

ONE: CHRISTOPHE & CLAIRE GAUTIER

Deep in a haunting bayou of Louisiana, a strange plot of enchanting land exists. Beautiful, green grass covers a square plot of two acres. The Gautier family owned two hundred and twenty acres of the land that encompassed this unique piece of earth. Surrounded by massive swamps, the savageness of the area abounds in the folklore from earlier generations concerning this isolated place. Alligators roam as well as large lizards and snakes. Still, the square of land is lovely to behold. A magnetism exists here unlike any other land in Louisiana or the world. Christophe and Claire Gautier inherited it from Christophe's Cajun uncle, Louie. Claire felt hesitant even to consider building a home on such a raw piece of land, but her husband convinced her that it would make a gorgeous destination from their Paris mansion. Years went into planning a paradise for their future children. At least quarterly each year, they visited the site from their base in France. Each time, Claire developed a stronger bond.

Was it the land, the location, or the dream of a large white home with lacquered, dark green shuttered windows, and a giant, sparkling pool surrounded by flower and vegetable gardens which enticed her? Someday, two blonde and perfect children would ensure years of happiness in their euphoric paradise.

To the surprise of the couple, the land proved hardy and rich. Although surrounded by swamps, the land was black and appeared fertile. Christophe planted a trial garden. It consisted of tomatoes and brightly colored peppers. The fertility of the land surprised them. Not only did the seedlings grow rapidly, but they flourished. Locals commented that they had never witnessed such healthy and vibrant plants.

All of this persuaded the hesitant wife to build here, in this strange place. So, on a bright summer morning in June, the heavy equipment arrived with plans to build a ten-thousand square foot home of exquisite luxury. It would accompany a large pool as well as extensive flower and vegetable gardens. One side

bordered a pristine lake of the bluest waters. Gentle winds seemed to blow consistently around this paradise.

The French couple's extended family was also excited. Everyone looked forward to spending glorious summers in the United States with this beloved duo. That was everyone except Aunt Michelle.

Uncle Louie's descendent, Michele, was ninety-seven years old. She was named for Louie's wife, Michelle Gautier, who lived during the earliest years of Louisiana history. During those early years, Louie's wife threatened to burn the Deed of Ownership to this awful land. The deed disappeared. The widow Gautier thought that it was lost. That was good news! Michele knew the power of the innocent-looking place.

Horrible repercussions existed whenever someone fell in love with *L'Euphorie*. The name was given many years earlier to this place of chaos, terror, and Cajun nightmares. Now, sadly Michelle flicked a tear from her wrinkled face. "Please, not Claire and Christophe. What have they done?"

Christophe Gautier, born into a family of wealth and prestige in Paris, was showered with love from parents driven and stern. When he was born, they changed their earlier thoughts on rearing the only son born into the Gautier family in over twenty-five years. Instead of harshness, the couple doted. His every wish was their command.

A nanny gladly arrived at the elaborate home in Paris. Highly educated, she would tutor this exceptional child. Thrilled that they chose her over hundreds of applicants, she loved the boy. As he grew, she became enthralled with him. Eventually, her motherly love changed into an intense desire for him. She lusted for the teenager. Soon, Madeline received payment from the boy's father, LaMar, to sleep with his only son. He was only fourteen years old.

Christophe believed this was normal. Always, he was given anything that he wanted. No person, place, or thing was off limits to him. Why had it taken so long for Madeline to give into his advances?

Such an event could have damaged the young boy, but it did not seem to cause serious repercussions. Christophe went to college with normal desires and expectations. He maintained a healthy love and admiration for women all of his life. Never did he harbor misogynist thoughts.

Not only did he possess unusual good looks, with his dark Cajun features, but academically he was at the top of his class. Obviously, he was gifted and talented. No woman was off limits to him. That is until he met Claire.

One summer day, just before summer vacation, the most beautiful woman walked past him on the college campus in Paris which they shared. Claire was tall and thin. Her long blond-white hair fell around her slim shoulders. Large eyes of the bluest azure looked at him. He melted. Never had desire overcome him to this extent. Claire appeared unnerved. Not remotely interested in him, she did not even smile as she strolled slowly past with her best friend, Adriana.

Claire desired to become a *pédiatre*. Nothing would stand in her way of becoming a doctor of children, she swore.

Christophe tried everything to gain her attention, but it was all in vain. Eventually, he called on his father's help. Claire's family was prosperous but not in the Gautier family's league. LaMar called her *Père*. The two fathers scheduled lunch at Gautier's club for the young people. Soon afterward, Claire agreed to attend a party with the handsome son. The rest was history.

Their attraction was strong. Immediately after graduation, they married. Young Claire never realized that such a life waited for her. Each day, flowers filled the ten room apartment which she and Christophe shared in Paris.

Papa Gautier welcomed the couple back from Belize, where they celebrated a month-long honeymoon, to a grand 6,500 square foot home. Nestled in the 18th Arrondissement, they enjoyed a view of the Eiffel Tower each day from the balcony which surrounded them. French-white walls reflected the softest hint of

blue. Eighteen-foot ceilings soared with a faint cobalt glow. Although the structure dated back to 1929, recent renovations tastefully demonstrated the latest in technology as well as gorgeous accessories.

The first day back, Claire could hardly wait for her new husband to leave for the office he shared with his father. Like a young child, she ran from room to room touching and spinning until she was dizzy. The excitement pulsed through her young body making it impossible to contain.

“Mama, you must come to our home. It is *magnifique!*”

Of course, Mama came at once. The two women were inseparable. Daily exercise at the Ritz-Carlton followed by two-hour lunches was the rule, not the exception. Claire also surrounded herself with young women who were captivated not just by her intellect but her vast wealth. Dreams of a selfless life of medicine quickly were forgotten. Life was too much fun to add misery and misfortune to the equation. She

dreamed of a little white haired boy and girl with azure eyes.

Christophe thrived under his Papa's tutelage. The making of money came effortlessly for him as it had for his ancestors. He adored his new wife and home. Life could not be more idyllic. Years trickled past. Only happiness graced the young family. Their joy shrouded them in love. The land waited silently for the arrival of the future owners of the most beautiful antebellum home in the New Orleans area. Deep in the transition zone of the earth, something trembled.