

HAVING SAM FOR DINNER



A NOVEL BY
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Slaughter, Louisiana, wasn't the kind of town where people went to reinvent themselves. It wasn't even the kind of town where people stopped for a night on their way to somewhere else. It was a place that time had forgotten, nestled deep in the bayou, where life moved to its own unhurried rhythm. The smell of moss and water lingered in the air, mingling with the faint tang of woodsmoke and the sweet, cloying aroma of wild jasmine. The town's single street stretched along the water like a crooked backbone, lined with weathered buildings that seemed to lean into one another, sharing secrets in the heavy, humid air.

That was exactly why Sam Garrison had chosen it.

After the slow unraveling of his engagement and the quiet heartbreak that followed, Sam had packed up his life in Houston and driven south until the highways gave way to winding roads. Roads that twisted through dense thickets of cypress trees, their roots clawing into the muddy water like ancient fingers. He hadn't planned to stop in Slaughter. It was just where he happened to run out of gas, the sign for a vacant cottage pinned to the bulletin board outside the gas station feeling like a nudge from the universe.

The cottage wasn't much—a squat one-story structure perched precariously on stilts at the edge of the bayou—but it had a porch that faced the water and just enough charm to make him believe it could be home. The windows rattled when the wind blew, and





the floors creaked in protest whenever he walked across them, but the view from the porch made up for its shortcomings. He'd been in Slaughter for three months now, and though the transition from city life to bayou quiet hadn't been easy, it had been what he needed. Here, no one knew his name or the way his life had fallen apart. Here, the only sounds were the hum of cicadas and the rustling of the cypress trees.

It wasn't a perfect life—there was the occasional snake on the porch, a plumbing system that seemed to resent functioning properly, and a pervasive loneliness that crept in during the long still nights. But it was a life. A quiet, simple life. And for now, that was enough.

The late-afternoon sun hung low over the bayou, casting golden light across the water and setting the Spanish moss aglow like threads of spun gold. Sam parked his truck in front of Roux's Café, its tires crunching over gravel. The café sat at the end of the town's only main street, its faded blue exterior peeling in places but still charming in its weathered authenticity. A hand-painted sign in the window read Gumbo Today! in cheerful letters, the exclamation point slightly smudged.

The door creaked as he stepped inside, the blast of cool air from the ancient window unit hitting him like a gift from the heavens. The café smelled like a mixture of freshly brewed coffee, fried catfish, and something sweet—beignets, maybe.





The hum of conversation filled the room, punctuated by the occasional scrape of a chair or the clink of a spoon against a mug. She was sitting at the counter, her auburn hair catching the light that filtered through the café's large front window. It cascaded over her shoulders in loose waves, a single braid draped casually across one side. Her nose was buried in a well-worn book titled *Cajun Folktales and Myths*, the edges of its pages dog-eared and slightly yellowed.

Sam tried not to stare, but there was something about her that made it impossible to look away. Maybe it was the way her green eyes flicked up to meet his for a brief moment before returning to her book, or the way she seemed completely at ease, as though she belonged not just to the café but to the very fabric of the town itself.

The barista, a wiry man named Gus, handed Sam his coffee in a chipped enamel mug. Sam had come to know Gus well enough to exchange pleasantries, but today, Gus seemed content to let the silence stretch between them.

As Sam turned to leave, the girl at the counter shifted slightly, her fingers tracing the edges of her book. There was something in the way she moved—unhurried, deliberate—that made him pause. “You’re reading *Cajun Folktales and Myths*?” he asked, the words slipping out before he could think better of it.





She looked up, her expression a mixture of amusement and mild curiosity.

“I am,” she said, her voice carrying a lilting cadence that made even the simplest words sound melodic. “And you are?”

“Sam,” he said, offering a small smile. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt. It’s just not a book I see people reading often.”

“Well, Sam,” she said, closing the book with a soft thud. “That’s because you’re not from here, are you?”

The corners of Sam’s mouth twitched upward. “What gave me away?”

Her smile widened, and she gestured vaguely toward him. “The way you carry yourself. You’ve got city boy written all over you.”

“City boy?” he repeated, laughing. “You’ve got me there. I just moved here a few months ago.”

“To Slaughter?” she asked, raising a perfectly arched eyebrow.

“Believe it or not,” Sam replied, taking a sip of his coffee. “What about you? You seem pretty comfortable here.”

“That’s because I’ve lived here my whole life,” she said. “Well, most of it. I spent a few years in Baton Rouge, but the bayou always calls you back.”

As she spoke, Sam noticed the faint dusting of freckles across her nose and the way her eyes seemed to glimmer when she talked about the bayou. There was a warmth to her, a sense of belonging that made him feel like an outsider in the best possible way.

“What brought you to Slaughter?” Ellen asked, tilting her head slightly.





Sam hesitated, not wanting to unload his baggage on her. “Just needed a change of scenery,” he said simply.

“Well,” Ellen said, leaning in slightly, her tone playful. “You picked an interesting place for it.”

“Interesting how?” he asked, intrigued.

She smiled, her green eyes twinkling. “Let’s just say Slaughter has its quirks. Stick around, and you’ll see.”

When she invited him to the dock the next morning, Sam found himself agreeing without hesitation. There was something magnetic about her, something that made the prospect of venturing into the unknown seem less daunting.

That night, as he sat on his porch, the bayou stretched out before him like an endless dark mirror. The fireflies blinked lazily, their light reflecting off the water, and the air was thick with the scent of wet earth and the faint sweetness of blooming magnolias. The sounds of the bayou—croaking frogs, the rustle of unseen creatures in the reeds—wrapped around him like a living, breathing thing.

He thought about Ellen, her playful smirk and the way her voice softened when she spoke about the bayou. He thought about the dock, about what she might show him in the morning. For the first time in months, he felt a flicker of something he hadn’t allowed himself to feel: curiosity. And maybe, just maybe, a little hope.

