



LITTLE WHITE CASKET

by

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It first appeared in the Garden District on a warm, breezy March morning – three days after Mardi Gras.

Darla Jamison sat talking with her sister-in-law at a glass-topped table in front of LaRue’s Coffeehouse, directly across the street from the wrought-iron gates of Lafayette Cemetery.

“So, have you decided on a theme for the baby shower yet?” Crystal asked. “I need to know soon. It’s only a couple of months away.”

In three months, I’ll be a mother Darla thought, feeling giddy.

She smiled at Crystal. “How about the Hundred Acre Wood - just like the nursery?”

“Well, I’m glad that’s settled.” Crystal retrieved a hair band from her voluminous pocketbook and tied back her loose, red curls. “I’ll get started on the invitations this weekend.”

Darla leaned back in her uncomfortable chair and sipped her decaffeinated latte. The first six months of her pregnancy had boogied on by, but she knew the last trimester would feel like the longest. Crystal gleefully reminded her of this fact every time they got together.

“How did Ryan’s recital go last night?” Darla asked. She watched a tour group enter the cemetery and disappear behind a row of aboveground tombs.

“Better than expected. I think he even surprised himself.”

A gust of wind blew a lock of Darla’s wavy, black hair into her eyes and she pushed it away impatiently, blinking. Was that a casket sitting just inside the cemetery gates? A crowd of happy leftover tourists ambled by, obscuring her view. She looked over at her sister-in-law and sighed.

“I’m sorry Kenneth and I couldn’t make it. I came down with a killer headache and he had a deposition that ran late.”

“Oh, don’t worry. There’ll be plenty more of those before school lets out for the summer.”

Darla glanced across the street again and her breath caught in her throat. A little white casket sat on the ground, right outside the cemetery gates. Had it moved?

That was just your imagination, silly. A funeral must be getting ready to start – a child’s funeral. How terribly sad.

Darla had been devastated by two miscarriages before her latest pregnancy. She didn’t even want to imagine what it would be like to lose a child after it was born. How could anyone deal with the grief?

“Yoo-hoo. Darla? Are you in there?”

Darla tore her gaze away from the pitiful little casket and met Crystal’s amused stare.

“Are you okay, honey? Maybe you should start back on the caffeine, just a bit.”

On a sunny morning two weeks later, Darla left her three-story brick townhouse in the French Quarter – also known as the *Vieux Carré* – for her daily walk to Jackson Square. She waddled slowly down St. Ann Street towards the Mississippi. Traffic was light for a change – a relief, since she had trouble crossing the road in a hurry.

She approached the busy corner of St. Ann and Bourbon, listening to a love-struck songbird and sniffing the mild breeze. Someone was brewing chicory-flavored coffee in an antique shop. Somewhere above her, beyond one of the many wrought iron balconies, a sax player with no talent insisted on murdering a famous jazz tune.

Four blocks down the way, Darla turned right onto Chartres and passed by the impressive St. Louis Cathedral before entering the Square. She found a shaded bench and plopped onto it to relax for a few minutes and do some people watching.

Her stomach growled as she sat there, and she rubbed her extended belly with both hands.

“How would you like some yummy beignets today, Haley Marie?” she said out loud, hoping that the nearby Café du Monde wasn’t as jam-packed as usual. “We’ve been good lately, so I think we deserve a treat.”

An elderly lady passing by smiled down at her indulgently. People overlooked all sorts of eccentric behavior if you were young, glowing and pregnant.

Darla stretched and smiled. Straight across from her were two little girls jumping rope. One day, in the not-too-distant future, she would bring her own daughter here to play.

Her smile faded when the girls moved on and she noticed a rectangular box sitting on the picnic table they had just been playing around.

My God. It’s a little white casket. Just like the one at Lafayette Cemetery.

Darla’s heart beat a frantic rhythm against her chest. She closed her eyes and opened them again.

It was still there.

But it can’t be. It can’t be real.

Darla looked around. No one else seemed to notice the ghastly object.

She struggled to her feet and approached the picnic table, fighting a flood of people moving in the opposite direction. When she broke through the wave, the casket was gone.

It was stress. It had to be. That was the only logical explanation.

Ha! But you aren’t always logical, are you, Darla? What about that little trip to “Queen” Marie Laveau’s grave, right after you found out you were pregnant for the third time – leaving her a long-stemmed white rose as an offering and wishing for a normal pregnancy, a healthy baby? Hoping for a little Voodoo protection from one Creole to another.

“As I’ve said before, everything seems perfectly fine.” Dr. Bradshaw stepped back from the examining table and draped the stethoscope around his neck. “You and your baby are in great shape.”

Darla watched a little brown spider drop from the light fixture above their heads, spiraling gracefully down to land on the old doctor’s shoulder.

He didn’t notice the leggy intruder, and for some reason she didn’t warn him.

Darla straightened her “Baby on Board” T-shirt.

“I’m sorry I’m so paranoid,” she said, sitting up. “I just don’t want anything to go wrong.”

Dr. Bradshaw peered down at her from over the top of his rimless glasses. “Now, there’s no need to be nervous at this late stage. Both your miscarriages occurred before you were four months along.”

Darla nodded. “You’re right. I’m being a pest. Should I come back for my regular appointment in two weeks?”

“By all means. We want to stay on schedule and keep track of your progress.”

He smiled as she hopped off the examining table. “And try not to worry, all right? Stress isn’t good for the baby.”

She’d had the nightmare for three nights in a row, starting right after her seven-month checkup. At the beginning of the dream, Darla always felt warm and safe in the quiet darkness. But then she would wake up choking and gasping for air – terrified she was going to smother to death.

She could never remember why.

On that third morning, a Friday, Darla arose and put on a pair of maternity jeans and a red and white striped top. She was determined to find some chores to do that day – anything to keep her mind off the mysterious nightmare.

She ate a light breakfast and then decided to dust all three floors of the townhouse. The exercise would do her good and the cleaning lady would thank her for it the next afternoon.

The house had a lot of space for just two people, but Darla hoped that one day it would be filled with children. She loved the gracious old home, with its high ceilings and parquet floors. An elegantly curved rosewood staircase dominated the foyer.

She started her “therapy” in the third floor ballroom and worked her way down. The second floor had three large bedrooms and two full baths. (She had already transformed one of the bedrooms into a yellow nursery.) The first floor consisted of a front parlor, a formal dining room, an eat-in kitchen, a study, and a powder room.

Darla was exhausted by the time she put away the feather duster. She had to remember not to mention the cleaning binge to Kenneth. He had ordered her not to do anything more strenuous than lifting a TV remote.

With a sigh of satisfaction, she went into the black and white kitchen and poured herself a tall glass of pineapple-orange juice. It was a perfect spring day, so she headed for the French doors at the back of the house that led to the walled-in, tree-shaded courtyard.

Darla opened one of the doors and froze. The glass of juice dropped from her numb fingers and exploded on the marble threshold.

Resting on the cast iron bench in the center of the garden was a little white casket.

Darla opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out. She squeezed her eyes shut and mentally said three Hail Marys in a row.

When she opened her eyes again, the casket had vanished.

Darla knew she couldn't tell Kenneth – or anyone else. They'd think she was losing her mind, or having hallucinations because of her fear that what had happened in the past would happen again.

Maybe it really was her subconscious playing tricks on her, but she would just have to deal with the frightening visions on her own. They would certainly go away once the baby was born.

Ten days after the incident in the courtyard, Darla threw together a pot of spicy jambalaya and invited her wealthy in-laws over for a late supper.

She'd formed a close bond with Kenneth's parents right after meeting them for the first time four years ago – as a bride of seven days. To her surprise, Cecil and Mona hadn't been unhappy with the elopement of their youngest son with a penniless, twenty-year-old waitress. They, along with Barry and Crystal and young Ryan, had become her instant family.

Darla's own mother and father had died in a house fire when she was ten. An alert neighbor had pulled her out of a bedroom window just in time. For years afterward, Darla had endured being uprooted and shuffled from one foster home to another. She'd never been abused, but she'd never been loved, either.

And that's why she refused to complain when Cecil insisted on giving her a bear hug every time they saw each other. She always let his two hundred and fifty pound frame pull away first.

"Hmmm, smell that andouille sausage." Cecil stepped past Darla, sniffing the air, and followed his petite wife into the kitchen. "When little Haley Marie starts school, I oughta set you up with your own restaurant, darlin."

"Ah, but it would really be *your* restaurant, wouldn't it?" Darla walked around them and stopped in front of the stove. "Anyway, thanks for the offer, but I have no desire to work in the food industry ever again."

"My dear, I understand you perfectly," Mona said, and immediately began setting the table. "Cecil, honey, you must realize that Darla plans to have more than one child. Being a mother is a fulltime job."

Kenneth entered the kitchen from the adjoining study and gave his mother a peck on the cheek. "I'm sure we can count on you to watch the baby for us once in a while, right, Mom?"

"My first granddaughter? Hon, you'll be lucky if I don't end up moving in with you."

Cecil let out a groan and took a seat at the long oak table.

Darla smiled, noticing again how much Kenneth and Mona were alike. He had her easygoing personality and her fair-skinned, attractive features. Whenever Darla tried to imagine what Haley was going to look like, she always envisioned her with Kenneth's sandy hair and light blue eyes.

"Need some help?" Kenneth took the two-handled pot of jambalaya away from his wife and whisked it over to the table, setting it next to the big, wooden salad bowl.

Just as Darla eased into a chair, the baby gave her a swift, hard kick in the ribs, making her gasp. "Oh, I think this child's going to be a star soccer player one day."

A laugh rumbled out of Cecil's broad chest. "She's gonna take after her daddy, all right. I can guarantee ya that."

An hour later, the jambalaya had been devoured and Cecil, at least, was ready for dessert. Darla had picked up a Royal Red Velvet Cake at the little patisserie on the corner.

It was her father-in-law's favorite.

"Well, now, lookee what we have here." Cecil rubbed his hands together.

"Don't get too excited, honey bun," Mona said. "You can't have more than one tiny sliver."

Cecil looked at her in disbelief. "Says who?"

Mona smiled sweetly. "Says your doctor, and more importantly, your darling wife."

"Humph!" Cecil shook his head and cut himself a hefty slice of cake, causing Mona to sigh heavily.

Darla wanted to grin, but couldn't. She handed out the coffee cups and then leaned against the table, patting her swollen tummy.

"You feeling okay, sweetheart?" Kenneth's eyes were full of concern.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I don't think that sausage agreed with me, though. If y'all will excuse me for just a minute, I'll run upstairs and see if there's something I can take to settle my stomach. Help yourselves to the coffee."

Kenneth grabbed her hand. "You sure you don't want me to come with?"

"For heaven's sake, stop fussing. I'm not an invalid."

Darla left the kitchen and headed down the short hallway to the front of the house. She started up the curving stairs, moving slowly, holding on to the smooth, shiny banister as she climbed.

When she reached the halfway point between the first and second floors, something made her look up.

Holy Mary, Mother of God.

The little white casket waited for her on the second floor landing, poised atop an old-fashioned brass cart with metal wheels. The baby coffin's wooden lid was covered with long-stemmed white roses.

No! This can't be happening.

Every muscle in Darla's body refused to work. She couldn't move or blink or scream.

All she could do was watch in horrified fascination as the cart's squeaky wheels began to move towards the stairs, taking the little white casket closer and closer to the edge. The roses began to slide off and tumble down the steps.

One of them landed at Darla's feet.

Oh, she tried to move, all right. She tried to move with every ounce of mental power she possessed.

It was impossible.

The roaring in her ears got louder as the cart went over the edge. The little white casket slid off its stand and hurtled towards her.

But Darla had already fallen into a spinning, black void.

"It's okay, Mrs. Jamison. Just relax."

That was a young woman's voice.

She heard other voices around her, murmuring. An older woman said, "Thank God she didn't fall down the stairs."

Thank God.

Darla opened her eyes and saw a pretty blond in a white coat bending over her.

"Ah, there you are. I'm Dr. Perry. Do you remember what happened?"

Darla slowly shook her head. "Did I faint?"

"That seems to be the consensus. We can't find anything wrong with you, though, which is good. The baby is okay. As soon as you feel up to it, your husband will be more than willing to take you home and tuck you in. He's going crazy out in the waiting room."

Darla gave her a weak smile. Poor Kenneth.

She remembered exactly what had happened to her, of course, but there was no way she was going to talk about it. She wanted to go home. She wanted to be in control again, and the only way she could do that was to figure out why she was having those awful visions.

Two more weeks went by and Darla still did not understand what was happening. Was it all in her head? Was she under a voodoo hex – or was God trying to tell her something?

She talked to the baby – and “listened.” She made note of how often Haley kicked and squirmed.

What else could she do? No one would believe her wild, grim story.

On a Saturday evening, the day before the baby shower, Darla managed to escape from Kenneth long enough to get out of the house and take a short walk to calm her nerves. She went as far as Royal Street. Before turning back, she lingered for several minutes outside an overstuffed bar, tapping her feet to the live zydeco music of a local band.

A cool, light rain began to fall as she headed for home. St. Ann Street looked strange and silvery in the lamplight. Steam began to rise off the cracked pavement and swirl around Darla’s swollen ankles. Traffic swished by and her fellow pedestrians pulled out their umbrellas or ran for cover.

Wimps, they all were. The soft rain felt good on her tired face.

When she got to the noisy corner of Bourbon and St. Ann, Darla stopped at her favorite patisserie and bought a dozen croissants for the next morning. The elderly shopkeeper once again asked about her due date.

“Less than four weeks to go,” Darla told her patiently, with a wave goodbye.

She held the bag of croissants close to her body, letting it rest on top of her stomach as she moseyed along, occasionally rubbing her aching lower back.

She was almost home when she noticed a statuesque mulatto woman moving up the sidewalk towards her – untouched by the rain.

The lady was attractive and exotic and somehow familiar. Her long, shimmering skirt whirled around her legs like a fine, blue mist. She had a white shawl draped around her shoulders, despite the humid warmth of the night. Large gold hoops dangled from her earlobes.

Darla swallowed hard when she noticed the bright blue *tignon* wrapped around the lady’s head. It was a seven-knotted kerchief – just like the one Marie Laveau had always worn before her death over a century before.

Ghost stories about the voodoo queen were widely circulated in the *Vieux Carré*. She was often seen haunting St. Ann Street, where she had once lived – in a home that was only a block away from the Jamison’s townhouse.

Darla stopped walking and concentrated on her breathing, trying not to hyperventilate. People moved around her and avoided the phantom without seeming to notice its presence.

Marie Laveau was getting close now. She gave Darla a Mona Lisa smile, as though she could read her thoughts and was about to say to her, “Yes, my pet, we are neighbors, you and I. You honored my grave. You gave my name to your unborn babe. Why, then, are you so surprised to see me?”

But those words were all in Darla’s head.

Please go away. I can’t take this anymore.

Marie kept moving forward, so quickly and gracefully that it seemed like she was floating above the ground. Her fierce black eyes were shining – and a mysterious little smile still tugged at the corners of her mouth.

Darla feared the specter intended to walk right through her motionless body, but just as they came face to face, Marie Laveau disappeared.

“Heed the warning.”

The invisible entity whispered the words into Darla’s right ear, causing chills to race up and down her spine.

She hurried home, shaking uncontrollably.

It was well past midnight, the baby was quiet inside her, but Darla still found it impossible to sleep. She lay on her back beside her sleeping husband and stared off into the darkness, convinced that something terrible was about to happen. She could no longer deny what she knew in her heart to be true.

But how was she supposed to stop it from happening?

She wanted to toss and turn and cry, but didn’t. Kenneth was resting peacefully. She could hear his deep, even breathing.

If only she could forget the things she’d seen and heard for just one night. The knowing was torture.

She finally fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

A few hours later she awoke to the sun. White light was pouring in through the nearby window and at first she thought it was what had awakened her – until she heard the noises: footsteps above her head and soft voices.

Kenneth was still curled up next to her, sleeping heavily.

Somehow Darla shimmied out of bed without waking him, grabbed her cotton robe and slippers, and tiptoed out of the bedroom, carefully avoiding all the squeaky floorboards.

Sunshine poured into the hall from the skylight. She moved up the second flight of stairs at a steady pace, her stomach churning. When she reached the third floor landing, she was forced to pause for a few seconds to catch her breath. She could hear the somber voices more clearly now.

Darla moved towards the double doors that led to the long ballroom. Her feet felt like they were encased in buckets of concrete.

She hesitated in front of the heavy doors, and then wrenched them open with cold, trembling hands.

Darla stifled a scream. This had to be a hallucination.

The room was full of people, most of them dressed in black. She recognized a few of the men and women as employees of Kenneth's law firm.

What were they doing here?

She walked farther into the room until she was surrounded by little groups of mourners. They were huddled here and there, eating hors-d'oeuvres and drinking punch.

Darla overheard some of their remarks.

"It really is such a shame. If only they'd known about it earlier."

"That poor baby had the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck *three* times."

"My God. Darla must be inconsolable."

"Oh, haven't you heard? She couldn't even attend the funeral because of her mental state. They say she's gone *completely* off the deep end now."

Darla heard a woman shouting and then realized the words were coming out of her own mouth.

“Shut up! All of you just shut up! It’s not true!”

The room fell silent and everyone turned to stare at her.

Tears were streaming down Darla’s pale cheeks. “This is not going to happen, do you hear me? I won’t let it.”

All this time, on the far side of the room, the mourners had hidden the little white casket. Now it rose into the air and floated above the crowd.

Darla shrank back against the wall in horror as blood began to seep out from under the coffin’s closed lid and drip onto the floor – and onto the people standing below.

It moved in her direction and she sprinted for the doors.

Several mourners deliberately blocked her path.

“Why are you doing this to me?” Darla yelled.

The little white casket hovered above her now. It tilted to one side and the lid swung open, allowing the dark, clotted blood that had been festering inside to gush out.

Darla threw her arms over her head and screamed and screamed.

“Honey, stop fighting me. It’s all right.”

“Kenneth?”

On the chilly hardwood floor, in the middle of the empty ballroom, Darla went limp in her husband’s embrace.

“You’re okay. Just calm down and tell me what happened.”

Darla took a deep, shaky breath, letting her head clear. The realization soon hit her like a blow to the stomach: Haley had not moved in several hours. Why hadn’t she noticed sooner?

She looked up at Kenneth with anguish-filled eyes. “There’s no time left. We’ve got to get to the hospital now.”

Kenneth practically carried her into the emergency room at Baptist Memorial.

Dr. Perry was on duty again and, despite Kenneth's objections, Darla insisted on speaking with her alone.

"My baby hasn't moved in hours," she said, her voice wobbling with emotion. "There's something very wrong."

"We'll run some tests right away and I'll call your doctor."

Darla burst into tears. "There's no time for any of that. You have to help her now. You have to do a C-section."

"Darla, I know you're worried, but ..."

"Please, listen to me. Do you have a child?"

Dr. Perry sighed. "A little boy, yes."

"Haven't you ever sensed when he was in danger? Would you want to take a chance on his life?" Darla wiped the tears off her face with the back of her hand. "I'm far enough along now to have the baby anyway. You have to trust me. I just know Haley's going to die if we don't do something now."

Dr. Perry stared down at her with green eyes full of confusion. It was the first longest minute of Darla's life.

"Please," she whispered, laying a hand on the doctor's arm. "I think my baby's being strangled to death inside me."

Haley's skin had a bluish tinge to it and she wasn't breathing when they pulled her out of the womb. After they cut away the umbilical cord that was killing her, she remained unresponsive for nearly a minute.

It felt like forever had come and gone before Darla finally heard her baby cry for the first time.

A few hours later, after her in-laws had left and Kenneth had gone in search of food, she cradled the sleeping infant in her arms and stared down at her in awe. Haley Marie weighed just over six pounds. She had gobs of black hair and dark blue eyes. She was a beautiful, perfect little human being.

Darla shivered when she thought of how close she'd come to losing her, and offered up a prayer of thanks to the heavens – and Marie Laveau.

A sudden commotion out in the hall drew her attention.

“Get ready,” said a nurse to an orderly, as they trotted past Darla’s room. “We’ll have to move her upstairs for her own good.”

Darla could hear a woman sobbing hysterically.

A minute went by and then the same orderly walked by her door again, only this time he was pushing a pregnant, dark-haired lady in a wheelchair. Darla noticed that her wrists were strapped down.

“No, please, I’m not crazy,” the woman said, still weeping. “You’ve got to believe me. *It was a little white casket!*”

THE END