly found niche of history.

It was as if Peele Street were beckoning them, welcoming them with open arms.

They strolled leisurely. It felt as though life existed in slow motion on this block. The atmosphere was one of quiet and peace, as if in an era with little stress and few modern concerns, a time long lost. Abby felt an immediate connection with this part of the city. The sky was mostly clear, with a few scattered clumps of cottony clouds suspended in a sea of blue. The sharp contrast to the dark red of the ancient brick facades was striking.

Goods for sale, from all over the world, peered from the windows of shops in the long chain of connecting structures. Once row houses, where families sat on porches and children played outside, they had long ago been converted into storefronts. Manicured plantings still adorned a few of the tiny front yards, but most of those areas had been covered over with concrete or brick years before.

Looking upward, dizziness overwhelmed Abby. Oddly, nothing seemed square as the buildings towered above them, oblique things of differing heights and strange proportions.

Her imagination soared. Fragments of mystical tales of souls of those who had lived in these houses floated on currents in the air, tossing mere morsels to titillate her mind.

Only to Abby, they were seeking, searching, calling.

The shop drew Abby like a magnet. It was half way down the block, where the buildings became deeper as the “V” widened, and back entrances opened onto the adjoining street.

The sign in front, suspended by heavy chain from a fancy wrought iron bracket, had been intricately carved, obviously many years ago. With the pounding of wind and rain, as well as abuse of hot days and humid nights, the paint had faded in places, making it difficult to read. Uncountable layers of varnish shone luminously in the bright sun.

However, the glass in the front display window was obviously old, but sparkling clean. The name of the shop, painted in fresh gold letters, ornate and solid, invited potential customers, inside to...

~ *Ye Olde Tyme Photo Shoppe* ~

The variety of sizes and shapes of sepia-toned photos on view in the window was a challenge to comprehend. Displayed in elaborate gold or wooden frames, portraits filled every inch of the window's display space. They were obviously of tourists like themselves, dressed in old-time costumes--or, so one might think at first glance. On second look however, that impression just might be well questioned, for, it seemed, perhaps older photos could be interspersed with new ones, but which was which?

The elderly shopkeeper, standing just outside the door and always the hawker, hoping to entice sightseers strolling along the street to enter the shop, chanted, "Can ya' tell which is which, a hundred year ol' photo of some famous, or maybe infamous, family member--ah, long passed on now--or maybe a portrait taken jus' yesta'day? Eh, ya' gotta' come on in an' take a closer look!"

Mystery oozed from his dark eyes. His body was grizzled from years of the bending and stretching of creative camera work, yet he was still steady of hand and sharp of wit. Yes, without any doubt, he usually was able to get folks caught up in that curious query, and more often than not, the marketing ploy worked and a new series of photos was taken, creating another sure sale. However, the question was never answered, and imaginations would soar--which was which?

To Abby, his voice was magical, ensnaring her in an air of mystifying determination.

They had to enter.

Abby did not hesitate for one moment, and Jerry dutifully followed.

Upon stepping inside, the musty smell of the shop could immediately transport one back in time. Sour odors secreted from the bowels of the more-than-a-hundred-year-old building drifted up through the wooden floors, worn thin by shoes perhaps encrusted with muck from the muddy street outside, a century ago. Smells of the pungent, perhaps noxious, chemicals used to process

the photos in years gone by, to the sweet, sugary scent of stale perfume of guests, past and present, all mingled, overpoweringly.

This alone, after only the first timid steps into the shop, could have been enough to encourage many a prospective customer to turn and bolt for the door, but not Tim's mom. She plunged right on in with curiosity flying so high it could have carried her right through the door without setting her feet on the threshold. Of course, his dad had tagged right along behind her.

The present was no longer; time stood still.

Inside, ancient cameras perched at different angles on their tripods or display shelves. With wooden cases scuffed by the wear of years of use by generations of photographers, they stood guard, as if silently waiting to spring to life for the next century of customers. Peering at their subject--now Abby--through their secret eyes, and hoarding stories yet to be told, they caused chills to cascade down her spine.

This is a true treasure, this museum of cameras, and each one meticulously preserved for generations to come, she thought.

However, the largest one, sitting strategically in the middle of the front window, was the one which fascinated Abby the most. Shivers surged through her body again. Her imagination soared as she visualized the photos this camera would have produced with absolute perfection. She could literally see them in her mind. Her bursting curiosity would be satisfied at looking through its eye, just once.

I have to inspect it at closer range, but another time. I must have one of these cameras, one day soon. I'll hint at it. No, I will make it clear to Jerry, and he will find one for me for my next birthday. She knew it; she would have one like it--or perhaps that very camera one day.

Then she ignored the camera for a few moments, and was mesmerized by more portraits hanging on the walls. Not one space had been left bare. Transfixed by the images in front of her, she moved slowly, pausing as she leaned close to examine each one.

"Abby, Abby, come on now, or we'll be here forever," Jerry teased her with exasperation in his voice.

She heard his voice, but her thoughts were sluggish, and her movements slow and deliberate, as if she were drugged or hypnotized.

She closed her eyes and shook her head, trying to clear her mind enough to think more coherently.

“Okay, honey, just a sec,” she heard herself say.

She turned back to the window, stepped up onto the stage, and touched it. As her fingers skimmed over the well-worn case of this largest and oldest camera in the shop, they tingled with excitement and anticipation. Anticipation of what? The box was dark with age and use, yet on its tripod stood still sturdy and strong. Layers of dust of previous years--*how many years*, she wondered--had settled deep into the crevices of the bellows, clinging there as if helping to protect it from the prying eyes of curiosity-seekers. She was part of it, and it was almost impossible for her to tear herself away from it, this relic from the past.

She did. She had to.

When they first entered the shop, it was a foregone conclusion they would have their picture taken. There was no question, no discussion this would be done. So, each must choose an appropriate outfit.

Jerry's choice was made quickly, a handsome vest of purple, green, blue, and dark pink brocade in a woven pattern of muted flowers. It was just a tad on the small side, but still serviceable, if it didn't have to be buttoned. A cream-colored shirt with seams gathered low along the shoulder, long puffy sleeves, a black string tie, and straight-brimmed black suede hat completed his outfit.

“It's a fancy John Wayne look,” he said to her, laughing, perching himself on a small stool. She chuckled the little chuckle he loved so well, her head cocked and looking down her nose at him, eyes sparkling.

“Yep, you are my fancy cowboy.”

Abby couldn't make up her mind.

She sorted through several racks of different types of clothes, methodically, in slow motion. Her thoughts were still lethargic, and she had difficulty concentrating, but she knew nothing she had seen had been perfect--yet. As she moved down each isle, her fingers lightly brushed the fabrics on the padded hangers, as if she were searching for something.

Not one gown suited her subtly flirtations mood. Most of the costumes were typical of the rich history of the area: too low-cut at the bust line for Abby, or of gaudy colors, or many red and black with lots of frills and ruffles. Nearly all of the outfits were more garish than she would ever wear, except in the throes of Mardi Gras, while others with high necks and of sedate colors

were much too demure. She continued searching. She would not be hurried, ignoring the perturbed looks from her husband, which meant *hurry up, my lady, we haven't all day to waste here*, but was left unsaid by Jerry.

Soon she hesitated, and then stopped. At last.

Her eyes were riveted on the cushioned hanger in front of her. The aura surrounding the dress hanging on it leapt out and enveloped her like an attacking cat. It consumed her, invading every crevice of her body. She was frightened. No part of her body would move. It was difficult to take in air; her gasps were shallow and labored.

Everything in the room faded away.

It was just her--and *the* dress.

She lifted the hanger from the rack and held the gown up in front of her. She could feel her heart pounding wildly, from somewhere in the depths of her chest, and her soul, and spreading throughout her body. Her long fingers caressed the soft, delicate fabric, fondling it, as a tongue savoring the taste of warm, melting chocolate. Her lips quivered. Then her heart quieted. Her face softened and she knew this was her gown. Waiting for her--made for her--hers alone.

The shopkeeper cocked his head and stared with surprise as she turned, glowing in her choice. No one had chosen this dress, ever. It was definitely not the type of costume he would have hung on the racks for his customers, or would have used in the sample photos in the shop's front window.

In fact, he wasn't even sure he had ever seen it before. Had it been here all of these years?

This gown--this tiny dress was different. Simple in style, yet elegant in a casual way, it seemed out of place here. How many years ago had it been made?

Fashioned of a white gauzy fabric, it had interwoven threads of shiny gold, giving off a soft glow. The dress had a panel of sheer lacy fabric down the middle, but not embarrassingly so, a rather high empire waist, and sleeves ending just below her elbows with a wide edging of intricate lace. Its bodice was graced with ornate yet large embroidered white roses, and delicate, almost indistinguishable light pink roses sweeping down the front. More large roses and pleats completed the skirt. Pink ribbons streamed down from the waist.

The narrow ribbons Abby had wound in her hair early this morning were the perfect accent. As she slipped the supple fabric over her head, she felt released, free, as she had never felt in her life. Her slim body filled the gown as though it had been sewn just for her.

“Wow--Abby,” she heard somewhere in a distance. “You look gorgeous--right out of *Victorian* magazine!” She had no perception of who was saying the words, but her smile came naturally, and her face lit up with the knowledge this was simply the way it was supposed to be.

She glided into the studio set. There was no solid floor under her feet, just soft, billowy air. She took a deep breath, and closed her eyes as she and Jerry were directed to sit in front of the painted background. With a great effort, she opened her eyes, looked up into the camera and smiled seductively as the intense light of flashbulbs filled the room. The sudden brightness returned her to some semblance of reality.

The photographer modeled the lovely couple in typical poses, some smiling as seductively as he could direct them, others more serene. Then it was over.

Perhaps as an after-thought, he asked, “Give me just another moment, if you will, to try something a little different.” He quickly chose a wide-brimmed bonnet with one large feather for decoration. The soft, feathery plume was white, and a wide pink ribbon was ready to tie in a small bow under her chin.

“Just one more minute, please, I have the perfect backdrop for you. A beautiful winding staircase, elegant, just like you, my dear. It was painted from a photo taken in one of the local mansions,” he told her. “You’ll just love it.”

She did.

It feels so right.

Jerry quickly changed into a typical coat and weskit of the time, dark, a little too formal for him. It didn’t seem right. It wasn’t comfortable, it was disconcerting--it just wasn’t *him*.

However, as was normal for him, he’d do it, just to make his wife happy.

Putting on the most serious face he could possibly generate, Jerry stood staid and serious beside his beautiful and elegant wife.

After several poses, the photographer was satisfied.

Several with the hat, the others without.

It was perfect, his years of experience told him so. *I can't wait to see these portraits*, the old photographer thought to himself.

He wished she were alone, instead of with her husband. He wouldn't dare count the number of years he had spent in this shop taking photos hundreds of beautiful women, and, most assuredly, enjoying every minute of it. However, he was blissfully aware this was one unique, elegant woman. *This is truly a lady to be treasured forever.*

If he dared to allow himself such a moment of pleasure, *I could easily be envious of the gentleman with her, but I'm too old even to think of such things.* Too many years have passed, and his body was aged and fragile, but his mind, never. It was still as sharp and youthful as it had been so many years ago. This woman was a jewel, so much like *her*, his love of countless years ago, a love never acknowledged nor consummated.

Abby and Jerry returned in an hour, after lunching in a charming little café in the next block the photographer had recommended. Their photos were ready as promised.

"Magnificent," Jerry shouted, his enthusiasm unrestrained, echoing Abby's own excitement. How natural they looked, in their outfits from the previous century. The portraits could have been taken a hundred years ago. It was almost impossible to make a choice, but after a great deal of bantering back and forth, they finally chose two poses, and the shopkeeper placed them into an old-fashioned double gold-colored frame.

The first was of the two of them facing each other, with Jerry looking down at Abby. Their eyes locked, this casual photo clearly showed their enchantment for each other. Her blond hair splayed out behind her under in the breeze created by the small fan which had been placed in front of them. The background the old man had used was an outdoor scene with rolling hills, then mountains in the distance, complete with a rail fence and white horse ready to nuzzle their hands through it.

In the other photo, Jerry stood statuesquely behind Abby, her back nestling into his chest. He was so much taller than she, and the top of her head reached only to his chin. The staircase rose majestically behind them.

Then the last photo--typical of the previous century--with the two standing next to each other, with as somber expressions as they could create. They had burst out laughing as the shutter had

flashed, however, this formal portrait would give off its melancholy mood for years to come.

The ones with the hat--funny thing, the photographer had thought when he saw them--were exquisite of her, but the image of her husband had faded into the background. Odd, as though the camera had a mind of its own, and chosen to focus on her instead of him. Disappointing, very unimpressive. Unusable, but he could work on them, cropping him out of the picture and concentrating just on her. He'd see to that later.

They left the shop satisfied. Jerry was eager to show the portraits to the family in Atlanta, and to see them displayed in their home. Abby had been more resistant, unable to choose easily, sensing a different mood in each photo. They would order more later.

However, she had already formed her plan. She had let her husband pick what he wanted, she would be back later.

It was still very early afternoon, too early to return to the hotel to prepare for dinner. So they decided to continue the day's adventures by touring several of the older residential neighborhoods. It would be a leisurely drive, by their favorite mode of transportation while in New Orleans, a horse-drawn carriage. Not a moment was ever wasted when they were in this enchanting small metropolis, a city of surprises at every turn, with never enough time to discover them all.

Chapter Two

It was decrepit, the coach standing alone in the shady place where patrons waited, often impatiently, for the horse-drawn carriage tours, or drivers waited patiently for customers. Only one was there this moment, one coach, where normally there would have been more.

“It’s an old dilapidated thing, Abby,” Jerry said when he sensed her interest. “Let’s wait for another one.”

She wasn’t to be deterred that easily, not Abby.

“It’s the most charming carriage I’ve ever seen. Don’t you wonder who’s sat in this coach, and where they were going, and when. My lands, Jerry, it’s got to be over a hundred years old. It’s absolutely wonderful.”

The look in her eyes turned dreamy as her fingers unconsciously stroked the handle of the door, a handle touched by how many others. Her imagination soared. “Can’t you just picture a happy family climbing up these steps, maybe the hem of the lady’s long gown muddied from the road, the gentleman’s high hat under his arm, and a pretty young daughter pushing her puppy up onto the seat?” She laughed out loud. She could see it all, clearly.

The tan leather seats were cracked with age and use, but there wasn’t a smudge of dirt or dust anywhere. A heavy woven blanket had been folded neatly and hung from the brass railing bolted securely onto the back of the front seat. The brass bases of the heavy lanterns on each side of the canopy were highly polished, and tiny panes of ancient bubbled glass were clear and luminous. It reminded Abby--just a little--of Cinderella’s coach. While the white paint was chipped and worn, the gold adornments shone like new. She knew this was the carriage which was meant to be their ride for the rest of the afternoon; today it was hers.

The horse was a charmer, grayish-white with darker gray speckles. He was fat, with long, chunky legs, and a mass of thick feathers splaying above heavy hooves. A tattered straw hat, as floppy a one as Abby had ever seen, somehow stayed perched atop the beast's head. His droopy ears poked out of two holes in the bowl, and faded plastic flowers peeked from underneath its brim, as if playing the part of his bangs--except they were hanging there, too, long and tidy. It all added to the charm of the decrepit rig, and seemed to Abby to be so appropriate in this city of eclectic sights. His mane was full and finely brushed, and his long tail never stopped swishing back and forth, as if to do it was showing his impatience, letting these special tourists know they should choose him to guide them, and allow him be on his way.

The horse's head turned as his inquisitive eyes followed them when they rounded the carriage, and his feet stomped with anticipation of another journey. His whiskered lips twitched, as if he were saying to them, "Hey, you'd better come on with me. You won't get as good a ride with any of those other ol' nags that'll soon be waitin' here too, as you will with me. They're feeble, but me, I'm experienced!"

Abby's laughter rolled, and Jerry snapped several photos. The look on her face was precious as the insistent horse nuzzled her ear.

The carriage driver greeted them with great aplomb. With eyes as black as coal set into bloodshot whites, and ebony skin to match, his voice dripped the Southern drawl still heard from oldsters here, and more often than not, a challenge for visitors to understand.

"Good afta'noon, Madam an' Masseur. I'm Tom Oaks, *Junya*," the old man said with a definite inflection on the Junior. He was staring directly at Abby.

"I'm here ta take ya home, Missy, into dis here city of mystical 'periences an' unexplainable happenin's. Come on wid me, an' you'll never wanna leave!"

Jerry's camera snapped again as the old man offered Abby his gnarled hand, and with a practiced and dignified flourish, helped her up into the creaking carriage. The strength of his grip surprised her, and his black skin felt rough and weathered under her own soft palm.

Their eyes met, and the two stood riveted together for just a moment, yet in that fleeting instant their worlds no longer separated them.

Time stood still.

As Abby clambered up the step and into the carriage, she felt as though she was entering another time, a world of many decades ago. Her spirits soared, and she was lightheaded with anticipation. She felt her heart pounding up into her cheeks, and knew her face had to be flushed. *Just a little over-excitement*, she thought to herself. *It'll go away in just a few minutes, I know it will.*

Jerry pulled himself into the carriage, while the driver climbed into the front seat and took the reins. Surely ancient by his weathered skin and craggy look, Tom Oaks, Junior, professed to have been guiding sightseers through the old city for many, many years.

“But now,” he said to them with eyes beaming, “I onla take those vera special visitors who’re spellbound by tha city, an’ already tangled all up in its web an’ intrigue an’ mystery--I take ‘em on my own special tour. But that’s only when I’m not creatin’ somethin’ in tha kitchen, jus’ like my father did for so many years.” The old man turned on the seat, and smiled to himself.

Later in the day, Abby, thinking about their tour, and remembering those words, wondered to herself: *how in the world does he determine which visitors he wants to take on his own special tour? How would he know? How did he know--it was to be us?*

“I’ll take y’all to tha mos beautiful part of dis city,” he said as he sat proud and tall in the driver’s seat, as if it was a promise. Both Jerry and Abby were anxious to hear his tales, maybe from his own personal experiences. Hopefully *he’ll share some really interesting stories with us*, Abby thought to herself. *And, I surely do wonder what he creates in his kitchen.*

As Tom, Junior, drove with a speed and determination they found a little assuming, they realized they had seen this area before, during several of their previous visits, in fact, on every visit in the last few years.

“We’ve been here before, Abby, so many times. Do you want me to ask him to change his route?”

“Heavens no,” she answered quickly. “Jerry, I love it here, you know I do! I feel like I belong here. Oh, how I would have

loved to live here, way back then. You remember I told you the very same thing last year when we ended up here. We might learn something new this time. Tom's a jewel, Honey! Oh, sorry, Tom, *Junior's* a jewel. I can't wait to hear what he has to tell us."

As they moved through the maze of streets, they were mesmerized by the detail and vividness of the stories he was sharing with them. Fragments of history, legends of families and their homes through generations, all seemed to have been engrained in his memory. His excitement at sharing as much as possible in the short time they would have together was unmistakable. His voice was strong and animated.

They easily recognized, as in years past, there were many resemblances of the structures they passed to ones with which they were so familiar in their hometown of Atlanta. Lawns were meticulously cared for with shrubs and trees pruned to perfection. Houses sparkled with the love and efforts of generations of their owners.

The carriage slowed to a standstill in front of one especially imposing structure, by far the largest home and grounds in the neighborhood, splendid in all of its detail, and unaffected by years of use.

"It looks so much like our home, Abby," she heard Jerry say, "only more grand!"

Abby was thankful the coach had stopped its rocking. She took a deep breath, and concentrated on listening again. It was difficult.

"I always stop here, ta tell tha fascinatin' story 'bout tha man who built dis magnificent house, an his family an his beautiful wife, one of tha most loved ladies in tha city."

The massive house was truly magnificent. Its white columns soared above the two stories of grand front porches which wrapped around both sides of the porch. Beautiful grounds, with superb specimens of mature magnolias, boxwoods, and enormous oak trees, spread over several acres of manicured lawns. Now most plants lay dormant in the cool winter weather, except for the brilliant reds and pinks, and transparent whites of the huge camellia bushes.

Had Abby been able to read the small sign on the fence, designating the home as a historically significant property, she would have read:

~ *Maison de la Oaks* ~
Home of the Bouchette' Family
Centuries in New Orleans

Tom, Junior, began to speak in detail about the man who had built this manor so many decades ago, and the matriarch of his family, a lady who still ruled her domain to this day. As a young woman, she had simply appeared one day in the late 1800s, and never left, the two loving and growing together to create one of the most influential families in the city.

The black man sat taller in the front seat of the carriage then. His body took on an even more authoritative stature.

When he turned toward them, his eyes glowed with a new spark, once bloodshot, then shining clear as white ice. His southern drawl became softer and yet dynamic at the same time. It was obvious he was speaking from deep within his heart. The sincerity in his voice gave them reason to believe there was another untold story here, a genuine, unfathomable one which Abby made a mental note to research in detail later.

“Tha master of tha house, he was a widower. He had lost bof his wife an’ son in childbirth real early in their marriage. Then, for years he lived alone in tha smaller house, right next door. His name was Clay Bouchette’.”

“Tha’s tha original family home over there, built by his great-grandfather many years ago. Dis big house here had been started for his wife, but after her death, he stop work on it, an’ it had sit here, a’fallin down, rottin for many a year. An’ it was tha eyesore of tha neighborhood, an tha talk of tha town. But then, *she* came to him.”

The old man sat quiet for a moment, sadness evident in the eyes from which he stared at Abby. As she gazed back at him, engrossed in his story, she couldn’t move. Her muscles felt like they were tied in knots. Her breathing became labored.

Abby knew then, somehow, this man was a part of this story, a story perhaps already a legend in its own time.

Tom, Junior continued. “One day, she jus--appeared. Tha story goes he brought her back from a trip to tha big city, New York. They say she was tha widderwoman of one of his friends up there, an was expecting da wee one when her husban was killed in a accident. So tha master, he married her an’ brought her home, ta here. She was tha most beautiful woman, lovin--and kind--and

genous. An young, much younger than Master Clay. Everone cherished her, an' tha babe she birthed before they come back here to N' Awlms. An he raised that girl child as his own daughter, but they never had no more children."

Abby couldn't move. She couldn't breathe.

"Tha master, even before tha babe was born, he started work on tha house again, an' with her help, finished it ova a year later. It was tha biggest an fanciest in tha city--he wanted it tha' way fo her, an she made it tha' way for him. Tha's this house here in front of us."

Abby was freezing. The sunny weather which had surrounded her had turned cold. Her hands were shaking.

"Everone loved Miss Rose. Afta tha master passed on, an' wit her daughter, she built his family business into an empire. An' she took tha black family on his ancestors' plantashun, on outta town a'ways, an ejudated 'em, an made a wonerful business for them out there, too. She's probably ova a hunded years old now, but her mind an' her heart's jus as strong as yours, missy. But her body, well it seems to be givin out these days, but she still sits on da upstairs porch an' rocks in her ol rockin chair--an' waits--an' watches--for somethin or someone. But nobody knows jus what, or who."

"Yu mus come back hyr, Missy," he said to Abby, gazing directly into her eyes. "Dis here home is open fo folks like you ta see, but you--must--come back," he repeated, with an urgency not lost to either Abby or Jerry.

She tried to concentrate on what he was saying, but his words were slurred, and time shifted to slow motion. Her queasiness intensified. Damp, swirling mist enveloped her, with long snaky arms with bony hands and thin probing fingers seeking to invade every part of her body and her mind. Her head began to spin uncontrollably, and a deep-seated nausea set in. Her fingers were numb from the cold, and she closed her eyes.

"Come home, come home," the mist whispered.

She felt like she was floating--and then, she was looking down at herself from somewhere high above, the vision below her intense with surreal quality; it was bizarre.

Abby saw her own body slumped on the seat of the carriage, but she was suspended above it at the same time. The figure of her husband, first sitting comfortably by her side on the carriage seat, was then moving with short jerky motions to lean

over her. Then he too floated up and away from the carriage, arms flailing in the dampness, extended toward her above him in the haze, but he couldn't reach her.

She glided through the trees, gorging herself with the fragrance of roses, but she couldn't see any rose garden. On toward the huge house. She drifted in and out of the columns of the porches--she still could smell roses--at this time of year?

Upstairs, rocking chairs were being pushed aside, people scurrying around. She watched it all, but heard nothing.

Again she closed her eyes.

Then caught in the vortex, everything around her began to spin in an undulating, sluggish motion. She felt herself tumbling, gently, with clouds of softness surrounding her, cushioning her, controlling her descent.

"Abby, Abby, are you all right? What happened?" she heard Jerry's voice in the distance. Usually so calm and controlled, he was then distraught. She sensed more than saw her husband's face pressing close to her own. Blinking vigorously and shaking her head, she tried to focus, and she searched for him again. She found fear in his dark eyes.

She was still shaking. His hands encircled her own frigid ones, and he blew his warm breath on the tips of her fingers. As she tried to concentrate, the brightness of the afternoon sun surprised her--had it not just been dark and cold and misty?

As her senses slowly returned she could think more clearly, and she realized right away she must have fainted. *Just another spell* was her first thought, *just another spell. But it was so dreamlike.*

"Please get us back to the hotel as soon as you can," Jerry instructed the driver.

The carriage swayed precariously as Tom, Junior, coaxed new energy into his aged yet willing steed. Taking short cuts from the usual tour route and upsetting traffic by flying down lanes which usually allowed no carriages, he seemed not to care about the turmoil he was causing. Curses flew from unsuspecting walking tourists, drivers of cars who knew he was way out of his territory, and policemen who probably would track him down later.

At the hotel's main entrance, the driver helped Jerry, and then a shaky and only halfway coherent Abby, out of the carriage,

and as they left Tom, Junior's side, the peculiar grin on his face was wide and knowing.

"Have a nice day, Madam an'Masseur. Thank ye for taking my tour. Like I said, y'all will never wanna leave. You're never gonna leave--you'll be back, Missy, you *will* come back, soon."

Later in their room, after resting for a short time and her senses having returned to normal, Abby adamantly declared, "I am perfectly fine. The hotel's nurse found absolutely nothing wrong with me." She added with some sarcasm, "other than maybe weariness bordering on exhaustion. She asked if we'd been trying to do too much." They both laughed.

"I can't get the owner of the warehouse on the phone to cancel our meeting," Jerry told her, frustrated. "The appointment was confirmed before we left home, so I know he'll be expecting us, and we really need several of those architectural pieces we saw in his brochure for the house."

"You go, Jer. I trust your judgment. I promise I'll wait here and rest while you're gone," Abby assured him in her most persuasive voice. "You go on now, and I'll be ready to go out to dinner when you get back."

"All right, if you promise. I'll take a cab instead of walking, and be back in just a couple of hours."

As Jerry turned to leave, she said to him, "This year has been the best ..." and they smiled knowingly at each other.

Their portraits in the gold frames sat on the dresser in their suite. In their spacious entryway in Atlanta, the photos would be displayed on the antique cherry octagonal table, where the diffused light of the Tiffany lamplight would cast soft, and ever-changing shadows on them.

However, earlier, after they had left the photo shop, she had had a great idea. *A picture of me alone would make a wonderful birthday gift for Jerry. It'd be only a week early. I know he'd love it for the desk in his office. An additional surprise, she had chuckled to herself, to add to the other very special birthday present I have for him. I wonder which one he'll like the best...* and she had laughed under her breath so he wouldn't hear.

Even though her plans for the afternoon hadn't gone exactly as she had intended, mysteriously interrupted by some kind of surreal experience she barely remembered now, she thought, *I can make it back to the shop, have another photo taken,*

and get back here before Jerry gets back around dinnertime. With a little effort she willed out of her consciousness the faint hint of dizziness, which had persisted. *That's not unusual these days,* she reminded herself.

She dressed hurriedly, refreshed the little bit of makeup she usually wore, put on her jacket, and waited for an empty elevator. When she reached the mezzanine, she took the stairs down to the main level, meandered around the outer edge of the huge lobby so as not to attract attention of the desk clerks or bellboys, and slipped out of the hotel. They all knew her, and she certainly didn't want Jerry to find out later she had been gone. He would be nothing less than furious with her, and her surprise would be spoiled.

She easily found *Ye Olde Tyme Photo Shoppe* on Peele Street.

Upon hearing the bell on the front door announce a customer, the photographer sauntered from the rear of the studio, and his surprise at seeing her again showed in his smile. A fresh brilliance had just floated through his door. His weary, bent body uncurled, and he beamed with the larger-than-life smile which had been normal for him as a young man so many years ago.

"How lovely to see you again, m'lady. You've just made this day worthwhile for an old man."

"My husband's birthday is next week, and I'd like to have another portrait made, one of just me for his desk. Can you can do that for me, and have it finished while I wait? I have about an hour."

Can I have it done while you wait? You bet I can. Just that much more time for me to enjoy your lovely presence.

Memories flooded his aging brain.

"Of course I can. I can work pretty fast when I want to, an' my old body'll cooperate!" They both smiled, and she wondered again just how old he actually was.

He hadn't yet replaced the dress on its hanger, having left it lying over the chair where she had laid it earlier, perhaps as a reminder of the lovely lady who had worn it. Though his sense of smell had long ago faded, he had been able to imagine her scent engrained in its fabric.

With familiarity, Abby quickly slipped the shimmering gown over her head, allowing it to glide over her shoulders and along her arms, easily nestling their way into the tight sleeves. As

the dress fell intimately and enveloped her body, an overwhelming feeling of peace and finality overcame her. She belonged in it.

She was in her other world.

The hat, yes, we must have the hat, they both thought at the very same moment, and they found themselves laughing at each other as their fingers touched, as they reached for it in unison.

This time, since she was alone, he took more time, savoring this unexpected opportunity to admire her delicate features and ivory skin. Like pure fresh cream, unblemished, and he knew it would be soft to the touch.

A beauty, he thought again to himself, *one of the loveliest women I have ever seen in my shop; surely a true lady, and so much like her...*

He remembered every detail of her, the unrequited love of his young life, those many years ago. Golden hair so much like this woman's who was standing there in his shop. The same gentle nature, and even her laugh had been the same. Every feature had remained alive in his dreams, even though his love had been a lifetime ago, it seemed to him--yes, it had been a lifetime.

My god, it must be at least twenty years since I last saw her, he thought to himself. *She was still a beauty then, she must still be now. She has to be at least ninety, no, maybe pushing a hundred. I guess we're all gettin' old. Ah, really old. I must try to get her in to have one last portrait done-- I hope it's not too late. Could it be too late already? No, I would surely know if she had died--the whole city would know.*

It had been so many years ago. He never had been sure of her age, and, as a young man, he had always been too timid, and then too gentlemanly in later years, to ask. But he was sure she had been a lot older than himself, and she was the wife of a man of means, one of the most influential men in the city. Clay Bouchette' adored his beautiful and younger wife, and had greatly admired the photos which had been taken of her on their first visit to the youth's father's studio.

When the two had first met, the young son had been in the process of learning the photography business from his father. Then after his father's death, there had been many, many more times over the ensuing years that he had taken those cherished portraits--and fallen in love as young boys, and men, do.

She often had stopped into the studio alone, always curious, questioning. She wanted to know "everything about

everything” there in the shop. She had been enthralled with the cameras, film and the developing of it. He was a mere peon in the frame of things then, yet she had always been kind to him.

They had spent many hours together, learning, laughing and becoming friends.

He remembered vividly the day she had said to him, “My friends call me Rose. Please call me Rose.” He had thought his heart would stop.

His dreams had been filled with her, and often still were. In them, both were young, romping in the fields, lounging in *their* home, frolicking with *their* children, but all in his mind. His love of so long ago, never acknowledged nor consummated--but today was today, and his dreams remained entombed in the catacombs of his mind, the beauty of it all to be returned to the present at his whim.

But that day, his reality was this stunning woman was standing there in front of him. She fit perfectly into a graceful dress she had somehow discovered in his shop. He shook his head again, remembering earlier in the day he could not recall ever having seen the dress before.

She reminded him her name was Abigail. An old-fashioned name, oozing sophistication and class, he thought it fit her perfectly and he told her so.

“It’s a lovely name, Abigail. I heard your husband call you Abby earlier, but that doesn’t suit you as well--it’s much too casual and contemporary for a woman of such style and refinement as you.”

She tried to concentrate on his rambling words, soft-spoken yet thundering in her head. But, as before, her thoughts were muddled, and her movements slow.

She was unable to focus on anything in this place, just as it had been only a few hours earlier.

This place is holding a spell over me. It has me in its grasp.

Again, she could not keep her eyes from the camera. Turned ominous, she was now sure its enormous glass eye was studying her from its tripod, eerily moving as she moved, watching her at every step and turn.

To take my picture, that’s why I’m here, she reminded herself, with some difficulty, yes, to have my photo taken, for my husband, for his birthday. But not with that--thing. Go away!

Watch someone else. But there was no one else for it to watch, just her.

She had brought her book with her. Being as old as she was sure it was, she had thought it would fit into the ambiance of the photo quite well. Long formal gloves appeared from somewhere, and then the hat, which finished the costume perfectly.

“My dear lady, you look like you have stepped directly out of the pages of *Gooday’s Lady’s Book*, at least a hundred years ago. I remember those days ... almost,” he laughed. She smiled.

He took more time with her than he normally would with his customers, again with the staircase as a backdrop. That was a must. Then he posed her without the hat, attempting to catch the subtle light of a light box on her cheeks, the shine on her golden hair, and accentuating her blue eyes, a little wistful that afternoon.

They were finally finished. Abby was tired, and still lightheaded.

She had followed his directions as if in a trance, but what a variety of portraits she would have to select from! How would she ever be able to choose?

The old photographer had already decided he would print duplicates of them all, and of course, keep them for himself.

As he began to process the photos, he felt excitement that she would be staying in the shop while he worked in the lab, yet still within his sight, just a little longer.

Abby lingered, unable to remove the gown of enchantment, and leaving the hat to hang down her back by its ribbon for a few more moments. It was such a natural feeling. She felt her body relax, and her thoughts, although still muddled, enjoyed the magical sensations. Wandering aimlessly between the racks of clothes, and then again closely looking at the photos displayed in the shop, she felt suspended in another time. Everything stood still--time--emotions-- life.

She couldn’t stay away from the ancient camera. She floated across the floor to the display window. Up, and over to it. As she allowed her fingers to trace the smooth sides and sharp angles of its wooden casing, she wondered who had used this huge camera many years ago, now friendlier towards her, no longer quite so menacing. *It must be as old as he is, or likely even older,* she thought.

Her senses were acutely aware of the odors surrounding her, so familiar, yet so unnerving then. When they had been in the shop earlier, Jerry had commented this building smelled like all old buildings did, whether in New Orleans, Atlanta, or any of the other historic towns they had visited through the years. These unique scents, created by many years of use, or abuse, never changed, only varied a little, depending on the nature of the building.

Her photos were finished before closing time, just as he had promised. With the pictures laid out in front of them on the glass countertop, she must decide on one, but how can she? Just one, well, maybe a few more. The intrinsic beauty of her every feature flowed from the paper like the smoothness of ivory.

She must have one photo with the hat, and another with just the tiny pink ribbons streaming through her hair. She could not help herself, and she chose several others.

The duplicates sat beside him on the counter.

Abby had thought as the time had passed that the odd smells in the shop seemed to be getting stronger and more pungent. Her head was beginning to spin even more intensely.

As she and the old man were engrossed in looking at her portraits, their concentration was suddenly broken. Now she was sure this changing, rising stench was not just her imagination.

At the same moment, the photographer smelled something different in his shop. He immediately seemed confused. He ran toward the back, stopped a moment, and then turned again toward the front.

“The building’s on fire!” he yelled, the horror unmistakable in his voice. “Hurry, we have to get out of here--right now! It’s a tinderbox! She’ll go up in minutes! Hurry, Abigail, hurry. Come this way--hurry--hurry...”

Tears were streaming down her face, leaving smudges in her makeup, and she was feeling faint again. *Not now*, her subconscious told her, *please not now. Don’t do this now. I need to think-- need to...*

She heard only garbled words, sensing, not seeing him close by her. He had been right there on the other side of the counter a moment ago. She frantically reached for him, thought she felt his hand around hers, then nothing more--and little by little he faded away, disappearing from her sight, and her world.

The wisps of smoke were mesmerizing, as she stood captivated and unable to move, staring at it as it seeped from under the door at the rear of the shop. It swirled upward and then, lazily at first, evaporated into the high thin air. She couldn't move. It was as though the soles of her shoes were riveted to the floor.

After the first curl appeared, and then was gone, more and more of the churning stuff immediately took its place, until the wisps turned into clouds, and the clouds turned thicker and darker and billowing.

She turned to look again toward the front of the shop, and saw it was still clear of the smoke that was rapidly filling every inch of space near the back doorway. But her feet wouldn't budge, and as she turned back around she was sure the advancing mass of noxious, deadly gases was searching for her, full of strangling tentacles reaching to encircle her very being. Spiraling up from the floor, it was looking for her, it wanted her--and it was going to find her.

Her tears were leaving streaks in the darkening film from the smoke on her cheeks. She can feel her heart pounding, demanding to be released from her chest. She couldn't get a breath of clean air, and the acrid smoke irritated the soft tissue in her throat. The spinning in her head was like a tornado, roaring, pulling her up and inside of it. The resonance of a hundred bells reverberated in her ears, booming like a barrage of exploding carillons.

Thick, dense smoke, black, roiling everywhere around her, billowing up from under the door.

She could feel the heat now, excruciating heat, and the crackle of the approaching flames was razor-sharp.

She couldn't think, she couldn't breathe, and she couldn't see.

Voices--she could hear the voices. They were surrounding her on every plane of her being, but whose voices were they? Where were they coming from?

First just mere whispers, then louder and louder.

"This way, come this way--follow us. We need you at home. You must come home. Hurry..."

Which way should she go? No one was there to guide her out of this firestorm, just the voices, loud, and clear, sweet and beckoning.

"Come home--come home..."

And she followed them, straight into the inferno of smoke
and flames--flames everywhere.
And they took her.

Chapter Three

Returning as promised to their hotel room, Jerry was surprised when he found Abby wasn't there. A little later getting back than he had expected, he had anxiously anticipated seeing her already dressed, waiting for him, ready for their date for dinner, just as she had promised.

Where in the heck can she be? he mumbled to himself.

"It's your birthday dinner," she had told him before he'd left for his meeting. "After all, it's only a week early." Her face was aglow with mischief as she had continued, "I have a very special surprise for you tonight, two surprises, in fact, both something I know you are gonna' positively love!"

What could she have bought for me? he had wondered. He knew Abby so well, and through the years they had delighted in giving imaginative gifts to each other, gifts expressing the unique love they enjoyed. Their home was already filled with beautiful things, each with its own special meaning or memory.

After waiting a short while, Jerry decided to go ahead and shower. He didn't take his time as usual, when he would allow his mind to unwind in the steam, and savor the sting of the pellets of hot water on his body. He hurried, quickly dried himself, and then dressed. Minutes passed slowly, feeling like an hour, but then turning into an hour.

He worried, and waited. And waited--and waited.

This is not like Abby.

He took the stairs two at a time, as he ran downstairs to inquire at the front desk, but no one in the lobby had seen her.

Several hours later, he was frantic and beyond being able to think clearly. He paced the floor, not knowing what to do or where to go to look for her.

Frightening thoughts filtered in and out of his mind.

Could she have gone out, for some reason, when I didn't come back on time, become dizzy again and fainted? Can she be lying in a hospital somewhere nearby, injured or even, God forbid, unconscious?

He imagined her insensible, terrified she didn't know where she was, and worse yet, alone. She surely couldn't have gone out and become lost, as she knew the better part of the city so well, and she would never have ventured very far, alone, especially after dark. At home, if she was out and found she was going to be detained, she would never neglect to contact him, because she knew he would worry about her, just as she would worry about him if he were late and didn't call.

He made phone call after phone call, to no avail.

Finally in desperation, he called the police.

"Nope, can't list her as missin' 'til she's been gone for twenty-four hours. Call back then," was the terse reply, unmistakably unconcerned. "We get too many calls in this godforsaken city to come at every tourist's whim, 'specially when someone don't get back to her hotel room on time.

"Did ya check tha restaurant where you were supposed to eat?" the voice on the other end of the phone asked.

"Yes, man, how many times do you think I've called there?" Jerry answered.

"Did ya check tha hospital closest to your hotel?"

"Yes, man, how many times do you think I've called every hospital in this damn city?"

"Did ya check tha shops or other places you'd visited during tha day? Maybe she went back to one of 'em?"

"No, man, it's the middle of the night!"

"Have ya gone out to look for her yourself?"

"No, man--I am not leaving this room, because if she comes back and I'm not here, she'll be as frantic as I am right now and I wouldn't know where to go!"

Jerry hung up with frustration.

He waited, and worried.

The hotel room filled with the first gentle hint of dawn, as thin rays of light began to stream through the curtainless window. Looking out over the haze from the never-dimmed lights of the city, he questioned, as he had over and over throughout the long night, where she could be, down there amongst it all.

He had paced, then sat, then paced some more, unable to think clearly or concentrate on anything except Abby. Finally he had dozed in the large overstuffed chair by the window, unable and unwilling to give up and lie down on the bed. Too distraught to stop watching the clock, he wanted to be fully awake the moment the door opened and she walked through it.

The shrill ringing of the phone shocked his dulled senses back to reality. It was an incessant racket that wouldn't stop. He had not been asleep, just hovering above a deep bottomless pit of anxiety, and he felt like he had been drugged. Suddenly startled out of the stupor, he was definitely wide-awake then.

When he finally answered it, the nearly unintelligible voice on the other end of the line sounded like Abby's mother, but the woman was hysterical, and he wasn't sure.

He could only make out a few frantic words. "Abby--fund her purse--fire."

"Whaaattttttt? No, no, no! Mother--put Father on the phone!"

".....No--no--noooooooo!"

Chapter Four

The pounding on the door was loud and reverberating, and began almost immediately after the receiver of the phone tumbled from his fingers.

If I don't open it, he remembered thinking later, maybe this nightmare will be gone, and Abby will be standing there, a little tired, maybe wet and cold--but safe.

He didn't want to open the door, but knew he had to do it. The knob felt unfriendly to his hand, the cold metal stinging like shards of ice.

He needed only one glance at the policemen's faces--and he knew. He turned away, wanting them to disappear, but they hesitated only a moment and followed him into the room, quietly closing the door behind them. Finally he turned to them, his face already contorted with grief, and heard those terrible words he would remember for the rest of his life.

"We're sorry to tell you there was a horrible fire in the *Olde Tyme Photo Shoppe* late yesterday afternoon. Your wife's purse was found in the rubble of the building, and we tracked her down through her identification papers. We spoke to her parents, and they told us you were staying here."

Silence.

Numbness.

Blank eyes stared.

"But you've obviously talked to them--we're so very sorry."

He could not speak. No words could express his anguish. He just stared at their smoky uniforms, incredulous at hearing these words, definite now, no longer questioning.

He stepped back.

"No, no, this is impossible!" Then, shaking his head, he cried, "It must be a mistake--we were there just yesterday. We

were there just—yesterday--*afternoon*. She was supposed to be *here*. Oh, my God no, pleassseeee no!”

The policeman waited a few moments, then continued.

“Once the building’s cooled down, we’ll be able to search more thoroughly. We hope to find her remains, but right now it’s too dangerous. The destruction was so great, there may be little left--of anything--or anyone.”

Jerry continued to gawk at the men standing there in front of him.

“It just can *not* be true!”

The old photographer had been hovering behind the policemen, as if trying to escape his own pain. His already heavily lined face was filled with grief, cruel and unforgiving. The shock of an afternoon and night filled with unthinkable horror had been etched deep into his mind; the profound sorrow was unmistakable in his eyes. He stepped up, and hesitatingly, in such a soft voice as to be almost unintelligible, he said to Jerry,

“Sir, your wife *was* there--in the shop--later.”

He faltered, gathering his thoughts.

“I was so surprised when I saw her come back again. She wanted to have ‘another photo taken for my husband’s birthday,’ is what she said.” The old man had to stop again, and took a long, labored breath.

He looked into Jerry’s eyes with tears in his own.

“She was so excited. She knew you’d love your present.”

He tried to smile, remembering, then continued.

“She looked like an angel in that dress, an angel! I just don’t remember ever seein’ that dress before--ever. It was as though--it was there--just for her. Oh, with such natural beauty she was so easy to pose, just like when you two were in earlier. She wanted to wait for the photos to be developed, and I watched her while I worked. It was like she was floating around the studio. She seemed to be in another world.”

He continued with difficulty. “We smelled smoke at the same time. We’d been so engrossed in looking at the finished pictures we just hadn’t noticed it earlier, I guess, until it was seeping under the door to the back hallway. The door was already warm, no, pretty hot, I think, when I touched it. I opened it anyway, just a tiny bit, and a wall of flames was right there. I slammed it shut, turned and ran back toward the front of the shop, expecting her to be right behind me. But she wasn’t. She hadn’t

moved. She was staring at the door, and the smoke. By then it was rolling up from the floor underneath it.”

“I screamed at her. I begged her to follow me out the front of the shop, away from the inferno behind the door. It was getting worse every second. I could hear the roar of it. It would burn through it in a moment; I knew it would.”

“It was so simple,” he cried, the agony in his voice so evident. “There was still time, but she didn’t listen, but I know--I *know* she could hear me. I think I even remember having a hold of one of her hands at some point. But instead of following me, she wrenched her hand free and headed for the back of the building, directly *toward* the fire.”

It was hard for him to go on, but he knew her husband had to hear it. With a deep sigh he continued.

“She just kept looking back at me, with the most questioning, pleading, terrified look in her eyes. But she never hesitated. The smoke was black, and thick, and billowing up around her. And then she was--just--gone.”

The ancient watering eyes had the same pleading, questioning look in them, only now desperately trying to understand. In the past uncountable hours, he had relived that scene, as a dream set on replay, repeating itself, over and over--and over.

As the old man turned to leave the hotel room, almost as an after-thought, he reached deep into his pockets with great effort and pulled out Abby’s book, and then the remaining photos he had taken of her. As though his hands weighed a ton, he handed them to Jerry.

“These had all been spread out on the counter. She’d been trying to make up her mind on the ones she thought you’d like the best. I guess I just scooped the pile of ‘em up on my way out of the shop. They’re wonderful.”

No more words came, but tears flooded those ancient eyes, and it was evident he, too, was heartbroken.

And they left Jerry, totally alone.

Chapter Five

Jerry returned to Atlanta, alone and still dazed, to face a house where everything, literally every single thing, reminded him of Abby.

The following days melded together like molten lava, heaving, undulating, never solidifying. The husband functioned as if in a dream, if what he did could be called functioning. If he was able to doze off, he awakened with a start only a few moments later, expecting his wife to amble out of the kitchen with his favorite roast beef and cheddar sandwich, or seductively beckon to him from the top of the stairs like she so often did, or, or—or--or.

Jerry couldn't bear to go into their bedroom. He dared not smell the lingering scent of the perfume she always wore for him on those special nights, or pick up the brush with strands of her hair entwined between the bristles, still on her vanity where she had last laid it down. He couldn't run his hands over the indentation on the sheets remaining there on her side of the bed, for fear of disturbing her shape. It was where she had last set, just before they had left on their trip. They had always slept with their arms and legs entwined, with the top of her head tucked under his chin and the smell of her hair lingering in his senses as he slipped off to sleep, but no more would there ever be that closeness.

She had been so cuddlelutable--his, their, special word. But never again, never, ever—again.

It was impossible for him to comprehend he would never be able to look into her mirror just to watch her, as he so often had done when he would quietly slip behind her and put his arms around her shoulders. His fingers would just brush the tips of her breasts then, and his face nuzzled his favorite soft spot on her neck behind her ear. He'd delight in her beauty in the mirror, knowing she had felt him approaching her, and she was always ready with her seductive smile. He called himself "her nuisance husband,"

and she laughed back at him each time he did it, assuring him “you can be my nuisance any time!”

She would never again look back at him through that shiny surface, and he would never again look for her there.

He did not go back into their room for many months.

Chapter Six

2004, New Orleans

Tim

Tim was weary, but he was determined to finish the first part of the story that night. He turned the recorder off, and got up to stretch his legs. Walking to the wall of glass, he mused, again taking in the view across the family's empire sprawling to the river. The lights of the complex were like tiny stars, millions of them, except they were below him instead of above him, but those stars were shining, too, and were especially bright this time of the year.

He went to the bar, well stocked with his favorite wines and liquors. He wasn't a heavy drinker, but he always kept on hand for guests a variety of premium wines and top-shelf liquors from around the world. However, he had few guests here these days, but that was his choice. He was comfortable in his role as President, and with Ben as Chairman of the Board of the company. They worked as a team--the two as one. Everything ran smoothly. They had competent and loyal managers and employees, and they were both able to enjoy life with their families, as they wanted.

He settled back into his chair, took a sip of cognac, turned on the recorder again, and continued.

"I'd been told about the fire by Granny Annie, before Dad arrived back home.

'Your mother is never coming home,' she had merely said. I was numb. I didn't know how I should act, but I surely knew how I felt. I was suddenly empty. Totally empty. I couldn't believe it.

There was a sudden, fathomless void in my life, which was so inconceivable, so deep, so bottomless, I was sure it could never be filled. I had lost the part of me that had created me, the part of

me that had guided me and molded me into what I would be, the part of me that was supposed to be there for me for all my years to come. But she was gone. She had disappeared into nothing.

'Ashes,' I heard them whisper, 'all they had found was just ashes.'

Was that all left of my mother, the person I adored more than anyone in this world? Was there nothing to show for her, because she was now—just--ashes? What happened to her impish smile and rolling laughter? Where was her lively sparkle, her witty humor, and most importantly, where had her love for me and Dad gone? Had it vanished along with her beautiful skin, her long, silky, golden hair, and whatever else I knew nothing about that made up the inside of her body? Nothing to say good-bye to--nothing at all, but ashes?

The days before the funeral--to this day I don't know how many days there were, but it seemed to me then it could have been two or maybe a hundred--and then the service itself, were just a haze for me. It all meant nothing. My schooling had been put on hold. There were so many friends and relatives hanging around, most of whom I probably had seen before but didn't remember. They shuffled in and out of the house at all hours. Conversations were short and mostly in low voices. There was little laughter, but what there was seemed unnatural and forced to me, even as a small child who knew nothing about anything.

I wandered around aimlessly, at the house and then at the funeral home. Winding my way through the groups of grownups, looking upwards to see if someone, anyone just might bend down and talk to me. All I found were brief glances and an occasional cursory pat on the top of my head, as if I were only a passing outsider who had joined a party, instead of a son at his own mother's funeral. Her only child, and yet I didn't seem to exist. There was no casket, no nothing, not even the ashes they had talked about. I wondered what they would look like, like ashes in the fireplace, left from the fire of the night before? Or--I couldn't begin to imagine what.

I ate whenever I felt hungry, peering over the edge of the dining room table, to choose from the wide assortment of synthetic-looking food laid out there. I fended for myself, even though I'd like to believe Dad thought about keeping my life as normal as possible, but he was totally unsuccessful at it.

I slept whenever I felt like it, but when I did close my eyes and curl up in my own bed, or some other quiet and inconspicuous place, to try to sleep (I was successful at sleeping only seldom), I dreamed fitfully of her. I would awake sweaty and cold, with visions of a raging fire swirling around in my head. I could smell the odor of the acrid smoke, until the cobwebs lifted from my still-exhausted brain, and I began to think clearly once again.

I've tried with all my might not to concentrate on it, but those nightmares have remained with me throughout my life, eventually turning less frequent, softening only a little.

I heard whispers there had been a tiny new baby inside my mother. Dad's birthday surprise, Granny Annie had tearfully confessed. She had known for a while, but had kept the big secret because Mom wanted that trip to New Orleans to be special, one Dad would always remember.

Well, it surely was--and he surely did.

His grief was so deep and so impossible for him to conceal he didn't try. He would often disappear into the library, her favorite room, and with the door closed, no one knew what was happening in there. I wondered, some of those times when I saw him enter and the heavy pocket doors pulled shut behind him, if I would never see him come out again. I was afraid he might disappear into ashes, just like my mother had.

He tried to talk to me. I know he wanted to tell me things would be all right, life would go on, and we'd be happy again, someday. But he was unsuccessful at holding an intelligent conversation with anyone then, either those who came to pay his or her respects, or me. Everyone tried to understand, but I was too little to know how. Unless they had walked in tragedy-laden shoes, no one would ever know the depth of his agony, and they were sympathetic. So everybody finally left us alone, to each grieve in our own way, and to heal in our own time.

We were alone, Dad and I--alone together.

I wondered if life would ever return to normal--but what would normal be without her?

Book Two - Rosie ... Rose

Chapter One

Later 1800s, New Orleans

In the very earliest time of morning, those few dark hours when black is like pitch, the cold can chill a body to its bones, even in the deep south.

This night, the fog, thick and swirling, resembled vapor steaming from a huge iron cauldron of boiling soup, dark but colorless. The sky was devoid of illumination except a lifeless curtain of iridescent stars sometimes peeking through the murky haze; there were few rays of light to pierce the yawning shadows.

Under the young woman's feet, almost numb now, the road was nothing but mud, and the deep ruts spreading endlessly in front of her were filled with stagnant water. The stuff sucked at her shoes, up her calves, almost to her knees, and reached, relentlessly, for the rest of her. It was difficult, and precarious, to pull one foot out of the sludge, just to sink again with the next step into even more of the gooey stuff.

Why should I, she wondered, why should I even try?

Rather than seeing it, she heard the carriage approaching. The rumbling sounds boomed louder and louder, and its flickering lights were like beacons searching for her. The thing was seeking her, bearing down on her.

Somewhere she found the energy to lunge out of the way just seconds before the coach flew by. She could smell the sour breaths of the horses, stale and hot and steaming on her neck. Their pounding hooves missed her only by inches, splattering more mud on her and leaving more dark splotches on her dress. The hem already was hanging low from the weight of the muck, to scrape up even more of the stuff that clung like thick, grainy glue.

She couldn't think clearly.

She was freezing, her scantily clothed body shivering uncontrollably. She pulled the wide-brimmed hat which had been

hanging down her back around to the front of her, hoping to warm and protect her hands. Not succeeding, she let go of it, and it worked its way to settle onto her back again, its ribbons pulling against her neck, strangling her.

She couldn't remember how long she had been wandering aimlessly, stumbling through unfamiliar neighborhoods. It was as though she was looking for some one or some thing, but she had no idea who or what. It seemed like it had been forever--perhaps it *had* been forever.

The black ink of darkness slowly surrendered to the soft pink glow of dawn. Her eyes squinted, as though she hadn't seen daylight for a long while nor, perhaps, expected to ever see it again. When she tried to blink, her eyes felt scratchy and full, like the mud had invaded them, and then dried, leaving big chunks of sand there.

All was quiet in those very early morning hours. The only activity was inside kitchens of the homes of the wealthiest, where their staffs had already begun their long workday. A dog was barking somewhere close by, facing the light of a new day by searching its favorite haunts for whatever scraps it could scrounge from the kitchens, or, perhaps, for a smaller animal to corner and either terrify or devour.

Her hair, oh! her hair. It was matted and full of tangles. With tremendous effort she tried to raise her filthy hands to run her fingers through it. But there was no energy to push the stringy mess up and away from her face, so she was unsuccessful at accomplishing even that small feat.

Her underarms smelled, and she disliked the unfamiliar odor, musky, rancid and--earthy.

Lips cracked from lack of water, she could barely open her mouth. Her throat felt parched and raw. If only she could find just a sip of water, maybe it would sustain her a little longer, just until she got to--wherever it was she was supposed to be.

The thing loomed out of the gloom, a bulky, dark shape, eerily looking like a bony skeleton. In the grayness of early morning, and enshrouded with clouds of swirling mist, at first it was difficult to distinguish what it was. As the sun peeked over the horizon below the rain clouds, slivers of orange light threaded themselves through empty spaces, like narrow slits of eyes looking at her through the mist, laughing at her.

Sitting back from the road, in the middle of a large open space, it looked so different from the other houses there. Something was very wrong. It was a sinister and sober thing, a brooding purple mansion in a denuded forest, with shadows still dark and deep.

The girl slipped to the ground, weariness overtaking her. Splintering wood scraped her skin as she leaned against a post of some sort, probably part of a fence.

The slight breeze blew wet tendrils of golden hair, and the ribbons from her hat, into her eyes. With great effort, she willed her long fingers to brush them away from her face. As the ribbons parted, she felt her hat begin to fall. Somehow she caught it, and with difficulty turned and tossed it upward toward the fence post behind her, not knowing where it ended up, and not caring.

The ground in front of her seemed to be undulating like a sea never calm, at first gentle and soothing, but then heaving and surging into huge swells, swells of thick tangles of wildly growing things.

She shook her head to regain some semblance of reality.

Raining now, the drops stung her cheeks like a bitter cold spray screaming off the top of the waves. She was sure closing her eyes for just a moment would give her more strength--*just one more moment*.

In front of her, two chimneys rose as proud and majestic sentinels on each end of the thing's foundation, and two more oddly stood alone in the middle. Columns ringed the porches, with only one crowned with its Doric adornment, standing regally in place. The others strangely ended at different heights, rising to nowhere, perhaps reaching for the heavens ... sentinels steadfastly guarding whatever was beneath and behind them. Walls were ending at different heights, openings where windows and doors should be, but weren't. Remnants of a wide, curving staircase were crumbling; little remained of anything. The thing repelled her with its mystery, but she couldn't take her eyes off of it.

In the front yard, mounds of red bricks had turned to mounds of red dust. Decaying lumber, black with age or green with mold, was scattered over the spacious grounds, which should have been the sparkling green of meticulously manicured lawns and gardens. Untamed weeds and strangling vines had taken over everywhere, and only the strongest trees were still standing, struggling to survive.

Light now streamed through the openings in the thing's lower walls, with openings that should have been windows. It appeared to glow from the inside out. It seemed strange to her that the walls were only half there, and there was no second story, no roof.

It wasn't a stationary structure, but a shimmering, moving, living thing. Emaciated fingers of misty vapor swirled, eerily slipping in and out of its open spaces now, beckoning her, drawing her to its inner self, to whatever was inside.

They're snakes, a malicious inner voice tortured her in her stupor. They're slippery, slimy things, and you hate slithery things.

It frightened her beyond her wildest imagination, this derelict of a house. Yet she was spellbound by it. Its magic enveloped her very being; she was imprisoned within its magnetic grasp.

Could she hear a low, soulful wail, calling from somewhere deep within its bowels? *Come home, cccooooommmmm hhhooooommmmm.*

Yes, she was sure of it.

She wanted to flee, but she couldn't move away.

She stumbled toward the structure, and found herself at the bottom of its steps. How she had gotten this far, she didn't know. But a little further, she must go just a little further. She had to find the energy from somewhere within herself to climb those rickety steps, to reach the unknown there--of which she knew she was intended to be the center.

The sudden contact with the surface of the rough stair treads on her knees shocked her back to her senses. As she climbed, ever so slowly, more jagged splinters from the deteriorated lumber scraped her knees and tugged relentlessly at the threads of her dress. Her fingers groped for, and finally grabbed onto the inner edge of each step above her, to help pull herself upward to the next tread, and whatever was beyond.

I cannot fall off this ledge. What is underneath? I don't know what's under there. It could be a bottomless pit. Maybe it's filled with snakes. But I have to do this. I have to reach the peak of this mountain or the bowels of this earth, whichever it is and whatever is there.

The top seemed to slip further and further away the higher she climbed. Would she ever reach it, and if she did, what would be on the other side?

She felt a fresh surge of energy, and was empowered anew as she scaled the last remaining steps of the strange structure. A vision swept over her of a large and elegant home, built solidly of red brick, the wide front porch reaching around from one side of the house to the other. Massive white columns with Doric capitals dominated the façade. The tall windows on either side of the heavy double front doors were faced with dark green shutters, hanging solidly on heavy brass hinges. Drapes of heavy red fabric were clearly visible through the sparkling windowpanes. Windows upstairs, opening onto the porch, mirrored those on the first floor, but sheer lacy curtains backed the panes of old rippled glass. The pitch of the dark roof of the third floor was steep, and she knew duplicates of the dormer windows there would also be facing to the rear, she assumed to overlook the gardens, and further on, perhaps a river, but there was no third floor now, nor second for that matter.

She imagined the grounds with gigantic magnolia trees lining the outer reaches of the circular drive. Their branches would spread low, with deep green waxy leaves, and aglow with huge white blossoms the size of dinner plates. Stately boxwoods, manicured with precision, gorgeous roses and lush green grass were laid out in perfect patterns. Subtle curves of the winding walkway, its bricks laid in an intricately designed herringbone pattern, softened its path from the street to the front porch. A shiny wrought iron fence bordered the entire perimeter of the estate, shielding, protecting, and defending it, and no snakes anywhere.

It was a home of wealth and prestige, a beautiful house, flawless, stunning in every way--in her mind.

Instead, debris littered everywhere. Doorframes and rotting timbers had collapsed, and windows--what windows there had been--had shattered, leaving intricate patterns of broken glass hanging in the frames.

Can it be real? Her mind questioned.

Or is it meant to be?

I have to find out.

Chapter Two

As the young girl slipped to the floor of the porch, her eyes were heavy, and they closed. All strength was gone.

Muted footfalls surrounded her; then, the din of loud voices. The ruckus was startling, and her eyes popped open again, very wide.

Then, not a sound from anyone. It was quiet, but for only a few precious moments before the mutterings began again.

The world above her was shadowy--black faces, with white eyes with dark pupils the size of walnuts, hovered over her. Every one of those sets of eyes was wide with wonderment, and gaping intently down at--her. She could see scuffed shoes and dark trousers. Black bony fingers peeked out at the end of sleeves of varying lengths. Some pointed at her, as if accusing her of something. She couldn't determine how many there were; they were all swaying above her.

Her tear-filled eyes searched for a friendly face, but seeing none, they deliberately closed again, leaving her with a frightening resolve of being totally lost.

She wondered what it would feel like to evaporate into thin air--to die.

She wanted to shrink inward into her own body, to become invisible before this mass of unfamiliar people who were gawking at her. She tried, but feeling pretty sure she had been unsuccessful at disappearing, she gave up, without moving a muscle.

The commotion quieted again. The crowd parted in slow motion, as if a huge magnet was drawing the bodies back and away from her, splitting the swarm in the middle.

From where the young girl cowered from below, peeking up through half-open eyes, the woman who hovered over her then seemed bottom-heavy, like a huge pear. All that was visible from

the place on the floor was the weighty fabric of a skirt ballooning out and upward from the tips of shoes, and a bulbous bosom popping out over the top of it. The woman didn't appear to have any midsection, or hair covering the black oval which was her face. Everything seemed sinister about the person standing there with her hands on her hips.

The Legend of Abigail Rose

Who was she ... why was she?



Abigail Rose Hart was born into the twentieth century, but it was the wrong century. A Victorian lady at heart, she dreamed of the lifestyle, legends, customs, challenges and adversities of the 1800s.

Move into the place - smell the smoke - feel the flames and suffer Abby's panic ... and then, "nothing left but ashes," the fireman uttered with sadness.

You will step into another era to live her dreams, immersing yourself into the unforgettable journey as she traverses two centuries. Witness the despair and hopelessness transform into glorious new beginnings as you step inside those unfortunates' whose lives will be forever changed by one woman - Rose Bouchette'.

With grand visions that change three families' lives as they merge into one, she lives the life to which she was destined, to discover "who she was" and "why she was."

Follow the dress...



About the Author

Elsie Hedetniemi Carr and husband, Robert Carr, live in St. Augustine, Florida, our "Nation's Oldest City," where its unparalleled history pervades every nook and cranny, and perhaps ancient souls waft on the breezes from Matanzas Bay. They established the first "Bed & Breakfast" in St. Augustine in 1980.