

GHOSTS

By George Sapio
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Cast:

Marcus “Bobno” Bobnowski.....	Male, 35
Maddie.....	Female, 20s
James Gordon.....	Male, 50s
Dr. Samantha Taylor.....	Female, 40ish
Dwight Davis.....	Male, 50s-60s
Emily Davis.....	Female, 50s-60s
Nurse.....	Cast as desired
Cop.....	Cast as desired

Please encourage diverse casting.

Setting

The action takes place in and around New Orleans: hotel room, doctor’s office, Jackson Square.

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Prologue

The second-floor parlor in a two-story townhouse off Bourbon Street. It is 1870. As lights fade up, a six-year-old boy's laughter, high-pitched and squealing. From SL BOY runs on, dressed only in britches. Hides behind chair. GOVERNESS follows in, looks around. A rapturous game of Hide and Seek. GOVERNESS finds BOY; BOY dodges, GOVERNESS grabs BOY and tackles him, tickling. BOY squirms out, GOVERNESS follows, but trips and falls. BOY runs out SR. GOVERNESS yells "No!" Sound of wood breaking, then a cry and a loud, squishy snap. GOVERNESS follows out SR. Pause. GOVERNESS returns, shaken and shocked. Paces back and forth briefly, talking to herself inaudibly. Stumbles off SL, returns with coiled rope. Stands UC, looks up at rafters, uncoiling rope. Lights fade to black.

Act I, Scene i

[Twenty years ago. DR. SAMANTHA TAYLOR's office. (then) DETECTIVE LIEUTENANT JAMES GORDON paces back and forth. He is very fidgety. Looks at desk clock. Goes to door, listens. Rapidly, takes small vial from coat pocket, empties a good snootful of coke into the hollow above his thumb. Snorts. Wipes nose. DR. SAMANTHA TAYLOR enters, sees GORDON wipes his nose with a handkerchief. Throughout following, GORDON sniffs periodically.]

SAM

Summer cold?

GORDON

Killer. I get them all the time. Hate these things. Detective Lieutenant James Gordon, New Orleans Police.

SAM

Samantha Taylor. Are you the same James Gordon whose wife just passed away?

GORDON

Yes. Five days ago and two floors up. Buried her yesterday.

SAM

I'm very sorry.

GORDON

It was a quiet, merciful end.

SAM

It must be a relief to know she's out of pain.

GORDON

Been a hell of a week, I can tell you.

SAM

You're here about Crystal Davis?

GORDON

How is she?

SAM

Too early to tell, but definitely not good. She's suffering from extreme exposure at the very least. She's sedated right now.

GORDON

When will she wake up?

SAM

Anyone's guess.

GORDON

I'll need to talk to her.

SAM

I would imagine so. We'll see what we can do.

GORDON

Dr. Taylor,...

SAM

I said we'll see. I know you have a job to do, but so do I. You'll get your chance, but only when I say so. When was Crystal reported missing?

GORDON

Five days ago. That would be June 17th. Probably just another incident of some kid getting drunk and wandering off into the bayou.

SAM

Lieutenant, this girl has been raped.

GORDON

You positive about that?

SAM

Two different sperm samples showed up. Different blood types. Two men.

GORDON

Christ.

SAM

They weren't too gentle, either. Crystal was severely beaten. We did find skin samples under one fingernail. Plus we may have found a hair that does not match hers. I've already given them to your forensics officer. You can match those up when you have a suspect.

GORDON

I appreciate your cooperation. So what's her prognosis?

SAM

Hard to say. All we know is she was outside for an extended period of time. It's clear that she was wandering around the bayou most of the time she was gone. It's a miracle she's even alive. Hundreds of scratches, insect bites and welts...she's suffering from malnutrition. We've got her on IVs and tube feeding.

GORDON

Jesus...

SAM

She's in deep shock.

GORDON

And you can't tell when she'll come out of it.

SAM

She's been wandering for five days with no clothes, the cold nights, no food, little water. Finger marks on her neck, upper arms, inner thighs, three broken ribs, a broken nose, and a split lip. Whoever did this really went to town on her. She'll come out of it when she's ready, but I wouldn't hold my breath. Her parents are with her now. Leave me your phone number and I'll call you when there's a change.

GORDON

I'd like someone to stay with her. For her protection.

SAM

That will be all right. But I don't want any of the other patients disturbed.

GORDON

If she wakes up, she can tell us what happened. She may even talk in her sleep.

SAM

She's not quite sleeping.

GORDON

I thought you said she was sedated.

SAM

Lieutenant, Crystal has been through a severe trauma. What will you do if she wakes up and has blacked it all out? That is a very real possibility. Think about it. As I said, she's in deep shock. She sees, hears, smells, feels, but she's retreated from full consciousness. She's there, but her mind is in hiding right now. She may stay that way for a while.

GORDON

Can I at least see her?

SAM

No questions.

GORDON

Of course not. Poor little lamb.

SAM

You will find these people?

GORDON

I won't rest until the truth has been told.

SAM

Is that a promise?

GORDON

Excuse me?

SAM

I asked you if that was a promise. Is it?

GORDON

Ma'am, it's my duty...

SAM

I know it's your duty. You're a cop. What I want to know is did you just promise me that you "won't rest until the truth has been told," or were you just "Yes, ma'am"-ing me? Is that a promise?

GORDON

It's a promise. Got a Bible?

SAM

You could swear with your hand on the Boy Scout manual. Technically.

GORDON

It's a promise.

SAM

Good. Come along now. [*SAM exits. GORDON takes a quick snort of coke*]

GORDON

Bitch. [*GORDON follows.*]

Act I, scene ii

Lights fade up. The present. Same locale as PROLOGUE; the parlor is now a suite in a hotel. BOBNO enters, carrying backpack and equipment cases. Sets down luggage, wipes forehead with sleeve. It is New Orleans in June, blistering and muggy.]

MADDIE

Wow! Isn't this room beautiful?

BOBNO

[Opens case, extracts camera and lens and begins to inspect and clean.] Yeah.

MADDIE

Mr. Enthusiasm! Come on, Bobno, this is gorgeous! So New Orleans. So French!

BOBNO

Spanish, actually.

MADDIE

What do you mean?

BOBNO

This house and nearly all of the other structures in the area—are about as French as bullfighting. The French had it first, but Louis XV secretly surrendered it to his cousin, Charles III of Spain in 1762. The good folk of New Orleans didn't find out until two whole years later. Surprise! Then the whole joint burned down. Twice, in fact. Once in 1788 and again in 1794. The rebuilding was in Spanish style. This time in brick. It's called the French Quarter, so naturally everyone thinks it's...well, French.

MADDIE

Ooh! Look out here! The courtyard is beautiful! Our terrace is huge! And the pool looks great! Wanna go for a swim?

BOBNO

You go ahead. I want to check the equipment.

MADDIE

Whoa, whoa. That's my job. I'll do it.

BOBNO

I got it.

MADDIE

You sure?

BOBNO

Yeah.

MADDIE

No, I'll do it.

BOBNO

I've already got it.

MADDIE

I don't mind.

BOBNO

I got it. First priority is the gear. If you want to sightsee we can maybe take a walk later.

MADDIE

You know, I have this dilemma. I mean, here I am, in love with you, and you treat me like, well, like shit. Really. After this film, I am leaving. Leaving. A year and a half as your assistant, we've slept together exactly three times. And it wasn't very good, either, because every time you were drunk. And the only time you could effectively get it up was when I practically raped you.

BOBNO

I'm sorry, Mad. You say something?

MADDIE

I said later would be fine.

BOBNO

I know the schedule is rushed, but we're on a really tight budget. The cost of this place is stretching it. The cameras are fine. The rest of the equipment should be here by tonight. Can you read me the preliminary schedule?

MADDIE

Tomorrow we start getting scenics. We do the girl's house first—

BOBNO

Crystal.

MADDIE

Right. Then...

BOBNO

Her name is Crystal.

MADDIE

Right. Crystal. Sorry. Okay, let me go over the background again. According to the parents, Crystal said she was going to the movies with some friends. This is significant, because as a rule, they did not let her go out except to church functions. The parents are devout Catholics and they didn't want any bad influences corrupting her. But this time she talked them into it. The father was the one who finally relented. Turns out she never did go to the movies, never had a date with friends that night. Schoolmates were interviewed, but the story seems to be the same: nice girl, excellent grades, polite, beautiful. No boys in the picture—the fact that her father was the principal of the school probably discouraged them from asking for a date.

BOBNO

Actually he still is the principal.

MADDIE

Right. So, the plan is that we interview Crystal's parents initially, then periodically throughout the hearing. They're going to be interesting. Crystal's been in a coma since June 17th, XXXX¹—that's twenty years—and her parents are against removing life-support. I just cannot believe that after all this time they'd want to continue their only daughter's suffering. Don't they have any compassion?

BOBNO

They have two things. Pain and faith. Pain from seeing their daughter refusing to die, and faith that this is what God wants. One feeds the other. Ironically, they probably draw additional strength from all this. God moves in mysterious ways and all that.

¹date twenty years past current

Their daughter is at the center of a huge medical, legal and ethical controversy. God's lesson, God's example. They don't have a choice, really.

MADDIE

Was Crystal religious?

BOBNO

Not really. I mean we don't have any primary testimony to that.

MADDIE

Well, Mom and Dad certainly vouch for her sainthood. Now. The initial hospital examination reveals that Crystal had violent sex with two men that night. Neither man has been found. Now. Moving on. We get shots of the bayou where she was found, the house of the people who picked her up, the hospital, the sheriff's office, the Right to Life Center, the Right to Dignified Death Council, plus lotsa scenics of New Orleans to throw in under the narration...what did I miss?

BOBNO

Nothing, as usual. Hey—you are absolutely the best, Maddie. I don't know what I'd do without you.

MADDIE

Maybe one of these days you'll find out.

BOBNO

Let's not go there again, okay? We've been through this. If you want to leave, I can't stop you.

MADDIE

Won't stop me is what you mean.

BOBNO

Why do you have to do this?

MADDIE

Because you'd be glad to get me out of your hair.

BOBNO

That is so less than true, Maddie. You are more than invaluable to me. You know that. I know I'm the guy who gets all the credit, but haven't I said a hundred times that I'd be nowhere without you? I can't lie to you, Maddie. You run the show and keep everything on schedule and smooth. You talk to people, which I don't do very well.

MADDIE

Yeah, yeah.

BOBNO

Look. We have the whole rest of the evening. Wanna do something?

MADDIE

You serious?

BOBNO

Absolutely.

[MADDIE grins, pulls book out of her purse.]

BOBNO

Oh, come on. No, no, not that.

MADDIE

I want to do this. It looks like fun.

BOBNO

A ghost tour? Oh, come on, Maddie! Those things are such a rip-off! They're for tourists.

MADDIE

We are tourists!

BOBNO

It's all mumbo jumbo and lies. Boogie Man bullshit.

MADDIE

[*Reading*] It says here that New Orleans is the most haunted city in America.

BOBNO

Oh, brother.

MADDIE

"There are hundreds of homes and establishments that boast ghost sightings. These places were scenes of great emotional trauma, and the lingering auras of those who were involved continue to manifest themselves."

BOBNO

There's a no-brainer. Considering the history of this place, it's less than elementary.

MADDIE

Explain.

BOBNO

History, Mad. New Orleans is supposed to have been settled on an area of Native American burial grounds. A sacred place. So, first off, you've got a few thousand extremely pissed-off Native American spirits. Plus, this place is a swamp. They call it a bayou, which is Cajun for "huge fucking wetland." Picture a giant petri dish for all sorts of thriving unfriendly micro-organisms. Malaria, TB, influenza, whatever. Thousands of people died here from disease and the environment. Add to that all the murders, massacres, pirate and buccaneer killings, not to mention the two times the whole French Quarter burned down, taking most of the population with it... In the early 1900s, when they built their first canal, the death rate for the Irish workmen was estimated, according to whom you believe, somewhere between 8 and 20 thousand. That was from cholera. And let's not forget 1800 or so who died during Katrina. I wouldn't be surprised if this town's got a haint or two. Maddie, if spirits could walk again due to emotional trauma, this place would be spook central of the known galaxy.

MADDIE

How do you know so much about New Orleans?

BOBNO

I read a lot of history. [*MADDIE gives him a look.*] I do.

MADDIE

Mm-hmm. I love ghost stories. I used to listen to them at camp and then stay awake all night with a baseball bat in case the deranged murderers with hooks for hands came to molest our tent.

BOBNO

You loved your tent that much?

MADDIE and BOBNO

Shut up.

BOBNO

No, truly, Maddie, I never knew you were a closet spiritualist.

MADDIE

You'd be amazed what I am. Anyway, there are lots of places here, Bobno. Most of them look like they're close by. We can just walk around and I'll read to you. Hey! Our hotel is listed!

BOBNO

Holy reservations, Batman. What a surprise.

MADDIE

This is so cool! This place is haunted! Listen to this. It says here that in 1859, this house was bought by a local cotton trader named Armand du Olivier. Isn't that a great name? Armand...du...Olivier. "He lived here with his invalid wife, their six-year-old boy, and many servants. The boy had a governess, a beautiful raven-haired girl of nineteen named Genevieve. One day while the governess and the boy were playing, the boy ran out to the parlor terrace and crashed through..." Oh my god...

BOBNO

And fell to his death, right?

MADDIE

"He crashed through the terrace, and impaled himself on the spiked railing that ran along the back courtyard." Bobno! [*Runs to terrace*] This is where he fell! Right here! He must have come right through this room!

BOBNO

I'd really give anything to open up to you, kiddo. I know having you here with me is more than I could ask for. As much as I can, I love you, Maddie.

MADDIE

What did you say?

BOBNO

I said don't run on the terrace.

MADDIE

"The governess committed suicide by hanging herself from the rafters of the parlor." That's this room! The parlor suite! Oh my god, Bobno! She committed suicide right here!

BOBNO

Right where you're standing? Well, that's cheery.

MADDIE

"It is said that people have heard a child crying through the building. When they go to investigate, the sound fades away. Frequently, a woman dressed in black has been seen running along the second-floor corridor, only to vanish through the north wall into what used to be the parlor. She is believed to be the ghost of the young governess, dressed in the cerements of the grave, rushing to save her young charge. Furniture, especially chairs, placed in the center of the room, has been found toppled over."

BOBNO

There's a door here. Behind the sideboard. This must be where she's supposed to come through.

MADDIE

This is creepy. "After the tragedy, several servants either ran away or quit. A few claimed to have heard strange noises coming from the parlor room and seen shadowy figures running along the second-floor halls. Olivier lived only four more years, succumbing to grief and alcohol." Isn't this creepy?

BOBNO

Honestly. You say creepy as if you meant "groovy."

MADDIE

Cuh-ree-e-e-e-p-e-e-e....

BOBNO

We can change rooms if you want.

MADDIE

No way! This is —

BOBNO

Pure bullshit.

MADDIE

You don't believe in ghosts?

BOBNO

I do not. Stories to frighten kiddies. And besides, that book leaves out a lot. Whatever parts of the story are true, that is.

MADDIE

What do you mean?

BOBNO

Read between the lines.

MADDIE

What?

BOBNO

Read between the lines: Invalid wife. Rich cotton trader. Beautiful young governess.

MADDIE

It's possible.

BOBNO

More than possible. Everybody had a mistress back then. It was accepted and quite common. Especially mulattos. They used to hold mulatto or octaroon balls every year to show off the new crop. It was the quite social event.

MADDIE

Bastard!

BOBNO

Who? Me or Olivier?

MADDIE

Olivier, of course. You're just cynical.

BOBNO

That I will admit to.

MADDIE

Come on, let's do it. Let's have some fun before we have to start working.

BOBNO

Maddie...!

MADDIE

Oh, please, please, please, please, please...

BOBNO

All right!

MADDIE

The tour starts in twenty minutes. And it's getting dark. Cre-e-e-epy.

BOBNO

Do you actually believe that spirits walk the earth?

MADDIE

I...don't discount it. I mean, why not?

BOBNO

It just seems like an exquisitely sadistic form of torture, that's all. Let's say you're a normal human, taking up space in the biosphere, doing whatever it is you're supposed to be doing. Then you die. I believe that when you die, it's all over. Kaput. Finished. Pffft, that's all she wrote. But in your world, sometimes you don't go to heaven or hell or purgatory, or Weehauken or wherever. You have to stay here. Or you *want* to stay here instead of going to eternal rest. Why? So you can relive the horrible thing that happened to you? Do any of these ghosts ever manage to rectify the tragedy? Take this place, for example. You got one stupid kid farting around, and bang! He goes through this terrace and lands on the spikes. Then you have this governess chasing him and watching him fall to his death? Who in hell would want to relive that? Reliving that would *be* hell, if you ask me.

MADDIE

Maybe they're trapped. Maybe there's something so horrible, so traumatic, they can't leave it unfinished.

BOBNO

Yeah, but they're dead.

MADDIE

Bobno, I'm not god. I don't know why or how.

BOBNO

See? That's what I mean. It doesn't make sense.

MADDIE

It doesn't make your kind of sense, Bobno. Enough people claimed to have seen spirits...

BOBNO

I just don't get the ghost thing. Not even being able to be dead in peace. That's just too evil for me to contemplate. Let me ask you this: Do you enjoy being scared?

MADDIE

You mean ghosts and stuff? Well, yeah. Telling ghost stories is fun. Why?

BOBNO

I've never really understood the phenomenon. Being scared for fun. Do you like nightmares?

MADDIE

Well... Bobno...didn't anyone ever tell you ghost stories?

BOBNO

No, not really.

MADDIE

You didn't go to camp and sit around a bonfire and...

BOBNO

Do you want to go or not?

MADDIE

What's bothering you? You are getting more and more...do you have UMS?

BOBNO

What, pray tell, is UMS?

MADDIE

Ugly mood swings! Come on, lay off! I wanna have a good time today. God knows it'll be the last chance. This damn film is going to be enough of a downer.

BOBNO

Hey, I'm sorry this assignment is so depressing. Tell you what. After we're done filming the right-to-die decision of some poor girl who was raped and has been in a coma for twenty years, maybe we can throw in a laugh track. Oh, God. Maddie. I'm sorry.

MADDIE

I can't believe you said that.

BOBNO

I can't, either. Maddie. I'm sorry. Please. I need you. Please.

MADDIE

It's okay. [*Crosses to BOBNO, hugs him. He hugs her back.*] That's it. It's okay. Hey. Can you handle this job? I can't help feeling that there's really something on your mind ...

BOBNO

I can handle it. I have to. I mean, I made the commitment.

MADDIE

Yeah, you did. Hey, let's go for a walk. Get a beignet and some java.

BOBNO

You got it. After the tour.

MADDIE

You sure?

BOBNO

Absolument, cher. You can tell me some of the ghost stories you heard around the campfire.

MADDIE

I can't believe you never heard of any. You never heard of the guy with the hook for a hand?

BOBNO

Uhh,...let's see...hook, guy, hand...

MADDIE

God, he's standard. He was the caretaker of the camp...

BOBNO

Which camp?

MADDIE

Whatever camp you're in. He's ubiquitous.

BOBNO

I see. Kind of a generic spiritual infestation.

MADDIE

...And now he lives in the forest in a cave and runs around murdering campers who don't believe in him because years ago his own children went to the camp and drowned.

BOBNO

Not only generic, but genetic, too. A generically genetic genesis.

MADDIE

[Takes BOBNO's hand and leads him out hotel room door.] And no one can ever find him. And he lost his hand trying to save his kids and then he ran away...oh, Bobno, you don't know the fun you missed....

[MADDIE's voice fades off down the hall. One second of silence, then the childlike laughter is heard again.]

Act I, Scene iii

[Later that same evening. MADDIE bursts in hotel room door. She is extremely angered. She strides heavily across the room, stopping only before she reaches the opposite wall. She turns to look at the door, then faces away again. BOBNO enters, looking as if he's been losing a long argument.]

BOBNO

I really don't see what the hell difference it makes, Maddie. Okay, so I didn't tell you and I'm sorry you found out this way...

MADDIE

You're so full of shit, Bobno. Try...try and imagine how I might feel. Try it for once. I know I'm nothing in your life—

BOBNO

That's not true!

MADDIE

It is true! I feel like such a fucking idiot!

BOBNO

Okay, I'm sorr-

MADDIE

Shut up! Just shut up! I can't believe it!

BOBNO

The jerk was telling lies! I'm sorry for embarrassing you.

MADDIE

Embarrassing me? What makes you think you embarrassed me? There I was, just listening to the guide talk about all these places and then we come to this beautiful house and he starts talking about it and you explode in his face!

BOBNO

How was I to know he was going to spread lies about that house?

MADDIE

How was he to know you grew up in that house? For that matter, how was I supposed to know you'd ever been here at all? You've been lying to me, Bobno. Our whole relationship has been behind a lie.

BOBNO

I only lied by omission. Technically, I never told you a falsehood.

MADDIE

How about when I asked how you know so much about New Orleans? "Oh, Maddie, I read a lot."

BOBNO

That part is true. I have read a lot. I know the whole history... I just didn't give you the whole answer. I walked a fine line and I fell off, okay?

MADDIE

Jesus!

BOBNO

I ran away at fifteen. I never expected to come back here. Then this started. This "right to live, right to die" shit. As a documentary maker, I could not pass it up.

MADDIE

How am I going to trust you?

BOBNO

You mean professionally or personally? Professionally, this film will be my best yet. Our best yet. Personally, I obviously can't guarantee a damn thing.

MADDIE

So what happened?

BOBNO

I told you. I ran away.

MADDIE

Why?

BOBNO

I couldn't go on living in that house.

MADDIE

Why?

BOBNO

There were reasons. My father died, my mother remarried... It's the case of the evil second husband, okay? The house wasn't big enough for both of us.

MADDIE

Sounds like the whole state was too small.

BOBNO

I moved on shortly after my mother died. Traveled around for a few years, settled down in San Diego.

MADDIE

You never came back?

BOBNO

Once or twice. Anyway. Went to film school. The rest? Academic.

MADDIE

The rest.

BOBNO

No. Not now. Later.

MADDIE

Not good enough.

BOBNO

Sorry, Maddie. It'll have to do.

MADDIE

You're a selfish prick.

BOBNO

Probably. But I'm a little sensitive about the dirty little private details of my life.

MADDIE

Something to hide?

BOBNO

Doesn't everyone?

MADDIE

Rhetorical diversion.