

# *The Wailing Courtyard*

by Sharon Pape

Althea Blanchet walked the narrow aisles of her museum shop, taking care not to bump into the apothecary jars crammed onto every shelf. She paused occasionally to straighten a jar so its label was easier to read. There was white and pink love powder, five finger grass, dragon blood sticks, Dixie love perfume, brimstone, pulverized lodestones, goofer dust, red brick dust and dozens of other exotic materials. She swiped at the fine strands of a spider's web draped between the tops of two of the jars like the cables of a bridge.

The inventory check was a ritual Althea performed before closing up each night, although she couldn't recall the last time she'd needed to restock any of her supplies. Voodoo potions weren't in much demand anymore. There were a few faithful customers who still stopped in for powders to change their luck or enhance their sexual charms, but the business was a vague shadow of what it had been in her grandmother's time, or even in her mother's. On a rational level, Althea knew it was the changing world that was to blame, yet she harbored a nagging sense of guilt, as if the failure was somehow hers.

Her shoulders hunched forward with a sudden chill. It was getting on toward night and the air was raw and heavy with rain. Her legs ached as if rats were gnawing at the joints. Barely forty, she already suffered from the rheumatism that had plagued all the women in her family. As she tried to fasten her old, gray sweater, the top button fell off in her hand. She looked at it and sighed, another button in a growing collection that needed to be sewn back on her clothing. It wasn't that she lacked the time or ability to do the chore, but rather that she questioned the need. Tourists who came in to see the voodoo artifacts and the wailing courtyard rarely spared her more than a cursory glance. And her only social obligations were a weekly visit with her friend Lettie, who owned a used book shop, and an occasional dinner with her cousin's family.

Althea dropped the button into her pocket and wandered to the door. Gaudy bits of colored paper that had escaped the Mardi Gras cleanup could be seen here and there along the narrow streets of the French Quarter. The frenetic parades and partying were over for another year. Life could return to normal once again. Or could it? She still had the decision to make and, in spite of all her careful introspection and the best of Lettie's advice, she was no closer to deciding than she had been six weeks ago.

She glanced at her watch. It wasn't quite six o'clock, but there didn't seem to be any point in keeping the museum open. It had been one of the slowest days in months. No doubt the revelers were busy sleeping off their good times. She had just pulled down the shades on the front windows and was locking the door when the knob twisted in her hand.

"Hey guys, this is it," a man said, jiggling the knob again. "Steve, I thought you said this place was open till six."

“That’s what the website said. Here, let me try it.”

Althea’s heart was set on a bowl of hot chowder and a hassock for her feet, but times being what they were, she could hardly afford to turn away paying customers. Smoothing back the unruly strands of her dark hair that had escaped the barrette, she unlocked and opened the door.

“See, what’d I tell you.” The young man named Steve marched in first. The rest of the group trooped in after him, six college kids still bent on celebrating. They were loud, possibly still drunk, and the small shop seemed to swell with them as if it were a balloon on the verge of bursting. Althea retreated to the corner behind the register, wondering at the wisdom of having let them in.

They swept through the aisles, calling out the names of the potions, laughing shrilly, their arms flailing the air for emphasis. Althea cringed each time a jar seemed in danger of toppling. She was about to insist they leave when one of the young men caught her attention. He was more subdued, perhaps more sober than his friends. He moved around the shop cautiously, pausing to look at the articles and photographs that were hanging on the walls. When the rest of the group tired of the shop and regrouped near Althea, he hung back.

“Nice little place you got here,” Steve said.

Althea nodded, unsure if he was teasing her or actually trying to be pleasant.

“Is the museum worth seeing?” he went on.

“That would depend on your interests.”

“What kind of things are in there?” asked a dimpled blonde standing at Steve’s side.

“Voodoo artifacts, photographs and materials about Marie Laveau, and there’s also the wailing courtyard.”

Steve fixed Althea with a grin. “Wailing courtyard, huh?”

Althea met his gaze. “Yes.”

“If we go in there, are we going to hear it wail?” someone else called out.

“I can’t give any guarantees, but some people claim to have heard it.”

“Have you?”

“Yes.” She didn’t add that Lettie believed the wailing was only the sound of the wind swooping between the buildings and into the little courtyard. From Althea’s viewpoint, belief was what you made of it. Had she been as pragmatic as Lettie, the decision would have been a lot easier.

“Why does it wail anyway?” asked the blonde.

Althea suppressed a sigh. There were times she enjoyed retelling the legend. But not at that moment and not to this group. They would mangle it, desecrate it with their laughter and sarcasm. “The soul of a young man is trapped in the courtyard,” she said reluctantly. “This museum was once the home of his fiancé. When she jilted him on their wedding day, he jumped out of a window into the courtyard, killing himself.” She glanced down at the register to avoid seeing the mockery in their eyes. “It was believed that someone who was jealous of the couple used voodoo to turn her heart against him.”

The blonde turned to Steve. “I bet you wouldn’t throw yourself out of a window over me,” she said petulantly.

“Well, maybe if it was on the first floor.” His words brought a round of guffaws. Even Althea found herself smiling.

The blonde wrinkled her sculpted nose. “So much for the gallantry and chivalry of the modern man.”

Steve turned back to Althea. “What’s it cost to go into the museum?”

“Ten dollars a head, but there’s enough of you for our small group rate of forty.”

He turned to his friends for a mandate. “We’re already here; I say, let’s go for it.” When no one dissented, he dug into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a bi-fold wallet. He handed Althea a credit card. She preferred cash, but these days credit cards were easier for customers who didn’t want to keep stopping at ATMs. She couldn’t blame them. She’d come to rely on the convenience of the plastic cards herself. After Steve signed the receipt, she asked him to sign the guest book on the counter, which he did with a grand flourish.

Forty-five minutes later, Althea locked the front door behind them. They’d gone through the entire museum in just a few minutes. But they’d lingered in the courtyard to hear the wailing, until a steady drizzle finally sent them on their way. Althea blessed the weather, in spite of the cold, gray pain it sent burrowing into her joints. She’d started to have anxious visions of Steve and his friends refusing to leave unless they heard the courtyard wail. They’d have food delivered and sleep on the cracked stone benches. She’d have to call the police....

Relieved it hadn’t come to that, she hurried across the wet courtyard to her ground floor apartment, chastising herself for letting her imagination get the better of her. What was wrong with her lately? She slid her key into the door lock, but there was no resistance, no click of the tumblers moving. She stood there for a long moment, frowning at the door. She always locked it before leaving to open the museum for the day; it was one of those things she did with such regularity that the act no longer registered on her consciousness. But lately she’d been so distracted by the decision looming over her that she couldn’t be sure she had locked it. Logic dictated that if there was even a chance someone had broken in, the smart thing to do was to call the police. But Althea was reluctant to make the call, reluctant to be seen as a middle-aged ninny jumping at her own shadow. Instead she took a deep breath, turned the knob and marched into the tiny foyer before she could talk herself out of it. No intruder grabbed her, no cold steel was pressed to her throat, no harsh voice warned her not to scream. The apartment was as quiet and peaceful in the evening twilight as it had been when she’d left in the morning. She shook her head at her own foolishness, a giggle bubbling up her throat.

The apartment was small, barely more than a studio. The short hallway led first to the kitchen on the right, then to the bathroom, also on the right, and finally to the multipurpose room she’d taken to calling her living space. There was a twin bed along one wall, which Althea could make up to look like a sofa with bolsters and throw pillows if she was expecting company. Although she owned the entire building, she’d been forced to rent out the upper rooms when the museum started floundering. The rates she asked were modest, and the people who came to live there could not afford to be frightened off by ghost stories. But even with the additional income, Althea was finding it harder and harder to manage.

She walked straight back to the living space, where she traded her low-heeled pumps for the worn slippers she'd left near her bed and padded back to the kitchen. Maybe a hot cup of tea would chase the chill from her bones. She flicked on the florescent light, thoroughly unprepared to find a young man sitting at the kitchen table. She was frozen in place for an instant, caught between the instinct to flee and the determination to stand her ground.

The man jumped to his feet. "I'm sorry," he said, holding up his empty hands as if to prove he meant her no harm. "I didn't mean to trespass or scare you or anything."

With the initial shock waning, Althea realized he was one of the college kids, the quiet one who'd stayed at the periphery of the group.

"I was just getting so cold standing out there in the courtyard," he went on, "and, well, I didn't think you'd mind if I came in here to wait. I must have dozed off, because I didn't hear you come in."

"I see," she said, still trying to work through her confusion.

"I guess my friends forgot to tell me they were leaving."

Althea wasn't at all surprised they'd forgotten him. He'd hardly seemed to be part of the group anyway. "Will you be able to find your way back to the hotel?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, moving toward the doorway. "And I really am sorry." Although he was tall and solidly built, there was a disarming vulnerability about his features and in the way he carried himself.

Althea noticed that he was shaking ever so slightly. "You *are* cold, aren't you?" she said. "I was just about to make tea. Why don't you join me for a cup before you leave?" When he started to protest, she said, "Please - it'll be nice to have the company." She picked up the chipped enamel kettle she kept on the stove and let water run into it without waiting for his reply.

"If it's no bother," he said, resuming his seat. "Hot tea would be nice." They introduced themselves while Althea set out cups, spoons and sugar.

"David," she repeated after hearing his name. It was a good strong name, but gentle on the tongue. It suited him. He smiled as if he knew what she was thinking. Althea poured the tea, trying to come up with something witty to say. Having grown up in a family of women, her father dead before she turned three, she'd never been comfortable in the company of men, never known quite how to talk to them. She suddenly regretted asking David to stay. What had she been thinking? The silence in the room was growing more awkward by the moment. But if it bothered him, he didn't show it.

She offered him milk or lemon, both of which he declined. Althea tried to remember what Lettie had told her about making conversation with a man. Questions, that was it. If she was at a loss for words, she should ask questions. "I've never met a man who didn't like to talk about himself," Lettie had said. So Althea started asking him questions. Where did he come from? What did he think of her city so far? What college did he attend? And what was he studying to be? David answered all of her inquiries politely, but without elaboration, and after a few minutes, Althea found that she'd run out of questions. While she ransacked her brain for another topic, David seemed content to sip his tea, holding the cup with both hands and clearly enjoying the warmth of it.

In the end, it was David who broke the silence and put Althea out of her misery. “So you own the museum?” he asked.

Surprised to be on the other end of a question, she swallowed her mouthful of tea too quickly, the liquid gurgling unpleasantly as it barreled down her throat. “Yes,” she sputtered, “yes, I own it. It’s been in my family for generations.”

“Have you ever thought about doing anything else with your life?”

She gave an abrupt, nervous laugh. “It’s funny you should ask, because I’ve been thinking about that a lot lately.” She didn’t intend to say more, but somehow the words kept spilling out of her mouth. “It happens I’ve received a very generous offer to buy the building. Years ago I would never have considered it, but now...,” her voice broke with sudden emotion. Needing a moment to collect herself, she got up and went to the stove. “Some more hot water?” she asked, her hand on the kettle.

“No thank you. Are you considering accepting the offer?”

Althea poured more water into her cup and set the kettle back on the stove. “Yes,” she said, sitting. “I’m afraid if I don’t sell now, I’ll be forced to eventually and maybe for a lot less money.” She picked up the tea bag on her saucer and dunked it back in the cup. “Even with the rent I collect it’s really getting to be a struggle.”

David nodded thoughtfully. “I’m curious - what would you do if you sold the place?”

A smile softened her angular features. There were a half dozen things she’d thought about, fantasized about. Some of them she wouldn’t feel comfortable telling him. Some she hadn’t even told Lettie. “I’d like to travel a bit,” she said finally. “I’ve never even been outside of this state. And I think I’d like to go back to college. Sort of start over again.”

“Sounds great. What’s holding you back?”

Althea’s smile drooped along with her shoulders. History was holding her back. Her mother, grandmother and a great grandmother she’d never known, as well as the lost soul stuck in her courtyard. “My mother is gone, but I know it would be a great disappointment to her if I sold the museum. “It’s been so much a part of our family.”

“Don’t you think she would understand that you had no choice?”

“I suppose she might.” Althea chewed on her lower lip, trying to decide how much more to say. Oh, what did it matter? She wasn’t likely to ever see David again anyway. “There’s also the matter of the young man,” she said, “the spirit I mentioned earlier who’s bound to this place.”

“Oh,” David said, the skin between his eyebrows furrowed.

“If he really does exist, what will happen to him when they tear down the building? They’re planning to put up an apartment house, but then where will he be? Trapped in a wall somewhere? I don’t know how these things work. I -” She stood up abruptly, bumping the table and causing the tea to slosh over the sides of her cup. Why had she said all that? It hadn’t brought her any closer to a decision, and now David probably thought she was nuts.

“Althea,” he said, “maybe you’re thinking about it all wrong. Maybe once the building is gone, he’ll be freed.”

She leaned back against the yellowed, old refrigerator, caught off balance by the novelty of his suggestion. It was a possibility that had never occurred to her. She turned it over and over in her

mind as if it were a gem she was examining for flaws. It made as much sense as any of her own theories. Perhaps more. She would sell the building, and they would both be free. The thought made her heart lurch with excitement.

David was looking at her, his head tilted to one side as if he was waiting for a response. "You might just have something there," she said.

He rose and carried his cup to the sink. "I'd better get going before my friends start worrying about me."

Althea had her doubts about that happening, but she kept the thought to herself. She walked him out, across the courtyard, through the museum and the shop where she unlocked the outer door for him. The rain had stopped, leaving puddles like mirrors to reflect the street lights.

"Thanks for the tea," David said. "And good luck with whatever you decide to do."

"Thank you for --" The ringing of the phone behind the counter startled her. She didn't get many calls, especially after hours. Probably just a solicitor. But what if it was Lettie? What if she was having a problem? They were each other's emergency contact.

"I should let you get that," David said when she didn't finish her sentence.

"Yes, I should see who it is," she said, already running to answer it before it went to voice mail. When she grabbed the phone off its base, she heard the disconnecting click. Whoever it was had changed their mind or run out of patience. Lettie would have waited and then left a message. Althea set the phone down, relieved nothing was wrong with her friend. She turned to see if David had lingered at the door, but he was gone.

Back in her apartment, she cleaned up the remains of their tea, then took a can of clam chowder out of the cupboard for dinner. But once the soup was heated, she found she had no appetite. A question had been nagging at her ever since she'd found David in her apartment and it finally pushed its way to the forefront of her mind. Was it just serendipity that she'd forgotten to lock the door the very day that David wanted to seek shelter there or...? Get a grip, she scolded herself, or you'll wind up following Alice down the rabbit hole. Then it occurred to her that there was an easy way to put the question to rest.

Leaving the soup on the table, she drew the sweater more closely around herself and ran back to the museum shop. The guest book was still open on the counter. Steve was the only one who had signed it, his name scrawled carelessly across three of the lines, along with his cell phone number. A simple call to him would answer the question of whether or not David was one of his friends. Althea picked up the phone behind the counter and punched in the number, but she hung up before the connection went through. She realized she didn't need to know. In fact she didn't want to know. Lettie would have made the call, tracked down the answer, tied up the loose ends. But she wasn't Lettie and she rather liked not knowing. If Steve had told her David was his friend, all the magic would go out of their encounter. Her big decision might weigh heavily upon her again. She closed the guest book, resolving not to even tell Lettie about David. He would remain her little secret. Satisfied, she turned off the lights and went back home to eat her dinner.

*For more information about Sharon Pape's writing, visit [www.sharonpape.com](http://www.sharonpape.com)*