

CHAPTER NINE

It's only 100 or so miles from New Orleans to Grand Isle but it takes a good two and half hours to get there as Highway One meanders its way through small towns and way stations set amid the desolate delta wetlands. There's a stark beauty to the landscape in this part of the world and driving through it is a distinctly solitary experience. There were occasional automobiles, but otherwise it was just Liesel, Hugo and me looking out over a vast network of sinuous waterways carving their way through swaying oyster grass. Seabirds dot the horizon and aquatic life teems unseen below the water. To think it's all disappearing at a rate of something like 30 square miles a year is almost more than the human brain can fathom.

I'd been to Grand Isle once before, years ago when Sallie dragged me down there for a day trip because she'd just finished reading Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, some of which is set on the island. She wanted to see how it matched her imagination. I got the feeling she was kind of disappointed, although she didn't say that. Like Grand Terre, Grand Isle is a thin barrier island at the mouth of Barataria Bay, but about three times as long. The two islands are separated by a short straight called Barataria Pass that is maybe a half mile wide. Unlike Grand Terre, Grand Isle is inhabited and can be reached by car via a toll bridge that connects it to the mainland. There are a thousand or so residents, fishing folk mostly, who seemingly must evacuate and rebuild every other year, or whenever the next hurricane hits.

I wasn't sure what to expect with this Prosper Fortune character and realized the entire trip might prove a waste of time. Still, I figured there was at least a decent chance he might have information useful to our investigation, and besides, I wanted to find out if Prosper was his birth name or a conceit he adopted to accentuate his treasure seeking avocation.

Chris remembered that Prosper lived “in the woods” on the north side of the island, facing the bay. He suggested I ask one of the locals for more specific directions. “Everyone knows Prosper,” he told me.

Upon arriving, I decided to orient myself by driving the three miles or so to the state park on the island’s eastern extremity. Along the way uninterrupted beachfront lay to our right, facing the gulf, and to our left were retail establishments, houses, RV camps and uninhabited marsh. Nowhere did I see anything resembling Chris’ woods.

Before turning around to ask for directions at a gas station and convenience store we’d passed a mile or so back, I continued on into the park and pulled into the lot by the long fishing pier that juts into the gulf. I put Hugo on his leash and together we walked out to the end of the pier. I could just make out what looked like a squall beginning to form a few miles out and tried to envision one of Lafitte’s schooners racing back to beat the storm. To the east I could see the ruins of Fort Livingston on the western end of Grand Terre. Named after none other than Edward Livingston, the fort was built for coastal defense in the 1850’s, but was never fully completed, though it was occupied for a brief time by Confederate forces. Looking back across the island toward Barataria Bay, the elevated view offered by the pier presented a sweeping panorama of land and sea engaged in their perpetual struggle for supremacy. The pirates must have been acutely aware of this push and pull, as the changing wind and tides continuously altered available routes inland.

Eventually, Hugo and I made our way back to the car and the gas station we had passed. I filled up for the return trip and went inside to pay. The burly cashier with a ZZ Top beard gave me a long look when I asked him if he knew where Prosper lived.

“Prosper know you?” he finally asked.

“No,” I admitted. “I’m doing some research on Jean Lafitte, and I’ve been told Prosper might be able to answer some questions I have.”

“Uh huh, the usual,” he said.

“A lot of folks come looking for Prosper with Lafitte questions?”

“I wouldn’t say a lot, but if somebody’s looking for him, that’s usually the reason. Either that or it’s social services checking up on him.”

I introduced myself. The man told me his name was Joe.

“What’s he like, Prosper?” I asked.

“Let’s just say Prosper is a few cards short of a deck and leave it at that,” Joe said.

“But he is an expert on Lafitte, right?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Joe shrugged. “Some folks seem to think so. Never put much stock in it myself.”

“Is he friendly?” I asked.

“Depends on the day. Sometimes he’s friendly enough and sometimes he doesn’t talk at all.”

“I guess I’ll take my chances now that I’ve driven all the way down here,” I said.

“Suit yourself,” Joe shrugged. Then he drew me an admirably detailed map with directions to Prosper’s place.

“He might not be there, just so you know,” he said, handing me the map. “He wanders around a lot with his metal detector, and he’ll spend the day on Grand Terre whenever he can get one of the fishing boats to drop him off and pick him back up later in the day.”

“What’s he do over there, hunt for Lafitte’s treasure?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Joe said, “although you’re never really sure with Prosper.”

Joe’s map took us back toward the state park but had me hang a left after a half mile or so. We stayed on that paved lane almost all the way to the bay, passing houses on our left and looking out at marsh to our right. As the lane neared its end, I veered off on a dirt road that took us across the marsh, and then I turned right again on another dirt road, heading back south toward the gulf. And there, sure enough, after a couple hundred yards, stood an acre or so of trees and shrubs, surrounded by marsh.

Pulling up beside these woods, I could clearly see the footpath that Joe said would lead to Prosper’s home. A No Trespassing sign was posted on a gum tree at the path’s entrance and an animal skull that I guessed was a deer rested at the base of the tree. It had been my intention to take Hugo with me, but now I was conflicted. If I did take him, he might not be welcome. But it was too hot to leave him in the car, unless I left the keys in the ignition and the AC running, which didn’t seem like a good idea either. Finally, I let Hugo out and put his leash on, and we walked side by side into the small, forested copse, like two intrepid explorers entering a forbidding jungle.

We hadn’t gone 20 yards when a fusty odor began to perfume the air. It was the rotten egg smell of decaying plant life you’d expect in a salt marsh, but with a feral muskiness mixed in. The stink got stronger as we walked on and then the attack happened before either of us could

process what was happening. A gray blur in my peripheral vision, a wild demonic scream, a cyclone of fur and saliva at my feet. Hugo screeched in terror and pain. Reflexively, I kicked at the shapeless mass as sharp claws ripped my torso and left a searing pain on my cheek. Just as quickly the beast was off me and Hugo had it by the hind leg and wouldn't let go as it thrashed this way and that, spinning around to slash at Hugo again.

A deep voice thundered close by, "No, Caliban! No!" Heavy footsteps rushed in, and a huge, gloved hand took the creature by the neck and pried its foot from Hugo's jaws. I got my first fleeting look at the animal, which was vaguely feline but larger than a house cat, with long shaggy hair and claws to match. A colossal human shape strode into the woods and tossed the struggling beast a good 10 feet into the brush. Hugo lay prone at my feet, panting and whimpering, his right ear dangling at the side of his head, above a deep gash on his shoulder. As I bent down to inspect and comfort him, I realized my pants and shirt were torn, I had a long scratch on my chest, and drops of blood were falling from my cheek.

"Follow me," the man said, walking past us. "We better get you two cleaned up."

Robotically, I scooped Hugo up and followed the giant, both of us trembling from the shock of the event. Hugo was breathing but otherwise limp, and his foggy eyes were only half open. In that moment it occurred to me that I could lose him, and I began to seethe with fury.

"That your cat?" I shouted accusingly, trailing the behemoth I assumed was Prosper Fortune by about 15 feet. I still hadn't seen his face. All that was visible was stringy gray shoulder length hair under a shabby Greek fisherman's cap and a frame big enough to play offensive line for the Saints. He wore filthy denim overalls over a sweaty blue t-shirt and walked with a limp.

“He comes around from time to time,” he said curtly, without turning around.

“You called him by name,” I said. “You train him to attack visitors?”

“Trespassers. Can you not read?”

I offered no response, stifling my anger and following at a distance as the big man walked on. We had come into a small clearing with a fire pit, a picnic table and a couple of crude benches. Set behind them was a tin-roofed plywood shack that resembled the fishing camps you see in the bayous, set up on stilts, with steps leading to a porch. The man climbed the steps with an exaggerated limp and motioned for me to follow as he disappeared inside without bothering to hold the screen door.

The pong of sweat, mildew and kerosene was overwhelming, as Hugo and I entered the dark one-room cabin. Our host was pouring bottled water into a small pot he'd set on a Coleman stove and motioned for me to sit on one of the two chairs he'd set at his dining table. His profile revealed a protruding lower jaw and brow, an enlarged nose, and noticeably thick lips. When he turned toward me, I was confronted by the pock-marked scars left behind by what must have been a frightful bout of teenage acne. All in all, it was not a welcoming visage.

“You're Prosper Fortune, right?”

“He get you anywhere beside your face?” the man asked calmly, ignoring my question.

I showed him my chest and smaller scratches on my thigh and shin.

“I'll be fine,” I said. “I'm worried about my dog.”

“What's his name?”

“Hugo.”

“Ah, as in Victor. Here, let me see. And, yeah, I’m Prosper.”

The huge man gently lifted Hugo from my arms and set him down on the makeshift cot that served as his bed. He looked him over closely and then pulled a large first aid kit from underneath his sink. He took out a bottle of iodine and poured it into Hugo’s shoulder wound and all around the base of his ear, which caused Hugo to squeal meekly in what little protest he could muster. Then he offered the bottle to me, along with some gauze.

“Here, you could use some of this too,” he said. “Hugo’s gonna be sore for a few days, but he’ll be okay. Still got some fight in him. He broke Caliban’s foot clear through, you know. I’ll probably have to amputate it.”

As I ministered to myself, trying to decide whether to place stock in the big man’s diagnosis, I took a not very guilty pleasure in the image of the wildcat hopping around on three legs. Meanwhile, Prosper Fortune took a long needle from his kit and sterilized it in the now boiling water. Then he wrapped a large bundle of dried herbs in cheesecloth and added it to the water.

Moving back to Hugo, he began tying what looked like thin fishing line to his needle and it dawned on me what he was about to do.

“Whoa, do you know what you’re doing there?” I asked, alarmed. “I can take him to a vet.”

“Closest one is all the way up in Houma,” he said. “Don’t worry, I know what I’m doing. Why don’t you come over here and see if you can keep Hugo calm.”

As I held Hugo still, Prosper spoke gently while carefully reattaching Hugo's ear with a surprisingly professional looking set of stitches. Hugo yelped and stirred a couple times but lacked the strength to put up much resistance.

"You're lucky, you know."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. Another second or two and Caliban might have ripped your throat open. You got this brave little fella to thank," Prosper said, smiling kindly down at Hugo.

"I saw the whole thing. Hugo was hurt pretty good, but he jumped up off his hind legs and pulled Caliban off you, and then took some more punishment for his trouble, but he wouldn't let go no matter what."

"It all happened so fast," I said, tearing up despite my determination not to.

"Here, take this," he said, offering a filthy dish towel. "That's the shock wearing off. Perfectly normal."

"How come you know so much about medicine?" I sniffed.

"Practiced it, in another life," Prosper said.

"When you were someone other than Prosper Fortune?"

He paused to grab a pair of tweezers and remove a cat claw from Hugo's lip. Then he retrieved the herb bundle from the pot and placed it atop Hugo's shoulder wound, pressing down gently.

"This may help with the healing," he said.

“Are you avoiding my question?” I asked.

He looked at me directly. “Before I answer, maybe you can explain why you’re here.”

I told Prosper a bit about myself and gave him an abridged version of our grave robbing story, leaving out key details such as the burglars’ footprints, a possible romantic connection between Jane Placide and Jean Lafitte, and the specifics of our transcription beyond identifying Lafitte as the author of Source A.

“Well, that’s the most interesting story anybody has brought me in a while,” he said. “I’ve never heard of your actress. Given the dates involved, I’d say it’s highly unlikely that she and Lafitte ever crossed paths. Do you have a working theory?”

“Perhaps,” I answered, “but before I reveal any more, I’d like a better understanding of who I’m talking to.”

“I’d say the story of a New Orleans antiques dealer and his city dog mixing it up with a feral cat in the wilds of coastal Louisiana is a lot more interesting than anything I’ve got to tell you.”

I smiled faintly but maintained my focus.

“Somehow I doubt it,” I said. “But you still haven’t answered my question. Were you born Prosper Fortune?”

Another silence. Then an answer.

“No, I wasn’t always Prosper Fortune,” he said. The inflection in his voice led me to believe he’d arrived at an internal decision to come clean with me, something I gathered he wasn’t in the habit of doing.

“My birth name is Andre Coulon. I grew up in New Orleans. Went to parochial school and was even an altar boy for a while, hard as that may be to believe. Graduated from Loyola in ’64 and went through med school at LSU. Then I enlisted as a medic in the Special Forces and went to Vietnam.”

“You must have seen a lot of suffering,” I ventured. I did some quick mental math and figured that he must be in his mid to late 70s, a good deal older than his vitality would suggest.

“You could say that” he said flatly. “I was with Fifth Group. Most of our missions had us disrupting enemy supply lines along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Lost a lot of good men. But that was nothing compared to when we got sent to Laos without our dog tags as part of Operation Tailwind. Four straight days of non-stop incoming. It was a bloodbath. Lost my lower leg to a rocket-propelled grenade, but that was getting off easy in the scheme of things.”

Prosper pulled up his left pant leg to show me the prosthetic it had concealed.

“What was it like coming home after that?”

“The things we saw. The things we did,” he said, gazing out the window. “Everything we thought we knew had been turned on its head. Our friends and family wanted us to be the same people they used to know. But those people didn’t exist anymore. Couldn’t exist.

“For me, it just got to the point where I felt like I couldn’t breathe, and I had to get away. So, I ran. And ran and ran. Out west, to Canada for a while, Texas, and eventually here.”

“Why here?” I kept on. “And why Prosper Fortune?”

“I wanted to be left alone,” he replied. “I’d been to the island a couple times as a kid, when my dad chartered a fishing boat for us, and it seemed like the kind of place where I could

kind of disappear. I rented a room in town for a few months until I found this patch of land and eventually turned it into my home.”

“Do you own the land?”

“No, it’s owned by Jefferson Parish I think, but they don’t have any use for it, and no one’s ever hassled me about it.”

“What about money?” I asked. “How do you pay for food and supplies?”

“By collecting Andre Coulon’s pension. It’s more than I need.”

“You know, you have a reputation for being a bit of a wingnut, if I may be so bold,” I said. “But you don’t strike me as the least bit crazy. Is it all an act?”

A faint smile crossed Prosper’s lips. I could see him debating his answer as he stroked Hugo.

“I must be crazy to live how I do, wouldn’t you say?”

“That wasn’t what I meant.”

“If what you’re asking is, do I sometimes ham it up a bit to keep people at arm’s length, well sure, yeah, I guess I do,” he admitted. “Am I rational? I’d like to think so, but I may not be the best judge of that.”

“Okay then. So why Prosper Fortune and what about Jean Lafitte and his treasure? Is all that just an elaborate cover you invented to embroider your act?”

“No,” he said quickly, and then paused. “Or no and yes, might be a more honest way to answer. I can trace my ancestry back to Coralie Lafitte Roup, who was the daughter of Pierre

Lafitte and his long-time mistress, Marie Villard. I figure Pierre's descendants have as much right to any treasure as Jean's do, right? Whether a claim like that could ever hold up in court, I have no idea. Probably not."

"So why all the time spent looking for treasure?"

"You mean when people see me out with my metal detector?" he smiled. "I do find some cool stuff from time to time, especially on Grand Terre. Take a look over here."

Prosper walked me over to a plastic tub on the other side of the room that contained an assortment of artifacts, including a few old coins that could have been left behind by the Baratavia pirates, as well as a spear head and shards of pottery that Prosper thought probably belonged to the Chitimacha tribe or their ancestors, possibly thousands of years ago. There was also a piece of metal with letters on it spelling ORIZO, which he believed came from the Horizon oil rig.

"So, you just like collecting found objects, is that about the size of it?" I asked.

"More or less, although to your earlier suggestion, my wanderings don't hurt my cover as the obsessed Lafitte treasure hunter," he said with a wry grin.

"And you adopted the name Prosper Fortune because it's an apt name for a treasure hunter?"

"That and ... well ... these woods are my island, you know, and *misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows*, so I thought it would fit."

"Ah, of course, *The Tempest*," I smiled. "That explains your cat's name, *the born devil on whose nature nurture can never stick*."

“The man quotes Shakespeare!” Prosper applauded with a wide grin. “I am not often honored with such erudition in my houseguests. Although I doubt Caliban thinks of himself as belonging to anyone, so the analogy breaks down a bit.”

I asked Prosper, or Andre, how he became so knowledgeable about the Lafittes. He explained that before he came to Grand Isle he had lived in Galveston for a stretch. He read some of the local history, knew he had some Lafitte blood in him, and became intrigued with the legends surrounding the pirates. He kept researching and before long he could pass himself off as an expert. Whenever he didn't have facts at his disposal, he learned to substitute imagination.

Having established some degree of trust with Prosper and relaxing a bit as Hugo's eyes cleared and his breathing normalized, I decided to press my mission.

“Here's the big question,” I announced. “Based on what I've told you and what you know about the Lafittes, how big could the Lafitte treasure be and where do you think it could be located?”

“There's really no way of knowing,” Prosper replied, walking over to his kitchen area. He continued talking while busying himself with something I couldn't see.

“I think there are misconceptions about whatever treasure there could be. First off, if there is treasure to be found, I doubt it's in Baratavia. The navy wiped the brothers out. If they had hidden anything, they would have come back for it, but instead they spent the better part of a year petitioning the U.S. government for restitution.”

“You think Galveston might be the better bet?”

“Maybe, but they were only there a couple years and their operation at Campeche never got as big as it had been here. And after the hurricane they took to the seas, acting much more like desperate men in search of new riches than successful businessmen who could turn to their nest egg to fund their next enterprise.”

“Okay, I follow your logic,” I said. “So where, then?”

“Maybe nowhere. But if I was going to dig deeper into anything it would be the Arkansas River expedition.”

I remembered vaguely that Jean Lafitte and Arsène Latour had embarked on a surveying expedition up the Arkansas and that in the process they’d gathered intelligence for Spain regarding the filibustering efforts of French ex-pats and others trying to establish settlements in what was nominally Spanish territory.

“How come?” I asked simply.

“Two reasons,” Prosper said. “For one, there was gold and silver prospecting going on along their route, and they apparently stopped for a few weeks near Pine Bluff to try their hand. Maybe they found a large deposit and drew a map so they could come back for it with the proper equipment.

“Also, according to Latour’s journals, a bit further along on their journey they traded with some natives who told them about large ore fields near the Caddo River. They were never able to go there because they were attacked by a different party of Indians and had to retreat to where they came from. But maybe Latour made a map with the intention of coming back. I doubt it, but it’s possible.”

“Okay, so gold is one reason to look into the Arkansas expedition. What’s the other?”

“There were a handful of French expat settlements trying to establish themselves in the general area they traveled through, some of which had been funded by Joseph Bonaparte. Do you know about Bonaparte and the filibusters?”

“Yes, I’m somewhat familiar.”

“Then you probably know that Lafitte and Latour had gone north together a year or so earlier, to D.C. and Philadelphia. It’s not clear that they met with Bonaparte himself, although they could have, but they talked to people in his circle. Bonaparte at that time was the equivalent of the robber barons a half century later, just filthy rich. So, one theory would be that if they performed a service of some kind for Bonaparte, perhaps to bolster the filibusters in some way, there could have been a significant reward involved.”

I made a show of raising my eyebrows.

“I know, it’s pretty far-fetched, but you did ask,” Prosper smiled. “As I said earlier, the most likely explanation is that this is just a wild goose chase, and your actress and Lafitte didn’t even know each other, or if they did there wasn’t any treasure involved.”

Prosper returned from the kitchen area with two plates, each with some Ritz crackers and a small bowl of what looked like a dip of some kind.

“Here, you look like you could use some nourishment,” he said.

“What is this?” I asked, taking the plate he offered.

“Have a taste and see if you can figure it out.”

Doing as directed, I took a cracker and scooped up a bit of the dip. A quick sniff revealed smoked fish of some kind, which is not really my thing. Cautiously, I took a taste and was greeted with a surprisingly pleasing flavor profile.

“Tastes like smoked fish,” I said, “with some creole spices and horseradish, I think. There’s something else in there that I can’t quite place. It’s delicious.”

“Thank you,” Prosper smiled. “I don’t often cook for others, but I manage to eat pretty well out here. You’re right, it’s smoked snapper with a spice blend and some horseradish. I also add a little dried seaweed and the broth from caramelized onions.”

“Interesting. Just the liquid, but not the onions themselves?”

“No, I have other uses for those. I find the liquid adds a depth of flavor and a bit of sweetness I can’t get any other way.”

“I’ll have to try this myself when I get home,” I said.

We spent another hour or so discussing Lafitte, which gave the herbal salve Prosper had applied to Hugo time to do its thing. I asked Prosper if the term La Violette meant anything to him, and he said it didn’t. He was aware of the book written by the mother-daughter team and allowed that the Lorenzo Ferrer angle might have merit. He also knew all about Edward Livingston and The Associates and agreed that Lafitte could have come into possession of something of value through his connections to them. In the end, we both concluded, this was all idle speculation.

Moving on from Lafitte, I asked Prosper if he ever thought about re-entering society.

“Sure, I’ve thought about it,” he said, “but as odd as it may seem to others, I’m comfortable here. Life is simple and nobody bothers me except the occasional heedless trespasser.”

I smiled to let him know his friendly jab had found its mark.

“I’m sure it’s not lost on you that Prospero does end up leaving his island,” I said.

“I’m aware of that,” Prosper said, smiling ruefully. “Just because I named myself and Caliban after a couple characters in a play doesn’t mean I’m living according to some scripted plot.”

“No, I guess not.”

Realizing that time had gotten away from me, I asked Prosper if there was a way I could get in touch with him if questions arose that I thought he might be able to help with. He gave me a P.O. Box that he said he checked every now and again, and I gave him my contact information as well.

As I got up to go, I saw that it had darkened outside. The temperature had fallen, and a strong breeze was beginning to blow, unmistakable signs that the squall I’d seen forming earlier was almost upon us. I carried Hugo to my car cradled in my arms, with Prosper escorting us as security against another ambush from Caliban. Prosper asked that I not blow his cover with the locals or among the Lafitte fanatic crowd and suggested that both Hugo and I procure antibiotics to guard against infection. We parted in what felt like friendship.

As we closed the doors to the car, thunder exploded above us, and the skies opened. Hugo whined softly and, trembling, gingerly rolled himself into a ball on the passenger seat.

Squinting through the furious torrent streaking down the driver's window, I saw a furry gray form emerge from a stand of ferns, dragging a leg behind it as it followed Prosper into his landlocked island. I could just make out the giant man opening wide his massive arms and turning his face up to the tempest. As he faded from view, I thought I heard him shout, laughing, "Our revels now are ended ..."