



Room With a View

A FRENCH QUARTER RESTAURANT'S GHOSTLY HISTORY INSPIRES A ROMANTIC NOVEL

By Toni Blake

WHEN I ATTENDED a party at a French Quarter restaurant in New Orleans, I never expected to find the inspiration for my second single-title novel. I was at Muriel's Jackson Square in 2001, during a Romance Writers of America conference, strictly to hobnob with author pals and editor acquaintances, drink a little wine and enjoy the fancy desserts. But the moment I wandered into the very lush and sensual red room, accented by beautiful old brick and romantic balconies, the whole evening changed.

Maybe it was the sprawling plush red sofas and chairs draped with soft throws and pillows of velvet and silk. Maybe it was the fringed red lampshades and overstuffed red brocade stools. Maybe it was the exposed brick hung with elegant, sensual paintings from another time, featuring women draped in flowing dresses or swaths of white fabric. The luxurious space is small and intimate, yet I could have spent hours studying all the wonderful contents that make it feel at once mysterious, sexy and enticing. Needless to say, I spent the remainder of the evening in the red room, soaking up the ambiance and letting the creative wheels start to turn.

When I returned in July 2004 to do research for *In Your Wildest Dreams* (Jul. '05, Warner Forever), the manager—a charming Southern gentleman named John Abbott—gave me a personal tour, from which I learned about the red room's rich and haunted past.

Around 1750, I was informed, John Baptiste Destrehan, Royal Treasurer of French Louisiana Colonies, bought the property and built a grand home for his family, which he furnished with the best linens, drapes, rugs, furniture, china, crystal and silver—all imported from Paris. But on Good Friday in 1788, a tragic fire swept through the French Quarter and the residence was partially burned.

At this time, the building's second owner sold the property to Pierre Antoine Lepardi Jourdan, who built his dream home for himself and his family. But in 1814, Antoine—as the Muriel's staff refers to him—wagered his beloved house in a poker game... and lost. He was so distraught over losing his home that he committed suicide on the building's second floor—and his ghost has been seen nearly 50 times in the past five years alone.

Antoine's ghost has been described as “a long cylindrical luminescence with sparkles on the outside.” During our tour, Abbott confided that he'd had a personal encounter with Antoine. “He paused and looked at me for a moment,” Abbott said, indicating the spot in the red room where Antoine appeared to him, “then turned and walked through the wall.” It's believed that a few other mischievous ghosts reside within Muriel's historic walls, but Antoine is definite-



Muriel's Jackson Square, in New Orleans' famed French Quarter, is home to mischievous ghosts and a lavishly decorated room, which inspired Toni Blake's latest spicy romantic suspense.

ly the favorite. The staff sets a table for him and his mistress each evening, complete with bread and wine. Although they call the red room “the séance” in honor of Antoine (and yes, they've actually held a séance or two in there and hope to do more), the room is decorated in memory of the building's five illustrious years during the 19th century as the most popular and upscale bordello in New Orleans.

On the pages of *In Your Wildest Dreams*, the red room serves as just that—a modern-day bordello where Jake Broussard, a Cajun bad-boy ex-cop with a secret, attempts a steamy seduction of straitlaced ad exec Stephanie Grant, who's come to New Orleans to search for her missing sister. Readers will have to see for themselves if there are any ghosts in my book, but let's just say I was pleased to learn about Antoine's haunting spirit because it seemed to present another connection between the red room and my story.

When people ask me how I get ideas for my books, I usually answer that stories just “come to me.” But when people ask the same question about *In Your Wildest Dreams*, I'm happy to say that I definitely know where this one came from. Pay a visit to Muriel's Jackson Square and ask to see “the séance”—you'll feel the same magic and inspiration. ✧

If you can't visit Muriel's personally, make a cyberstop at Muriels.com. To learn more about the novel or see more photos from New Orleans, visit ToniBlake.com.