

# ECHOES

*A Novel*

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## *Chapter 1*

She could hear soft crying. She lifted her head from the cool hard floor and looked around in the darkness. Far off she could see a small circle of light. As she watched the light began to grow larger and brighter, taking on the shape of an open doorway. For a moment someone was standing in the doorway, but she couldn't make out any detail. There was just a heavy shadow, and then it was gone.

Now she could see a young girl on the far side of the door. She was seated on the floor against a wood post, with her arms stretched above her head. Her wrists were held in place by a thick rope that encircled the post, and a dirty white cloth was tied around her mouth. The girl had long blond hair that hung limply around her face and onto her shoulders. She was dressed in just panties and a camisole t-shirt. At some point they might have been pale pink, but now they were a dingy gray.

Even at a distance she could see the girl looking at her, imploring her for help with her eyes. She tried to push herself up to her feet. Pain exploded in her abdomen and she gasped, rolling onto her back. She put her right hand onto the small mound of her stomach and felt warm dampness. She lifted her hand and brought it close to her face. Even in the darkness she could make out the blackness of the blood on her fingertips. She felt her throat tighten and began to fight for air as a convulsive sob escaped her lips. In the distance she heard a phone begin to ring.

Alexandra “Sassy” Jones sat up in bed with a start and looked down at her right hand. Although she’d had the same nightmare every night for twenty five years, she always awoke wondering if it was real. Even in her confusion her right hand began to move reflexively for the cell phone on her nightstand. She could still feel the phantom sensation of the small round hole in her stomach that her fingers had traced thousands of times. She cleared her throat and brought the phone quickly to her ear.

“Yes?” she said calmly.

“Sassy, it’s me.” It was the voice of her former partner, Michel Doucette.

“Michel,” she said. “Are you okay? What time is it?”

She felt suddenly anxious. Michel had been on a leave-of-absence from the New Orleans Police Department for the past six months and she’d grown unaccustomed to hearing his voice on the phone in the middle of the night.

“It’s Carl,” Michel said.

For a moment Sassy was confused. Why had her ex-partner said that he was her ex-husband? She tried to make sense of the words and wondered if she was still dreaming, somehow bringing together the two most important men in her life.

“This is Carl?” she asked tentatively.

“No, Sassy. It’s Michel.” Michel said.

“But you said...”

“I’m sorry,” Michel cut her off abruptly. “Carl’s dead.”

Suddenly the pieces of the conversation fell into place and Sassy came fully awake.

“How?” she asked slowly. Her words seemed to come from a distance and echo in her head.

“It looks like a suicide,” Michel responded gently.

Sassy was silent for a moment. It had been a year since she’d spoken to Carl and 5 years since she’d last seen him, yet he’d been a part of her life every day for the past twenty five years.

“Are you still there?” Michel asked.

“Yeah,” Sassy responded slowly. “It was our anniversary.”

“What?” Michel asked, confused.

“Yesterday,” Sassy said, “It would have been our 25th anniversary.”

Michel paused before responding, suddenly understanding what Sassy meant: Carl had killed himself because it was their anniversary.

“I’m coming over,” he said finally.

“Okay,” Sassy replied blankly.

She placed the phone back on the nightstand and turned on the small lamp next to it. She stared at the wall in front of her for a moment, then willed herself to get up and get dressed.

## *Chapter 2*

When Sassy opened the door Michel was surprised by her appearance. For the first time since he'd met her five years earlier he'd expected her to look something less than her best, but the solid woman in the doorway looked as though she were ready to go to dinner or the office. She was dressed in slacks and a short matching jacket that were the same chocolate brown tone as her skin, though two shades deeper. Under the jacket she wore a deep plum silk shirt with a wide spread collar, and a delicate gold necklace draped her throat. Her short dark hair with its few silver threads was neatly brushed and her subtle make-up was perfectly applied. As always the effect was both simple and stunning, and Michel wondered not for the first time if Sassy ever just rolled out of bed and slummed it in sweat pants and an old t-shirt.

As Michel walked in Sassy hugged him warmly and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Although their partnership had long ago developed into friendship, it was an unusual gesture of affection and Michel sensed that Sassy's composed appearance was deceiving.

"It's good to see you," she said softly.

While Sassy poured them coffee, Michel walked into the living room and settled onto the plush burnt orange sofa that separated the seating area from the dining room. He'd always felt that Sassy's home was a perfect reflection of her as a person. The room was warm and welcoming, yet devoid of clutter or excess. The rich cocoa walls were tastefully accented by smaller

black and white photos with simple black metal frames, and larger, more colorful paintings—all depicting either the Crescent City or African-American culture. The white built-in shelves along one wall were lined by well-thumbed books on a range of subjects from psychology to religion to history to music and art. Here and there were small sculptures or artifacts that Sassy had collected during her travels in Africa and Western Europe. In addition to the sofa, there were two deep-seating chairs covered in pale sage twill. The centerpiece of the room was a coffee table consisting of a large, square glass top that rested between four thick burlled olive bases. The overall effect was simple, yet with rich detail that told you everything you needed to know about the home's occupant.

Michel noticed a small silver ashtray on the coffee table directly in front of him and smiled. Not only had Sassy thought to put the ashtray out, but she'd correctly anticipated exactly where he would sit.

"How did you find out about Carl?" Sassy said as she walked into the room carrying two large white ceramic mugs.

She placed one in front of Michel and settled next to him on the couch. Michel knew without asking that she'd put three sugars and more than a little cream into his coffee.

"Al Ribodeau called me," he said as he lifted the mug and took a small sip. "He took the call and thought it would be better if you found out about it from me."

"How did he know Carl was my ex-husband?" Sassy asked, giving him a genuinely puzzled look. "You're the only one in the department who knows I was even married."

"He saw your pictures."

"Pictures?" Sassy asked, the look of puzzlement growing.

"Carl had a wall of photos of you," Michel said carefully. "Al said it looked almost like a shrine."

Sassy took a deep breath and let the image sink in. She'd closed her heart to Carl long ago but suddenly felt fresh sympathy for him. She imagined him sitting alone in a room,

staring at the reminders of their life together.

“When was the last time you spoke to him?” Michel asked, bringing her back suddenly.

“366 days ago.”

Sassy could see the surprise on Michel’s face at the precision of her answer.

“Carl called me every year on our anniversary. Usually around 10 pm after he’d got a few drinks in him.”

“And last night?”

“I unplugged my phone,” she said matter-of-factly. “I didn’t feel like talking to him this year. He didn’t have my cell number.”

“And you think that may be why he killed himself? Because you didn’t talk to him?” Michel ventured.

Sassy shrugged.

“I don’t know the man anymore...*didn’t* know him anymore.”

Michel took her hand, watching her face carefully to make sure it was all right.

“You’re not blaming yourself, are you?”

Sassy met his eyes and gave a sad smile.

“I don’t know yet,” she said. “I haven’t had time to process it. I know logically it’s not my fault. I don’t have any illusions that I have that kind of power. Carl was angry at me, but I don’t think he would have killed himself over me. Not after 25 years.”

“What makes you think he was still angry with you?” Michel asked.

He noticed Sassy slowly withdrawing her hand from his as she looked away, focusing on a spot directly in front of her.

“The calls,” she said with a weary sigh. “When Carl called, he’d tell me what a cunt I was and how I’d ruined his life by leaving him.”

Michel was shocked by both the bluntness of the response and the fact that Sassy had allowed the calls to continue for so long. It seemed out of character.

“Why didn’t you change your number?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Sassy said, looking back at him. “I guess I figured he needed to vent and it was harmless enough. Maybe I was worried that if he didn’t have that opportunity he’d do something more drastic.”

“Like kill himself?” Michel asked.

Sassy didn’t respond but Michel could read the answer in her expression. He waited a moment before continuing.

“Sassy, I’ll understand if you don’t want to talk about it right now, but what happened between you and Carl?”

Something about the words “right now” caught Sassy’s attention and she looked at Michel more intently, trying to read his expression.

“Are you asking me as a friend or a cop?” she asked.

Michel dropped his gaze for a beat, then looked back at her.

“Both,” he said.

“What aren’t you telling me?” Sassy asked, a look of anxiety clouding her face.

“I think we should go to the station,” Michel said. “There’s something you need to see.”