

In His Arms in the Attic

By Alexis Brooks de Vita

The first surprise was that the two hundred-year-old townhouse was still intact in the heart of the French Quarter, even after Hurricanes Katrina and Ike, and the rebuilding of New Orleans into an adult fantasy of itself.

Ave Marie de la Croix pulled her antique 914 black Porsche over to the curb that dipped between the narrow-bricked sidewalk and the cobblestoned street. She shoved open the driver's rusted door and unfolded long, lean, jean-clad legs to slide out and confront her childhood holiday playground.

Then Ave had her second surprise.

She thought she heard a voice, hushed and urgent, call her name: "Ah-vay!" She jerked her head up toward the townhouse's second floor. And something slipped like a razor-edged knife between the wrought-iron balcony and the glass panes of the French doors.

A bird as it flew overhead? A squatter scuttling back into hiding?

Ave waited. Watched, barely breathing.

But no bulky darkness shifted behind the dusty glass. No hesitant hand pushed aside tattered lace to peer down at her upturned face. Nothing moved again.

Ave muttered, "Jumping at shadows."

She threw a cautious look back over her shoulder. No frustrated residents were out running errands, and no lost revelers wandered in search of bars or breast-baring college girls. Even with Mardi Gras night fast descending, this little side street remained empty and still.

Her neighbours had probably all fled the seasonal festivities for suburban relatives' homes. Ave would be alone in the townhouse tonight.

She squared her shoulders. Tossed back her head and yanked out the hair-tie that held together a lopsided bun at the nape of her neck. Braids and dreadlocks cascaded down to her narrow waist.

She had not driven all this way from San Francisco just to play the scared, little, big-eyed girl again. She was all grown up now.

And ready to believe in ghosts. On the theory that, once you believed, there was nothing left to fear.

Ave kicked shut the sports car's door and strode across the cobbles and bricks. She jangled through the ring of rusted keys she'd retrieved from a Bay Area safe deposit box until she found one with curled masking tape, faintly labeled: "Front Door."

She worked it into the lock. Grabbed the scratchy latch. Twisted and shoved.

Hesitation seized her with the panic of a virgin who has changed her mind just seconds too late. *No!*

And then came the rush of rotted air and the sweeping view through darkness to abandoned things huddled under stained sheets that always meant coming home.

Only, this had never been her home. Ave had never been more than a holiday visitor here, puzzled by the grandmother and aunts she loved so much.

Ave lifted a booted foot across the threshold. Eased her body behind it like a dancer poised at the edge of the stage.

Surely, someone was here. She could feel someone. "Sheridan?" Ave called. She couldn't resist the hope.

But nothing stirred.

Ave pulled herself together with a little mental slap. Of course that was not the way to invoke a spirit.

Ave flung out a hand and patted the wall to her right in search of a light switch. Felt an old-fashioned knob at the end of a long, wire-covering tube. Turned it.

No lights flickered on. The electric company hadn't come through.

I should have brought a flashlight from the car, Ave scolded herself. But she suspected that if she went back to the Porsche now, she would leap into it and drive straight to Canal Street to search for a hotel room. *Mardi Gras Night, there won't be one.* So, she'd end up fleeing the Crescent City all the way back to the Golden Gate Bridge.

"And what will you do there?" Ave challenged herself out loud, just to hear a voice. "Jump off of it into the Bay?"

If she hadn't jumped or overdosed during her zombie-state in the blighted seasons following Sheridan's death, there was no point doing it now. *Just see this through,* Ave urged herself.

Maybe he will come. Perhaps he is already here.

Watching her. Counting on her to bring them together again.

Ave crossed the dust-coated hardwood floor to the closest lump of furniture hidden under dust covers. Grabbed a handful of cloth and yanked.

And screamed as a spiky clump hurtled across the toe of her boot, squeaking and trailing a bald tail an inch above the floor.

Ave was back on the street and had already grabbed open the Porsche's resistant door before she got hold of herself. "Just a rat," she panted and, "What did you expect?" she chided herself. "No one's been in that house since the honeymoon."

And with the accidental resurrection of that blessed, fairytale memory, she bent her face into her grimy hands and let belated tears of loss and despair gush free.

It felt good to cry. She sank against the Porsche's side, her curved back pressed against Sheridan's gaudily stenciled "914", and sobbed.

Flashes of memory: Sheridan openmouthed like a child as they cruised the French Quarter's narrow streets. Sheridan emerging from his gleaming Porsche, laughing and shaking his head with disbelief at the sight of her inheritance, this dilapidated mansion.

Sheridan coaxing her up the curved stairs, a candelabra in one hand and her wrist in the other. "Come on, babygirl. Aren't you even curious to see if the old stories are true?"

They had been married in San Francisco on a long-ago Valentine's Day before they rushed their honeymoon Gulf-ward. Sheridan so wanted to celebrate his first Mardi Gras in New Orleans: to revel in the streets and stack his neck with gaudy beads flung from masqueraders floating by in the night air.

Wanted to get into the townhouse attic by midnight and see if the ghostly Mardi Gras ball was only a spinsters' story told to a gullible Creole child. As if, in this sunken city where history and myth trembled at the edge of the encroaching sea – holding back the final devastation – magic still lived.

The two newlyweds never made it into the attic. Ave thundered down the steps and out onto the street, cursing Sheridan's insensitivity every step of the way.

He'd come after her. When he caught up with her among the revelers groping her rear end and waving strings of bright beads to tempt her to share her body, she slapped him. "That's my childhood you're making fun

of, Sheridan! It's not funny. And I don't want to see whatever comes into the attic at midnight!"

Sheridan had laughed off his shock, kissed her, and swept her up into his arms to carry her back to the townhouse. Watching all this, the revelers cheered.

They'd spent the night out on the balcony. It was his idea. They'd told each other favourite childhood memories, and made love in a sleeping bag against a backdrop of fanning fireworks and the drunken laughter of merrymakers.

"Oh, Sheridan." Now, as the sobs eased, Ave dabbed at the muddy paste her tears made as they mingled with the dirt she'd gotten on her hands when she pulled off the first dust cover. "Tonight I'll make it into that attic for you, my love. Be there for me, too, Sheridan." She pulled herself to her feet.

Ave looked toward the wide-open townhouse door. The ring of keys glinted in the dark parlour where she'd dropped them when she'd fled.

No way could she go back in there now. But she'd go get some candles, see if she couldn't put in a call to the electric company, and maybe the gas and water people, while she was at it. Go do some groceries, as the locals called shopping, maybe find a few of Sheridan's favourites. Then she'd be back.

When Ave returned, she drove the Porsche through the narrow alleyway behind the townhouse to its carport. The walk through the alleyway around to the front door, lugging four bags of food and cleaning supplies with a flashlight, normalized her re-entry. The flashlight's beam swept ahead of Ave and sent vermin skittering out of sight to the edges of the dark parlour.

"Uh," she groaned. She'd be anxious to get into the attic by midnight and, if no one was there, get out of here.

Could she bear to think that no one would be there?

That Sheridan was gone? *Grief does things to your mind.* How many times had Ave heard this from her university's counselor, her aunts and girlfriends, in the blisteringly lonely months since Sheridan's death?

"I just have to try," she said aloud, a habit these days. "Sheridan believed in ghosts." Which led to that unspeakable hope: *Maybe his belief can bring him back.*

It was worth a try. What did Ave have to lose? *Sheridan will try to come back to me. If anywhere, here. He will know I need him. He will know I stayed alive just to come here for him.*

She would go into his arms once more. This thin thread had tied her to life. Because the worst thing about death was that it came without giving fair warning, one last chance to fill up your soul with enough love to last as long as you had to keep going.

A winter ago, Ave had prepared a lecture on war-and-water literature for her university students as she tossed together a soup and salad for Sheridan, on his way home from a Deans' meeting. But Sheridan flung aside his trenchcoat and briefcase to gather in his arms a rape/murder victim in an alleyway and was shot along with the fleeing culprit by the arriving police officers.

Struggling to hold onto life at the hospital, he'd weakened so alarmingly before she even got there that just kissing his cracked lips seemed a cruel imposition. As she waited and watched the emergency team work on him, Ave never doubted for a moment that he would revive.

But the doctor pulled up the sheet to cover Sheridan's face. He looked up as Ave started to scream and shouted for help, tugging her out past the curtains of the emergency room.

She fought all the way, shrieking Sheridan's name. But he was gone. And her first coherent thought, struggling up out of layers of shock and sedatives, had been that they would never make love again.

Not easy to say to her aunts when they came to her loft apartment with plates of steaming greens, spicy cornbread, and savory dirty rice. "Eat, Ave Marie. You're not in the grave yet, no matter how badly you wish to be." Not easy to explain to friends who asked her to a party, a club, a blind dinner date. "Maybe it's time for you to meet someone new, girl."

I'm not through with Sheridan. I have to hear his voice. Tell him I love him. Feel his arms around me again. If another man touches me, I'll kill him. I'll die. I need to make love with Sheridan. Maybe then she could finally say goodbye.

Sheridan would have understood exactly how she felt. And if he came to the Mardi Gras ghostly ball

By now, Ave had snatched off dust covers all the way from the front door through the dining hallway and up to the kitchen. They littered the floor behind her, waiting to be gathered up and dumped into a washing machine.

And there was just such a machine where she remembered it in the corner of the kitchen: frontload, European-style.

Ave deposited her load of candles and cleaning utensils and a handy camping lantern on the kitchen worktable, and went back for the dust covers. She jammed them into the washing machine and took a deep breath before she snatched open the broom closet.

Shushed sounds of brittle things scuttling out of her way.

Ave stood her ground. She shone her light bravely around inside the cramped storage space, driving hideous creatures before her, back into the darkness. Only brooms and a dustpan, a bucket, and a collection of string and sponge mops remained.

The water and gas companies had done better than the electric people. Soon, Ave had mopped a disinfectant trail throughout the downstairs rooms that was guaranteed to send vermin staggering back into the city's sewage system.

Nothing scampered at the edges of the darkness now, she thought with satisfaction as she dumped the muck into the gutter outside. She really should finally close the front door when she went back into the pine-scented townhouse. Close herself in with her ghost.

The latch clicked loudly in the silence.

Seemed to echo far away, upstairs.

Ave's heart stutter-skipped. Could an echo carry that far in here? All the way up to the attic? "Hello?" she called, after the sound ricocheted off the dark cathedral ceiling.

No answer. No more sound.

She should go back outside to the Porsche 914. One of its two trunks held Sheridan's battery-operated sound system and his favourite CDs. She should play Sheridan's music so she wouldn't have to listen to sounds she couldn't explain while she prepared to see him again.

Ave left her cleaning bucket to wedge open the heavy front door, even after she returned and set up Sheridan's music system.

Blues would be good for the invocation. Soon, Bobby Blue Bland crooned, "I'll take care of you. Please let me take care of you."

Now for a romantic dinner.

Ave retrieved a candelabrum from the mantelpiece in the parlour and carried it to the dining hall. Had she and Sheridan eaten at this very dining table before they went in search of the ghostly ball? Was this the same candelabrum Sheridan had carried upstairs? Ave couldn't be sure.

That one honeymoon night they had spent at the townhouse was hazy, entangled as it was in her mind with so much fear and desire.

Ave fitted new white candles into the holders and debated lighting them this early. Decided against it.

She went, instead, to the kitchen, and washed and dried a collection of fragile plates from the china cabinet. She set out a circle of brie, a baguette of fresh bread, some buttery mascarpone cheese, and clusters of willow-green and violet-black grapes. She covered all these under upturned serving bowls on the dining table, in case the vermin crept back in while she was away, up in the attic.

Last, she set out the very same Hungarian cut crystal goblets that they had toasted their love with out on the balcony. "To us," Sheridan had said.

But she placed a bottle of clear water on the table tonight. Ave had not dared drink anything stronger than coffee since Sheridan's death. Depression always threatened.

"There." Ave stood back from the table, hands on hips, to survey her spread. Perfect.

And a black line as thin as a hair caught in the viewer's eye moved just out of Ave's line of vision.

At first she thought it was a hair. She wasted precious seconds fluttering an eyelid and tugging at her eyelashes.

Wait. No pain.

There was nothing in her eye.

Ave jerked toward the doorway between the dining hall and kitchen. Something slipped away just ahead, as she turned.

"Sheridan?"

The slamming in Ave's heart took forever to calm. She had to reason with herself that Sheridan wouldn't come to her like this, slithering around at the edges of things. This was her imagination. She had always been frightened by the attic as Mardi Gras midnight drew near.

And a memory surfaced like a swimmer breaking through ice to gasp for air.

Ave's grandmother, bathed and scented with lavender, wisteria, and mimosa oils from the local *Voudun* shops, draped in delicate white lace, her fine golden fingers sparkling with her wedding ring's diamonds and sapphires as they ran along the keys of the baby grand piano, while she waited for that blackest hour.

The candelabrum's flames flickered roseate spatters against the darkness all around and drew a courageous little Ave down the curved stairway to sit at her grandmother's side. "Why are you still up, Grandmamá Marie? Why are you so dressed up?"

Ave had looked up into her grandmother's face. The fullness of her grandmother's youth had been carved by passing decades into contours of tenderness and grace lovelier than any of her young wedding photos.

"I want to be with him again, little one."

"Be with who, Grandmamá Marie?"

Grandmamá Marie had raised her beautiful face to gaze up the pitch-black stairway toward the attic.

Ave turned there now as Bobby Blue Bland's song died away. In the sudden hush, a footstep sounded high away at the top of the stairs.

And brought a memory of Ave's aunts struggling to restrain the one of them who fought in their arms to go up the stairs at Mardi Gras midnight, dressed in red satin, her hair straightened into undulating waves of perfumed blackness.

"No!" Ave screamed before she collected herself.

The footsteps stopped. Or had never sounded. Ave couldn't be sure. She breathed deeply. Swallowed the sudden panic.

Grandmamá Marie's bath. Of course. A scented hot bath would ease Ave's mind and put her in the mood for a possible encounter with Sheridan. And wasn't she in luck? Water and gas were both turned back on.

It was harder to mop the upstairs bathroom floor and scrub the tub in what was now the pitch darkness of nighttime. Ave was very aware that the front door downstairs was still open to the street, to wanderers, revelers and burglars. But she wasn't yet able to bring herself to close it again. She kept remembering the sound of that distant latch closing way upstairs in the attic.

Ave kept her cell phone off to save its power, but placed it carefully on the bathroom floor between the bathtub and the lit candelabrum, in case she needed to call for help. Then she stepped into the old claw-footed tub.

The warmth eased her legs and back. She moaned with pleasure and relief.

And came awake, thinking it was silly to be afraid to close the front door. Rats and roaches were nowhere near as dangerous as rapists, thieves and drunks. She would go close that door right now and then come back and finish her bath.

Ave clutched the edges of the tub and rose. Water sluiced down her sinewy *café-au-lait* thighs. Sheridan used to kiss her thighs like sipping coffee, the cream of the sunless season whipped deep into her skin's end-of-summer mocha.

Dizzied by sleep and reverie, Ave stepped onto the newly cleaned floor and gathered up the sheet she had taken for a towel during her foray into a linen closet. She rubbed briskly, wrapped the sheet over damp skin and tucked the end between her breasts.

Paused. Listened. Called sharply, "Who was that?"

Someone had just whispered her name. Ave was sure of it this time. She leaned forward and shoved the bathroom door closed. Latched the flimsy hook.

She fumbled for her cell phone. Snatched it up and powered it on with shaking hands. Waited an eternity for it to beep into life so she could call 911.

And then thought, *A burglar wouldn't know my name. That has to be Sheridan.*

"Sheridan? Sheridan, is that you, honey?"

Ave shut the phone just as she glimpsed the time. Nearly midnight. Already? *Finally.*

She slid the cell phone back to the floor and reached for the candelabrum, instead. *How long did I sleep in the tub?*

Went to the bathroom door and leaned her cheek against it, listening. Nothing moved. No one spoke again.

"Sheridan?"

Ave gathered up her nerve. She had survived nine months when she would rather have been dead. She had driven halfway across the continent to meet with Sheridan one last time. She must not falter now, hiding from him in the bathroom, cowering in fear of the unknown.

Ave forced her free hand up to the latch. Flipped the hook free. Lowered her hand to the knob.

Twisted it open. Pulled the door wide.

She raised her candelabrum and peered into the darkness.

"Sheridan?"

How she hated the pleading in her voice! She tried again, more forcefully this time. "Sheridan, I'm here. It's Ave."

Ave stepped out into the hallway and looked up toward the closed square of the attic door, still half a flight of stairs higher.

He would be in the attic.

Ave had not meant it to be like this. She had meant to be bathed, perfumed, dressed in his favorite colours, with her hair cascading from a pretty clip atop her head.

But what if he was up there already, waiting for her? How alone he must feel, suspended between the world of the dead and the world where they had shared their lives together!

Ave closed her eyes and thought of the warmth within Sheridan's arms. The hard strength when he pressed her against his chest and abdomen. Their passion.

She opened her eyes and forced herself to move up the last curve of the stairway. Of course it was Sheridan up there in the attic, waiting for her. What on earth else could it be?

Another flash of memory. One aunt's sharp hand across the cheek of the aunt who struggled and wept.

"You don't even know what's up there."

"But Mamá always went up there every Mardi Gras."

"And you don't know what she went up there to meet."

"Papá. Daddy was up there for her."

"You don't know that. She never said it was Papá."

"But who else could it be?" the aunt in red satin had asked desperately, just as they all heard the tinny thin music of the ghostly ball begin.

Ave paused beneath the attic door cut into the third floor ceiling. What had the aunt in red satin done, in the end?

But what did all that matter? What else besides the spirit of the man a woman loved could possibly be in that attic?

Had her grandmother ever explained? To any of them? *No*. She was sure Grandmamá Marie had never said anything beyond, "I want to be with him again."

But Ave hadn't been there to hear the last words when her grandmother died. Couldn't even remember her grandmother's waning years. Couldn't begin to guess at the "he" that Grandmamá Marie meant.

In fact, it seemed to Ave that she could remember nothing worthwhile, figure out nothing, just now when she needed so badly to remember and figure out everything.

And finally, for the first time ever, she wondered if the culprit whose crime cost Sheridan his life had survived that double shooting. How ironic, if he had. How cruel of fate.

In a flash, un-tethered memory – a hissed warning to the aunt who struggled : “Carnival is the night when spirit becomes flesh, you fool. *Anything* could be up there.”

This had stopped the aunt in red. And now it stopped Ave.

She faltered. Struggled with indecision.

Became impatient with herself. Really, what did all these memories matter? *Surely, nothing at all!* She knew with all the power of her love and devotion that Sheridan would come back for her, no matter what, just as she had held on, survived the pain, and come all this way just to be with him.

And anyway, if something else was in the attic when Sheridan came for her, he would protect her from it.

Of course Sheridan would protect her.

By now, Ave had arrived beneath the attic door. Bolstered by the thought of Sheridan’s protection, she reached for the rope that would open the door and drop down its collapsible ladder.

They would be together again.

Only as she gripped the rope did Ave wonder if Sheridan might not yet have arrived in the attic. Who or what else might know her name?

Her hand on the rope lay still.

Ave thought of the limbo of nothingness Sheridan had to have come across to return to her. She shivered, damp from her bath in the humid chill.

And maybe just a little frightened?

Ave realized she was waiting for Sheridan to call her name again. This close, she would recognize his voice. Or know if it was something else that called her.

But nothing called.

The cell phone was back in the bathroom. Maybe she should go get it and call her aunts in San Francisco, to ask if one of them had ever made it into the attic at Mardi Gras midnight. Maybe they would tell her what waited there, once they discovered it was too late to stop her from coming to the townhouse.

Ave let go of the rope.

And the music of the ghostly ball started.

So faintly at first that she wasn’t sure she heard anything, only that pleasure and sweetness had stolen into her mind and eased away her

worry, the music seeped through gaps between the attic door and the ceiling just above her head, and swelled into fullness as she listened.

“How lovely.” Ave could not recognize a tune. Only the tinkling harmony of archaic instruments. A mandolin? A harpsichord? Bells?

The ghostly ball had begun! Was Sheridan just a few feet above her, even as she hesitated? Would she soon be in his arms in the attic?

Excited now, Ave reached for the rope, pulled it, and opened the attic door.

Blackness and melody surged down the descending doorway and engulfed her. The flames of the candelabrum guttered out as the music drew Ave up the ladder.

Topping the last rung, Ave climbed forward onto the attic floor, into the blindness.

Far below, she heard the front door slam.

Ave swung the useless candelabrum around. “Sheridan?” The attic door creaked shut behind her bare feet. “Sheridan, it’s Ave.” Her voice shook. “We can be together again.”

Silence.

Why would Sheridan frighten her so? She would ask him as soon as she could unclamp her throat and speak again.

And then, so faintly she wasn’t sure at first that she felt it, a touch on her ankle.

Lighter than a wisp of dust. Weightless as a gossamer insect’s wing floating upward on a draft, a trickle of feeling drifted against gravity along her leg.

She wasn’t sure she felt anything until it spread behind both knees and clambered up to seize the insides of her thighs.

She screamed and hurtled the candelabrum. Heard it crash as she tried to backpedal toward the ladder, out of the attic.

Found she couldn’t move.

What had happened to the music? When had it stopped?

And what was this that roiled just in front of her? Darkness boiled thicker than the darkness it drew from.

She whimpered, mute with terror and hope. And sudden, deep, humiliated pleasure. Her trapped legs spasmed.

“Ssshhh.” Oddly, the sibilant shush quieted her as the pitch mass surged against her trembling, welcoming limbs.

It eased her to the floor, pierced her body with white-hot chill and splintered her mind with light. Pleasure fled before awe. She succumbed in amazement, unsure that this thing that embraced her could ever have been Sheridan, gathering ethereal fragments of himself to swarm back to her from his oblivion.



Alexis Brooks de Vita has published literary theory in *Mythatypes*, an historical murder mystery titled *The 1855 Murder Case of Missouri versus Celia*, a translation of Dante's *Comedy*, beginning with *Dante's Inferno: A Wanderer in Hell*, and has contracted with Double Dragon/Blood Moon to publish a series of Atlantic Slave Trade dark fantasy titles, beginning with *The Books of Joy: Burning Streams* and *Blood of Angels*. She can be found at: alexisbrooksdevita.com.

