

HUNTERS

Katherine Rambo, Tucson, Arizona

Chapter 1

**Louisiana, Bayou Mauvais
January 12, 2009**

Hidden by the dense fog, Verity drove across the narrow stone bridge over Lost Creek and parked her car behind the abandoned shack.

Gerard wasn't there. And he hadn't been on the road. Between here and New Orleans, it was mostly two lanes. Verity would have seen his car.

For the second time tonight, she texted him. No response.

Two hours ago, secure in her parents' house, in her own room, putting on her *Guns of Navarone* clothes, the plans she and Gerard had made to rescue Jolie from the cult still seemed so simple. So righteous. *So heroic*. Like one of the movie plots she and Jolie used to make up.

Not anymore.

Without Gerard's help, the attempt would be felony reckless. Too much like the classic movie/romance novel cliché, *Stupid Heroine goes into the haunted attic by herself*. She could still leave and go home. No one would ever know she'd been here. But if she did, and something terrible happened to Jolie—maybe worse, if no one ever knew what happened to her at all—for the rest of her life, she'd be tormented, wondering what if...

God, Papa Legba, just get us through this.

She got out of her car, hesitated, then shut the door. It wasn't as loud as she'd feared. No worse than a small cannon cracker at Mardi Gras, and she hoped that any stray cult members, gator poachers or wandering hoodoos would assume it came from a hunting rifle or backfiring outboard motor.

She left the shack and followed a dirt road merging on the right into fallow fields. On the left, it was hedged by dense undergrowth in a strip of second-growth oak and hickory woodland. It wasn't just the chill air that made her turn up the collar of her

old peacoat and pull her knit watch cap farther down around her ears. Mixed with the smell of standing water and sharp leafy compost odors from damp earth, there was a taint of woodsmoke from the cult's ceremony, beyond the woods on the open high ground near Bayou Mauvais and the ruins of Belle Abri mansion.

The perfect place for corruption, depravity and the ravaging of lost souls.

In 1840, the rapacious nouveau riche Sauviac family, lately arrived from Jamaica, established Belle Abri plantation and built its Greek Revival mansion. Respectable people did not visit, as the Sauviacs themselves were not "received." Their refined cruelty and unnatural good fortune—their enemies tended to die in grisly and mysterious ways—and stories passed among slaves to the outside world, fueled rumors of black magic and demon-worship. In 1865, the son of Belle Abri's owner kidnapped a planter's daughter, igniting a raid by her family, other plantation owner,s and ex-soldiers who rescued her and burned the mansion, slaughtering every Sauviac they could catch. Survivors found refuge in New Orleans.

The mansion was rumored to be haunted, and Verity couldn't shake the feeling that even from this distance, evil, gibbering *dupy* ghosts might come writhing out of the ruins and grab her.

In the fog, intent on finding the path that led from the road through the woods to the high ground, she didn't see the parked grey cargo van until she bumped into it. Frightened, she backed up. No voices, no sound. One of the back doors wasn't completely closed. She opened it a few inches and glanced inside. Empty. Both sides had padded bench seats. On the floor, bench cushions. The only windows were in front. The interior had a weird stink of body odor and burnt orange peels. She pushed the door back the way she'd found it.

Alert for sounds from people she couldn't see, she continued walking. Muted colors, bulky shapes with no hard edges and occasional rents in the fog revealed two more vans, a dozen cars and three double-cab pick-up trucks. She made quick calculations. With just bench seats and floor cushions, each van could pack in up to twenty passengers. The cars and pick-ups, five or six. Up ahead, there were probably more she couldn't see. There could be over two hundred people here. What was she walking into?

A few yards ahead, laughing and swearing, three people holding flashlights thrashed through the underbrush onto the road. They wore white arm bands and carried gnarled wood clubs. *Enforcers*.

Sprinting into the woods, she tripped over a log hidden in the weeds and scraped her left ankle, recovered, then froze at the faint sound of slithering.

On a woven lanyard around her neck, she wore an extra car key, a small Swiss Army knife and a penlight. She took off the lanyard, gripped the penlight, hesitated, and listened. Judging from the voices, the Enforcers were still on the road, but

moving away. If she used the light for just a few seconds, there was minimal risk they'd see it.

Sweeping the narrow beam from side-to-side, she discovered there were no paths.

She put the lanyard back, picked up a long stick and walked slowly, putting one foot down, waiting, moving again, sometimes shuffling, testing the sodden earth, prodding weeds, briar patches, clumps of saplings and trailing vines, trying to give snakes a chance to retreat, fearing every shadow and twisted stick might come alive and strike.

An owl hooted, rose from a tree limb and glided away. She realized it was the first wildlife she'd seen or heard since she'd left her car. Frogs and night birds were silent. Rabbits did not break cover. There were no shining eyes from possums. Not even manic chittering from raccoons. It wasn't natural. Something was wrong, and it wasn't just the cult.

At a stretch of Lost Creek about six feet wide, the woods ended. Over a slippery single-plank bridge she crossed onto the high ground. According to her maps, it covered over five acres. Judging from the number of cars, there was probably a large crowd. But in darkness, where fog mixed with smoke from small campfires limited visibility to a few yards, the crowd and the high ground did not exist. Around the fires, in circles of hard-packed dirt and grass fading into darkness, there were just phantoms in fanciful but rather shabby "medieval-Elf Land" costumes. Jolie was probably wearing one, which meant even close up, she'd look different and easy to miss. *Oh, bon sang!* She could have already passed Jolie without recognizing her. The last of Verity's optimism burned away into frustration, the realization of how alone she was, and the first gut-twist of real fear.

As if blocked by a psychic wall, the campfires ended about fifty feet from the mansion's front steps. Even the Enforcers kept their distance. On the right side near the back, a shifting red glow illuminated trees and dense brush along Bayou Mauvais.

Originally protected by natural and man-made levees, the mansion and the bayou had been a half-mile apart. Since the end of the Civil War, battered by hurricanes, floods and no maintenance, the levees had almost eroded away. All the old slave cabins and out-buildings were now submerged. A few more hurricane seasons, and the mansion itself would be flooded.

Stronger than fear, insatiable curiosity pulled her into the deep shadows along a path until she came to a large hole broken through a ground-floor wall. About fifteen feet away, crouched behind a pile of rotted timbers and charred bricks, she stared into a room where two men stood around a small scrap-wood fire on the open floor. She recognized them: Paul Roulard and his first cousin, Damien Durel, jaded feral *Aristos* living on trust funds and legal pay-offs arranged by their families to keep their spawn out of jail.

Paul and Damien looked so much alike—six feet tall, thin but muscular with handsome, intriguingly sharp faces and dark shoulder-length hair—many people assumed they were twins. Tonight, unlike the cult’s devotees, they wore street clothes: jeans, pullover sweaters, and heavy hip-length coats. From their scowls, folded arms, the way they scuffed their boots on the floor and ignored each other, she assumed they’d been arguing.

In grade school, Damien had been the neighborhood bully. Verity had been eleven years old on the rainy Halloween night when he’d ambushed her outside a school party and chased her down an alley into a cemetery. The only witnesses were ghosts. Dressed like a medieval pilgrim, Verity had been carrying her grandfather’s oak walking stick. In darkness, where the animal is older than the human, Verity had turned on Damien.

Afterwards, he kept his distance. In the past seven years, their mutual hatred had grown cold, deep, and silent. Verity had no longer feared him--until now. She remembered that Paul and Damien had Sauviac grandmothers. Damien’s family still owned Belle Abri: over one-thousand acres on both sides of the road and across the bayou. On private property, Damien, Paul, and the cult could do whatever they pleased without being bothered by locals or the law. Like the faint stench of decay from an old grave, rumors of black magic still tainted both families. So maybe their presence here, and their connection to the cult, had a chilling kind of logic.

Through a doorless opening in the back wall, another man entered. Older, perhaps in his early thirties, he wore jeans, a black turtleneck sweater and grey parka. Verity didn’t recognize him, but he looked so much like Paul and Damien, he must be related. His thick auburn hair was long on top, short at the sides. Upper cheekbone to chin, the left side of his face was marred by a jagged red scar at least a quarter-inch wide.

Paul said angrily, “There was just supposed to be the vans. Who told the others?”

“You did.” Said Scarface calmly, with an edge of contempt. “You boil their brains with dope and bullshit about being “chosen” and higher dimensions and you think they’ll keep quiet? Are you that stupid? Did any of your mother’s children live?”

Fist up, Paul lunged at Scarface.

Damien got between them. “Enough! Blame both of us. Me and Paul. It’s done. Can’t change it. We’ve got problems. Let’s deal with them.”

Paul stepped back.

Scarface said, “So they told everyone else. They’re all here. Maybe that’s not a problem. It’s time, anyway. It’s gone on long enough. We’ve got enough guys to keep control. After that...”

In the bayou, something large splashed. An animal screeched once. The men looked toward the bayou. Verity ducked.

Scarface said, "God, I hate those things. But they're useful. They'll do the job." Verity raised her head just high enough to see over the pile.

Paul looked horrified. "Not... all of them? There's at least two hundred—"

"Witnesses," said Damien. "Some will get away. Not far. The road that followed Three-Mile Bend to Sugartown, it got washed out in Hurricane Marie. Now it ends in the bayou. The bridge over Lost Creek's one lane. There'll be a traffic jam. Accidents. The bayou connects to Lost Creek. As long as it's dark—"

Paul persisted, "But the cars—"

Scarface cut him off. "Could be days, weeks before somebody finds them. By then we're gone. No evidence. Any kids get away, who's going to believe them? Bunch of dopers. Hippies." He smiled. "Must belong to some kind of cult."

Paul said angrily, "I didn't sign up for this."

Damien asked, "So you came to Jesus? You want out? Thought so. Fine." Behind them, another man entered.

Verity knew him. Eddie Lawler, ex-high school uber-thug with the face and body of a blond angel and the soul of a water moccasin.

Lawler and Scarface glanced at each other. Lawler left the room, then returned holding a leather pouch about eight inches long with a spout on one end.

Damien and Scarface tackled Paul, forcing him face down on the floor. He struggled, trying to yell. Damien pressed his hand over Paul's mouth. Scarface pinned his arms. Together, they rolled Paul onto his side and twisted his head back. Lawler stuck the spout into Paul's mouth, forcing him to drink. Paul spit out what looked to Verity like dark orange water. Lawler slapped him hard and replaced the spout; kept it there long enough for Paul to swallow visibly three times, then removed it. Damien and Scarface released him and stood. Paul twitched, thrashed and lay still, gasping. Lawler pulled him upright. Paul smiled, frowned, smiled again convulsively, raised one arm, and let it fall. Lawler pushed him out of the room.

Scarface said, "I'll be in the car. Don't worry." He tossed Damien a ring of keys. "Business isn't finished."

Verity fled.

Her feet sank into mud. Distraught, oblivious, she'd taken the wrong path. Now she was too close to the edge of the bayou. Six pair of glowing eyes appeared above the dark water. Gator eyes were gold. These were red, and each pair set too close together, appearing almost human.

The eyes moved closer, then sank. Verity turned, tried to run, slipped on the grass, lost her footing and slid toward the water.

A man wearing dark clothes and a hooded sweatshirt grabbed her outstretched hands and pulled her up the bank onto solid ground. Pale as a revenant, he had an odor like burning cedar and woody spice; light, elusive—yet stronger than the bayou stench.

He helped her stand, started to speak, then hurried away. Verity followed, until someone called her name. She turned. Jolie stood beside a small campfire.

Petite with dark eyes and a beaky nose, artistic and outspoken, her preferred clothing style had been 1950s French Existentialist with smoky eye make-up, sweaters, skirts and berets. Like one of her heroines, actress Louise Brooks, she'd worn her straight black hair in a bob cut. Now oily and tangled, it hung ragged around her ears. She wore a loose, full-length purple velvet dress with glittery embroidered flowers, gold tassels and a tattered, crooked hem. She had a smell on the edge of repellent: stale musk like wax mixed with burnt orange peels.

She exclaimed, "Verity, my star-sister in the blue aetherium! Welcome to our fire!"

Caught by surprise, Verity muttered, "Yeah. You too. Jolie—"

"Are you here for our first ascension?"

Other people gathered close, smiling and talking softly, sometimes to themselves.

Jolie said, "We shall ascend to Luriel, earth's second moon, the lavender beauty loved by the Atlantans, and hidden by the Council of High Adepts in the Galactic Command to protect it from earth's pollution."

"But you called... we thought... what happened? Why—"

"You're simply trapped in what is! Free yourself! Feel the healing light of Luriel on the star wind! We are reaching mass enlightenment, foretold in the Na'Caal records of Lemuria, guided by Knights of the Lost Star of Khabarah-Khan, who have come to us masked in the guise of Lord Sirius and Lord Altair."

Verity muttered, "Jesus—"

"Yes! Among the Ascended Masters, instructing us through cosmic wisdom to see beyond the discomfort of the transition as our crystalline vibrations intensify into balanced polarity."

Jolie touched Verity's arm, then pulled away—exactly, Verity thought, like someone touching an object they weren't certain was even real.

Stinking of burnt orange peels, the crowd moved closer, chanting: *"From the chamber of power we go singing to the waters—"*

"Chastised, cleansed, marked for the Ascension—"

"Guided by the messengers, guardians of earth and water—"

"Whose earthly forms in this dimension distorted by psychic pollution—"

"On Luriel, revealed as beings of light, beauty, purity—"

Enforcers moved in, herding people toward the bayou.

Lawler appeared, followed by his crony, Sikes Turcas: bulky with heavy-lidded eyes, his round fleshy face pitted with gravel scars from a motorcycle accident.

Lawler grinned at Verity. "Hey, Lafitte. Been a long time. Missed you, girlie."

The crowd parted for Damien, holding a black cloth bag about three feet long wrapped and tied with leather straps. He placed it on the ground, then stood, face-

to-face with Verity. He sighed, "Too bad about Gerard. Not real bright. He shouldn't have believed that last phone call from Jolie. Or whoever it was." Reaching into his coat pocket, he pulled out Gerard's iPhone, displaying Verity's last text. "We knew. And you made it so easy. Out in the open. Street clothes. You and petite missy *crasse*." He smiled and hurled the iPhone into the bayou. "We should have kept him around longer. Brought him out here. I would have paid money see that show." He hooked his thumb at Jolie. An Enforcer gripped her shoulder and guided her toward the bayou.

Verity jumped toward her. Damien threw his right arm across Verity's shoulders. Her mingled rage and fear emerged in short explosive scream. He shoved her back.

An Enforcer pushed Paul, now without his coat, to the shoreline. Looking confused, he moved erratically, as if wanting to escape but not knowing how.

Turcas stroked Verity's arm and shoulder. Like a small, gibbering animal, terror clawed at her insides. *Oh God, Papa Legba, get me the hell out of here!*

Damien said sharply, "Turcas, stop it. She's not for you." Turcas backed away, looking sullen.

"Not yet. When the ceremony's over, you and Eddie do what you want. But make sure no one finds the body." He crouched, untied the bag, opened it and pulled out what looked like an alpine horn. Made of polished brown wood, it had holes down both sides and a few on top.

Kneeling on the edge of the bayou, he placed the front of the horn level with the water. By fingering the holes, he played a weird sequence of bass notes.

Laughing and chanting, the crowd surged forward. Some waded up to their waists, raising their arms, immersing themselves, crying and praising like ecstatic born-again in a frenzied revival meeting.

Red eyes and a mass of scaly gator bodies broke the surface. People were abruptly pulled under. Screaming, others scrambled back, slamming into the crowd on shore. In Jolie's eyes, Verity saw terror and sudden awareness, as if the physical shock had shattered whatever clouded her mind. She cried, "*Verity, help me! Aidez-moi!*"

"*Je viens!*" Verity fought through the crowd to the edge of the bayou where Jolie, now on her stomach, scrabbled at the mud as something below the water dragged her backwards. She vanished.

Seizing Verity's hand, the Stranger pulled her away. They ran toward the road.

In the woods, the panicked mob turned feral. People who fell in the creek, across fallen logs, or who got in the way helping injured friends were trampled, kicked, punched and knocked aside.

In the chaos, the Stranger lost his grip on Verity's hand. He reached for her—but like quicksand, the mob sucked him in, leaving Verity on her own. She struggled onto the road into fog thickened by dust kicked up by spinning tires. People ran in

all directions, shouting and wailing. Engines revved. Tires squealed, metal crunched. Darting between the cars, Verity narrowly escaped being hit. Fear gave her unnatural energy. Feeling no physical pain, her thoughts running on a level separate from her body, she ran down the road, whispering desperately, “Jolie, I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! Mother of God, help her! *Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death...*”

About the Author

Katherine Rambo, a 4th-generation Californian, graduated from Whittier College. She is a retired real estate photographer with a background in news reporting and photojournalism. She moved to Tucson in 2005. She has self-published two books: *Nursing Homes: The Right Questions*, and *The World Came to Tucson* (a history of the Tucson Gem & Mineral Show). Both books are available on Amazon.

Her goal in 2019 is to publish two non-fiction books: *Tucson Granny’s Comfort Foods: Recipes from the Desert Rat Cafe Cooking Club*, and *Dark Flight: The Hunt for the Tucson Ring Meteorite*. A third non-fiction book, *Dancing with the Dead: The Unnatural History of Tucson*, is undergoing final revisions.

She is currently seeking an agent and a publisher for *Hunters*, her first novel.