



Voodoo Caught (Hot Nights in the Big Easy)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Two hearts entwined in one hot night

A chronic gambler, down on his luck, Austin must fight for more than his life.

A premiere Jazz musician has been imprisoned. Its been a century since Luc was free to play the streets of New Orleans.

When the mafia catches up to Austin and threatens his life, he discovers Luc, cursed by a voodoo witch long ago. Both are caught in a nefarious trap, linked together by a mysterious ring.

They need to work together to make it out of the Big Easy alive.

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Hurricane Katrina Memorial

A group of tourists poured out of the bus and mingled around the entrance to the memorial. Slowing my pace, I slid in behind them. Blending in was a good way to hide, and I wasn't one not to take advantage of whatever Lady Luck threw my way. The tour guide started talking in a booming yet compelling voice. And wasn't he a sight? White jacket covered in what appeared to be blood splatters. Well, it sure fit for a ghost tour. Or murder. Or whatever.

The guide went on and on about the Katrina Hurricane Memorial and the atrocities of the city. The memorial was gorgeous in the daytime with its black stone walls, but at night, it was all shadows. Perfect for me. I ducked behind one of the dour monuments as the guide moved to the Charity Hospital and its history. Mass graves. Unknown poor people dumped there upon death. And then something about one particular guest . The niece of a mob boss had the poor soul killed and dumped with the other unfortunate souls in an unmarked grave. This one, however, wasn't content to rest. And late, late at night, if it was quiet enough, you could hear his music on the wind. "He was a musician, you see, and in fact..." I crouched and slid deeper into the shadows, thinking I was safe there. "...he was called the Prince of Jazz. He could sing like a bird and play any instrument, but he loved the piano best."

Another voice, deeper, richer, cut through the tour guide's spiel. "There. Grab him."

Shit. They found me . I sprang up and tried to run, but a big brute of a man grabbed my arm, and another stuck his leg out to trip me up. Then they had me. They held me tight and carried me over to the even bigger dude who was apparently in charge. "Good job." He put his index finger on my forehead. "If you don't have every penny,

I'm going to beat it out of you in blood."

I tried to hold my hands up to plea my case, but they had my hands pinned. "You know I don't. Why the hell do you think I was running?"

"Smart ass." He looked around. "Perfect. Come on. Bring him."

"Where we going?" I asked, but even without the brute's answer, I knew. The memorial had been built on the grounds of Charity Hospital Cemetery. We were right there. It didn't take much to keep moving deeper into the property, away from the hurricane-shaped memorial. Well, it seemed quite appropriate for what my life had become.

"Abel. Get a shovel," he snapped, literally and figuratively, at the one man not holding on to me.

Not too long after that, I was digging my own damn grave in a remote spot on the grounds. Fuck my life. "This is bullshit."

"Every time you open your stupid mouth, I'm going to give you one more punch."

I grumbled under my breath.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all." Fuckers. After making me sweat my life away in this fucking heat, they were going to beat the shit out of me and bury me alive. I was already as good as dead and now tortured on top of it. This would be a long, painful death.

"Deep enough." The brute in charge stood and leaned over me where I stood in the

hole. “Get out.” He grabbed the shovel and yanked it away from me before I had a chance to use it as a weapon, and good for him because damn straight I would have. But I wasn’t eager to crawl out of the grave only to get my ass beat. “Now. The longer you delay, the worse it’s going to be.”

“I’m dead either way. What does it matter?” And there would be no one to miss me.

Brute-in-charge gave an evil chuckle. “That hasn’t been determined yet. But keep this up and it will.”

He lied. I didn’t have a chance of coming out of this alive. Maybe I could run again. It didn’t matter. My life was worthless anyway. How long have I spent running and dodging and scamming? Since I was a kid, and I didn’t know anything else. I didn’t contribute anything. No, I took—to survive. But that didn’t matter, especially now. I climbed up the side—it wasn’t deep enough to take much effort. At the top, I flipped over onto my back in the grass. Resigned.

And the beating came. Kicks to my ribs and thighs to start. Then one of them hauled me up and good old Brute-in-charge punched me in the gut. Twice. Across the face once. If my jaw wasn’t broken, it sure as hell would be bruised. “Throw him in the pit. Doubt he’ll be able to get out of it in this shape.”

“Yes, boss.” Whoever was holding me dragged my limp body across the ground and let go. I landed hard. Dirt puffed up around me. I wrapped my arms around my stomach and curled into the fetal position. Maybe I had internal bleeding and would die quickly, but if the way the rest of my life was going was anything to go by, it would be slow and painful.

“I suggest you find the money. Fast.” The assholes laughed as they walked away.

Wait. Walked away? I had been holding my breath, expecting a gunshot to the head.

Maybe I did have a chance to get out of this alive.

I heard someone saying something about making the boss happy but had no clue what he was on about. And it didn't matter as long as they left. I stayed still until I couldn't hear anything anymore. I felt a little dizzy, probably a concussion, and I might have dozed off after that.

What woke me was the sound of music. Faint, dancing in the air...here and then not. Then, clear enough, I could hear the sad melody.

I put my hands beneath me and pushed but the ground wasn't solid. I collapsed. On top of something...

Deity ! I was on top of a dead body. Fuck my life!

I scrambled back and away as far as I could in this tiny hole. I hadn't dug it very big. Didn't need to.

It was too dark to see anything. The moon and stars weren't nearly bright enough this close to the city, and no one had bothered putting lights this far out. When we'd come here, the memorial was no longer in sight, nor the towering building of the hospital either. And to think, they were renovating that monstrosity for apartments, but that wasn't the point. Getting the fuck out of this hole and away from that body was.

But then the music lifted again. Louder, and seemingly coming from right in front of me. A blue glow lit the place, allowing me to see the pile of bones that I had missed right in front of me, still covered in dirt but clearly bones. An arm that had been busted up, and a hand with mangled fingers and...

A glowing ring.

It was hard to tell beneath the azure light pouring from the jewelry, but it looked gold. Rich and silky. Could be worth enough to save my life. But I'd have to get it off the bone. And it was glowing. And making music.

I was afraid but had to take the risk. I mean, this was life or death— My life or death. And this fellow was already gone. No one else might have cared about me, but I still wanted to live, to survive. Fuck! My entire body hurt. I'd have boot print-shaped bruises covering my sides. Slowly, I inched forward, reaching my hand out toward the glow.

The music stopped, and the light dimmed, fading to nothing. I grabbed it as the last of the light faded and yanked it off the skeleton. I felt it, heavy in my palm, weighing more than I'd thought it could. And it was warm. Fuck ! What was I getting myself into? Ultimately, it didn't matter. If I wanted to see the sun come up the next morning, I had to try.

I slid the ring on my finger.

The music started again. This time, it was incessantly loud. Piano, guitar, a snare drum, and then a voice. It sang about a rose, and then I saw a figure on his knees in front of me. Head down. But he slowly looked up. And stared right at me. He solidified as I stared back. Big, brown eyes in a Clark Gable-like face. A younger Gable, though. Close to my age. Prominent nose, soft lips that turned down in pure sorrow. But then surprise mixed with it across his features.

“Holy fucking deities and Mars.” I was seeing a mother-fucking-ghost. And not a fancy light show or spooky sheet, either. No, a man in a button-down shirt and a seriously confused one at that.

“Are? Are you talking to me?” he asked with a voice like buttered rum.

“Y-Yeah...”

The man sat up straight, shoulders going back. “Well. This is new.”

“Y-Yeah...” Well, what the fuck was I supposed to say? To a ghost, a sexy ghost even.

“I’m Luc, Luc Marchand.” He held out his hand, and I leaned forward to grip his long, slender fingers, but it went right through him. “Ahh...you’re alive then. Well. This is also new.”

“You, uh, you know you’re dead?”

He nodded. “Been here a long, long time.”

“You’re a musician? I heard music.” In fact, there was a trace of it still in the air, circling us but fading.

“Yes. What about you?”

“I...” What the hell did I tell this handsome man? Dead or not, I was a loser and nothing more. “Doesn’t matter. Hey, I need to get out of here.”

“I understand.”

And wow, I watched as a blush bloomed across the face of this man, glowing in front of me.

“Gah! You’re—” I was about to tell him how gorgeous he was. I was ridiculous. “Sorry. It was nice to meet you.” Turning to the side, I climbed again, pulling myself up by measures. No easy fit with bruised ribs and jaw, and I still felt like puking from

the gut punches. But I managed to get to the top. I rolled over on my back, looking up at the faint stars and wondering how the fuck I got here.

Not in the cemetery, in particular, but in my life. Running from goons over a gambling debt. Lady Luck was a cold-hearted bitch. But then again, I'd been running my whole life from one thing or another, never toward anything.

After catching my breath, I pulled myself up and started the long walk back to the French Quarter. To my surprise, Luc walked beside me. He turned with a smile. "Apparently, I'm coming with you."

"With? Me?"

"You took the ring." He pointed at my hand. "So, I go with you."

Deities ! It hit me then. He was attached to the ring. I didn't steal jewelry I could pawn for cash to save my ass—not that it would have been enough anyway—I stole a ring embedded with a ghost. I couldn't turn that over to anyone. It wouldn't be right. I sighed. Fuck my life . He was sexy and sweet, but I didn't much need a supernatural companion. My life was shit without that, so what the fuck would it be with it? "I'm Austin."

"Nice to meet you, Austin...uh...do you have a last name?"

"Broussard. As if it matters."

"Austin Broussard. That sounds lyrical on my tongue."

"That, uh, that's sweet." We made it to the front of the memorial and realized I had to get lost in the Quarter if I was going to have a chance of surviving. "It's going to be a long walk." I glanced over at him. "And we may have to run. I don't know if you're

going to be able to do that in those shoes.” They were nice, a leather and tweed oxford that paired nicely with his high-waisted slacks.

Luc stretched his arms and then put a hat on that I hadn’t seen before on his head. It was a fedora, like Indiana Jones wore, though not dusty, and it had a wider band. “Well, Mr. Broussard, I cannot feel my feet. It’s you that will be doing all the running.”

“Hmm...okay then. And call me Austin. I think we’re beyond formalities, right?”

“Maybe. But that’s not how I was brought up.”

I looked him over again. “What year do you think this is?” He looked like he could have stepped out of a fancy men’s catalog.

“I have no idea. I was buried in 1924.”

“Huh. Well, it’s a hundred years later than that, my friend.”

The smile fell from his face. I could see him thinking. “Two thousand and twenty-four?” His mouth hung open.

I headed right down the sidewalk along Canal. “Yep. We say Twenty-Twenty-four.”

He didn’t say anything else for a long time. We had a long walk back to the Quarter.

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Faubourg Marigny and the Canals

Figuring out our next move wasn't hard since I was filthy from digging and rolling around in grave dirt. So when Luc asked where we were going, the answer was easy. "Home."

"And where is home?"

"Marigny. It's outside the French Quarter, and you know, it's a quirky little community. A lot of artists. And...it's in the other direction." With a huff, I reoriented. "Okay, it's probably a two-hour walk either way. We can go down to Norman before cutting over. Come on." As if he had a choice.

"I'm quite interested to see your home, Austin."

"It's a shit hole. So don't get excited."

We talked about other things as we walked. Not about my gambling addiction. Not about music. Those felt like topics that were too deep in the middle of the night. Instead, I told him about New Orleans and the changes he missed in the last hundred years. About cell phones and airplanes and, when a fancy sports car passed us, the automobile industry. And computers. Space travel. Luc didn't believe half of it. What was left unsaid was whether he would actually need that information.

"Maybe..." he looked down at his shoes—cool ass shoes.

"Maybe what, Luc?"

“Do you think I could ever come back? I mean, I’ve thought about it a lot. Had plenty of time to think. I don’t know how, but I’d like a second chance, you know.”

“Not moving on? Like to the afterlife?” I had to know. Why would he want to come back as a human here in a strange world he was grasping to understand?

Luc shrugged. “I’ve thought about both, but after meeting you. You know? I think I’d like a shot at it.”

If we could find a way to bring him back, we would. Otherwise, he might be stuck in that ring forever. And likewise, the other alternative was figuring out how to get him out of the ring so he could move on to whatever the afterlife had to offer. I had to admit that last bit was distasteful to me, especially if he wasn’t ready for it, and it sounded like he wasn’t. And...I kind of wanted him to stick around. He was probably the most interesting thing to happen to me in a long time, maybe ever. “If we can figure it out, we’ll bring you back. I’ll certainly give it a shot. Okay?”

“That sounds wonderful.”

It took a little under two hours. But I was tired. Running through the Quarter, digging a grave, being beaten, and walking all the way from Charity Hospital Cemetery to Marigny all left me exhausted and aching. I hoped like hell I had Tylenol at the house.

Finally, my little row came into sight when we turned the last corner. The one I rented was painted a cute yellow with blue trim and shutters that covered the windows and door, and there was a huge hedge in front of it that someone had shaped into a little man. I didn’t love living here, but there was a certain fondness for the originality of it.

“This is me.” I rubbed my hand over the bush man before stepping up to the stoop

and opening the shutters, then unlocking the door. Luc went in ahead of me and looked around. I knew what he would see. A shotgun house with rooms all in a row. The living room opened to a kitchen area, and behind that was a tiny bathroom and a bedroom behind that. I hardly needed to flip a light on since Luc was glowing up the place, but I did anyway, and his aura was dimmed by the dingy illumination. "It's okay. All I can afford, and actually." I scratched my head. "I can't afford this. Anyway. I'm gonna grab a shower."

I didn't think about what I was doing, simply going through the motions, and ended up naked in the shower, unsure of how I got there. I climbed into the tub and turned my face up to the water. When I turned around, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

Luc stood there, watching me with a sly look. "Where you go, I go."

"Fuck. I forgot."

His eyebrow over one eye quirked up as he examined me. "I don't mind."

"Yeah?" I smirked. I wasn't too bad looking, maybe a bit scrawny since I hardly ate, and bruises had started to form in reddish-brown.

"Yeah. Too bad I can't give you a hand with that...washing."

My cock betrayed me, standing up tall for my spirit friend. "You can...watch." I grabbed the soap and used it generously over every part of my body, neck, shoulders, chest, abs...then my dick and balls, stopping to stroke my hardness.

Luc's eyes widened and he licked those perfectly kissable lips. "My, my. You are a fine-looking man. Show me how you pleasure yourself."

I slowly rubbed over my cock with soaped-up fingers, playing with the head, sliding

down the shaft. I rubbed my balls, then began for real. I felt the need building, and getting off was the goal. I didn't know if Luc could do the same, but I was going to try to make it enjoyable for both of us as much as I could.

Bucking into my hand, I moaned, hoping to give him a show along with my orgasm. I slammed my other hand against the cheap fiberglass surround. Knowing his eyes were on me had me coming in record time. I shot out hard toward him, letting my seed fall into the bottom of the tub.

"Wow." He reached a hand toward me. "I wish I could touch. Feel you."

"Can you, uh...do that yourself?"

"No. I can't feel anything."

"We have to fix that." I wanted to touch him more now than anything now. I wanted to know what his skin felt like against mine, what his lips felt like around my cock, and what his kiss tasted like.

"I have some thoughts about that. You know, a hundred years of being stuck out there, you get thoughts."

"You ever speak to other spirits?"

"Yes, that too."

"Let me get dressed and we'll figure out our next move." I didn't add that we needed to do it fast because I had no idea how long it would take those goons to show up here looking for me.

"You want to go where?" I pulled a shirt over my head and sat on the edge of the bed.

“We need to consult the spirits of nature. We need to go to the swamp.”

“Fuck. It’ll be morning before we get there.”

Luc shrugged. “I’m as much here at any time of the day as at night. I don’t eat. I don’t sleep.”

“Okay. But I do those things.” And I was hungry for sure, but I’d never let that slow me down before. I reached under the bed and pulled out my old hiking boots, and wondered if I had bug spray because I was wearing shorts if we were heading out to the swamp.

We still had about three or four hours until sunrise. Maybe we could get there and back.

I was wrong. It took three hours to get there. Walking sucked sometimes. But we spent that time getting to know each other better. Luc told me about his life, playing in clubs, chasing men, and running from women.

“Including Rose?” I asked, putting two and two together. He had sung about a rose in his song, but I hadn’t thought about whether it was a person or a flower. I was guessing the latter now.

“Yes. I ran from her, but not fast enough.”

“This is her fault? Who was she?”

“Yes. She was related to the mob boss at the time. Silvestro Carollo. She was his niece or something. I’m not sure, but when I didn’t reciprocate her intentions, she cried to him.”

“And he killed you.”

“No. Actually, he turned her down, but she was determined. She found a voodoo mambo to trap my soul in the ring. She lied though. Told the mambo I defiled her. So with my soul trapped and a dead body at her feet, Carollo had no choice but to step in, but he wasn’t happy about it.”

“Guess not. She forced his hand.”

“Yes, well, he took the ring, stuck it on my finger and dumped my body in an unmarked grave.”

“In the one place no one would give a damn about.”

“True.”

His story was sad, and it made me more determined to help him. So I slapped at mosquitoes as we left Harbor Drive and slid into the unauthorized personnel area of the canal. “Following the canal will take us farther and farther into swamp land. If we go far enough, we’ll hit a lake, but damn,” I slapped another bug, this time around my neck, “I don’t want to go that far.”

“Me either.”

The only light was coming off of Luc, but at least I had that to see by. I didn’t know what we would find as I sloshed through the marsh, or even what we were looking for...until we found it. Or him.

The first indication was a laugh that came from the trees around us, but it wasn’t pleasant. It wasn’t evil, but not benign either. Luc turned this way and that. “I think this is it.”

“What’s it?” I asked.

But another voice answered, it matched the laughter I’d heard. “Looking for me, boys?”

Before I had a chance to say no, Luc answered, “Yes. Can you help me?”

The figure didn’t so much as step out of the woods as simply appear there, becoming more solid by measures with each step toward us. “Maybe I can help. Maybe I cannot. Depends on what the needing is.”

He wore a jester cap and his face was painted white with red circled cheeks and black lips. His eyes sparkled like black diamonds. For a jolly figure, he was fucking scary. “Who are you?” I asked, the words slipping out before I could stop them.

“Oh, I go by lots of names or none at all.” The laughter swam around us, but he hadn’t opened his mouth, merely cocked his head to the side.

It was Luc who answered. “He’s the Wildman. The jester. The spirit of New Orleans, of Mardi Gras, and of the night. He’s the joker from the tarot deck.”

“This can’t be good.”

“Huh. You.” The joker man pointed at me. “Someone is after you. The big baddy, bad daddy.”

“Who—?”

“Carlos Marcello. Wants your life.” The joker danced around, stood on one hand, then leaned against a tree and pulled out a cigarette. He had a shot glass in the other hand. “Too much merriment. Too many demands. I can’t help your spirit, friend, but

I can help you. Beware Carlos Marcello.”

Then he was gone.

“That was useless.” I shook my head and turned back. I needed to get the fuck out of this swamp land.

“Not really. He told us who was after you. Now we can plan.”

“Luc. Carlos Marcello is dead. He’s been dead for years. I doubt I believe anything that joker dude said.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Austin, I’m dead. But I’m here.”

“Okay, you have a point, but I don’t know what to do with that.”

The joker appeared in front of us out of nowhere. “One more thing, boys. To find what you need, you need to focus on the needs of others. A need is a need, and everything depends on the needing.”

Then he was gone again as quickly as he’d come.

“Cryptic much?” I stomped too hard on the ground, splashing water around my feet. I was pissed because he’d scared me with that bullshit.

The sun started peeking over the horizon, casting a soft pink hue over the city, but it was hardly enough to light the way. I still had Luc, though he grew quiet, and I didn’t want to make things worse for him. We were both a little disappointed—well, at least I was. And maybe a little too tired as well because I wasn’t paying too much attention to our surroundings other than being back on the dirt road leading out of the swamp area.

“Austin. Austin, stop.”

“What?” I stopped and looked over at Luc. He pointed ahead and to the side at a break in the trees. Something was there. It growled. It was as big as a man, maybe taller than me, but that’s where the similarities ended. Beady eyes peered out from a goat’s head, but this goat had sharp teeth that snarled with saliva drooling from blood-red gums. “We are truly fucked.”

“Should you run?” he asked me, but I certainly didn’t know the answer. Sometimes, that made things worse. Predators could be triggered by running, movement, but if you stayed still, they might walk away. This thing was not walking away. In fact, it took a step closer and lowered its head.

A second growl from behind caught my attention, but I was afraid to take my eyes off the beast. “Luc, what was that?”

“A...A...I don’t know.”

“Shit.”

“I think it’s a Rougarou.”

“A what?”

“Werewolf.”

“Great.” We were truly fucked. At least Luc was already dead. Sort of. I supposed when your soul was sucked from your body, that made you dead. And, oh shit, my brain was rambling. “What do we do?”

The Rougarou leaped around us and ran toward the other creature. Now, in my sight,

I saw that the second monster on the scene was bigger and bulkier, but maybe not as fast. The other disappeared back into the woods, and then the Rougarou turned and faced us. It looked very wolfish and hairy, but as it walked toward us, it shrank and changed. The snout retreated into the face and quickly, a woman was left. A naked woman. “The Grunch won’t bother you now. You’re safe to go.” She gestured down the road.

“Th-Thank you?”

“That sounds like a question. I saved you.”

“I-I know? But what was that?”

“Grunch. I said.”

I had no idea what she was talking about, but Luc filled me in. “Oh, that’s a creature from the depths of hell sent to keep the Freakshow people safe.”

“Freakshow?”

“You know, Carneys. Sideshow. Whatever. They came here and were persecuted.”

I held my hand out. “Stop. I got it.”

The woman tilted her head to the side and looked between me and Luc. “I was about to ask why you were out here alone. Now I see. You’re not alone. For what good your spirit guide did to protect you.”

“Luc is not a guide, and we didn’t know what to do.”

The woman snorted. “I’m Cecile, by the way. You’re lucky I was out here.”

“Yes and thank you for sure. I think we’re going back to town.” I started walking, Luc beside me, and Cecile turned to walk with us. It wasn’t weird at all that a naked woman accompanied me. After finding Luc and meeting the joker man, not to mention the Grunch, I figured anything was possible.

“What are you doing out here anyway?”

“Looking for advice. Trying to figure out how to get Luc back.” I still wasn’t sure it was even possible. “You know, corporal--needs a body.”

The sun rose a little above the trees as we walked, shining down on her dark brown hair that fell around her shoulders. “You should be happy with what you have. But if you are serious, then maybe you gonna need help. You need a voodoo priestess. They know about these things.”

“Oh, no. I don’t think that’s a good idea. It was a voodoo priestess that got Luc into this situation to start with.”

“Mm...that doesn’t sound like no mambo. That sounds more like caplata. You can buy them. Well, I guess that’s what you need too. I don’t know.”

Luc sounded frustrated. “It was a mambo. Rose didn’t pay for it. No, she conned her.”

“I don’t think it matters what you call her. Voodoo is voodoo.” I didn’t want to subject Luc to that again.

Cecile grabbed my shoulder. “No, that’s not right. A caplata, they work black magic, mostly. Or it’s a con. Promising this or that and not delivering. But a true mambo, she’s the real thing and she deals with spirits and deities, not black magic. That’s probably what you be needing. Someone to set things right. That don’t mean it won’t

cost you.” She let my shoulder go. “But. That’s your best bet. If you want to get your Luc back to this plane.” She walked toward the trees.

“Hey, wait.” She sounded like she knew what she was talking about. I certainly had no way of getting Luc back on my own. I needed more information on this. “Say we did want to go to a mambo, who would we even go to?”

Cecile stopped and turned around. “I know one. She helped me when I needed it most. Lady Geneviève. Over on Burgundy. Six-one-eight Burgundy.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. But I wish you luck.” With that, fur sprouted down her back, covering her hips and legs. She bounded into the trees.

“Are we going to see this Geneviève?” Luc asked.

I sighed deeply. “I don’t know, Luc. I’m too tired to think. And hot. And my body hurts. I need to rest.”

“Let’s go home then.”

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Woldenberg Park

I snuck into my own home—well, I rented it—through the back window since it was daylight out. I tended to leave it unlocked for this purpose. Who knew who was watching the front. Could be the goons after me or the landlord because rent was due, and as usual, I didn't have it. Unfortunately, it wasn't one of those floor-to-ceiling windows like I had in the front. I suspected the back was an addition at some point. The three units attached to this building were probably all one at some point, but when they were divided for rentals, extra rooms were added across the back. Yay for me. I fell to the floor after having struggled to lift my body over the pane. I crawled to the bed. Every muscle in my body felt like they'd been through a meat grinder. I pulled my clothes off. Luc had already seen me naked, so it wasn't anything to strip down to my boxers.

I passed out, sprawled across the mattress, without even saying good night.

When I woke, the sun was pouring in the window I'd climbed through, but that wasn't what had done it. Luc was beside me in the bed, yelling at the top of his lungs.

“Austin! Wake up!”

“Wha...” I groaned and pulled the pillow over my head. If Luc was corporal, he'd probably have beat me with it.

“No, no, no. Wake up. Aus...someone is breaking in the front. Come on. You have to go.”

“What? Shit.” I tossed my boots out the window and grabbed my shorts and shirt from the night before off the floor and hefted my ass back out.

In record time, I pulled on shorts and my boots without lacing them, then tore down the alley and over a small fence. I slipped into the neighbors’ courtyard and out the other side. It was my standard route that ended in a parking lot right on the edge of, surprise...Burgundy. Marigny was on the edge of the French Quarter, after all. I kept going until I thought I was far enough away from the house.

One of the houses a few blocks up had a decent stoop. Of course, it was cement and not the old-fashioned brick that actually added character to the city, but I was not going to be picky. I sat and laced up my boots, catching my breath.

“This is the street, right? For the mambo?” Luc paced in front of me, looking as dapper as ever. His fedora cocked back, striped shirt unbuttoned at the top and tucked into those dark blue pants. He very well could have stepped right off the pages of *Roaring Twenties Weekly* if that was an actual magazine and not something my overworked brain made up.

“Yes. But it’s a coincidence. Right? We don’t have to go there if you don’t want to.” I had never been so concerned about someone’s feelings. Normally, a fuck off and I was gone, caring only about what I needed. I wasn’t entirely sure why Luc was different, but he was.

He stopped with the pacing and sat beside me on the stoop, wringing his hands. “What other choice do we have? I thought about it a lot while you slept, Aus.” That was the second time he shortened my name. Oh, I had noticed it the first time, even sleep rattled. It made my heart do some weird fluttery thing.

“Luc...” I paused, licking my lips. “I don’t have the answers.”

“I know but maybe—”

My stomach growled loud enough to wake the whole neighborhood. Wait. What time was it? The sun was high in the sky and actually starting the daily descent. It had to be around one in the afternoon. “Fuck, I’m hungry.”

“There are restaurants close, aren’t there?” He was right. We were in the French Quarter or just about to be. But...

“I’m broke, Luc. I don’t have a damn dime in my pocket.” I hated admitting that. Hated feeling like a loser. I hung my head.

“No shame in that, Austin.” He put his hand on my shoulder. Okay, through my shoulder. I didn’t feel it, but I understood the gesture. It was nice, though I could blame my situation on nobody but myself. Even if I wanted to find another scapegoat, there wasn’t one.

“Don’t want your pity. I might be down on my luck but—”

“No pity. You think I haven’t been there? A time or two. I think I know how to help you, though. I’ve talked to other spirits over the years, and this is...well, you’ll see. But you’re going to need a hat or a box. Something to collect money.”

“Collect money? It’s not going to rain from the trees.”

“It might in this city. Come on. Find something to collect the money and head toward the river.”

The Mississippi ran along the southern edge of the French Quarter, right through the heart of New Orleans. A popular tourist attraction, the waterfront was about twenty minutes away. On the weekends, there was an open-air market there, and sometimes,

if I had any money, I could buy fresh fruit or a meal or whatever. Not today, but I was going to trust Luc, so I headed in that direction, searching for something to put the money in along the way.

I cut across Dauphine, then down Esplanade. We made it all the way to Chartres before I found something useful. Garbage cans were sitting on the corner, and one was stuffed with cardboard. I pulled it all out and sorted through it until Luc pointed out the one he wanted. He'd picked a decent-sized piece, about the size of a shoe box, but it was square. "That will do fine. Now, down to the river." He was excited and hurrying me along. I couldn't see his glow in the bright sun, making him seem almost solid. Until he walked through something.

When we got to the river, I walked past the riverboat station and toward Woldenberg Park. We stopped near the Riverwalk Gazebo. There were a few telescope stations along the steps where anyone could look out over the muddy waters of the Mississippi. I had never done that. I didn't think there was that much to be seen except the big bridge in the distance with its metal spiderweb spanning the water. "This is good. There." Luc pointed to an open spot down the steps from some modern art sculpture. "Put the box down and stand still."

I did what he said.

Luc stepped in front of me. He was only a little taller than me, but I could clearly see his deep brown eyes. They were what my momma would have called soulful. Then he touched his nose to mine and...

He entered my body.

"What?" Panic crept up my throat. What was he doing?

"Trust me, Austin. Relax and let me have control for a minute."

I took a deep breath. “Okay.” And another. “I trust you.” I relaxed. I had to trust him. I was all in now. Though that wasn’t something that came easy.

Then I was shoved to the back of my own head, and Luc was there, closer than any other human had ever been for sure, right inside my own body. I could pick up some of his thoughts and feelings. Nervous but confident. I can do this. I want to show you .

He started humming with my lips and throat. And dancing. And then he started singing, but it sure as hell wasn’t my voice. No, it was his beautiful tenor.

The song was jaunty, sassy even. I picked up some of the words.

Sally was down at the old oak tree She had a beau down on his knee Cicadas sang a song of the south And Sally punched the boy right in the mouth

I felt myself chuckle, but it was completely internal. I would have rolled my eyes, but Luc was in control of them. I sat back, a passenger enjoying the show as much as the small crowd that had gathered. I would have been afraid of calling the attention to myself, but the people were dropping cash in the box. Change, to be sure, quarters, pennies, but dollars too.

Luc bowed. “Thank you. Thank you.” And most of the people moved on. He picked up the box and put the bills in my pocket, leaving the change. Then he moved down the walkway a bit before he put it down again. Then he started up another song and dance. A few more people dropped money.

He repeated the move again, but this time, he changed the routine. He lunged down on one knee and sang another song. It was the song for Rose.

It came from somewhere inside of him, and I felt it reverberate through my lungs and

throat, but it was all Luc. Singing the sad, sad song of love unrequited. And a lonely, broken girl who had done the unthinkable.

A cold tear slid down my face, jolting me from my thoughts, making Luc fall back on my ass. He laughed out loud and jumped up. That's when I noticed the people all around him and the box at his feet that was full of cash.

Let's go get you some food, Austin. I can feel your hunger . Luc stepped away from me, out of my body. I hadn't noticed the warmth of him until he was gone, leaving me chilled to the bone under the hot southern sun.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:32 am

618 Burgundy

I headed up to one of my favorite spots where I could get a good meal that was actually affordable. Clover Grill. It was worth the ten-minute walk back to Bourbon Street. The weird little pink cart sat out in front of the tiny restaurant, as it always did. It was right across the street from Café Lafitte in Exile, one of the gay bars and also one of my favorites. That place would let me come in and hang out, even if I didn't buy any drinks or tip the bartenders walking around in nothing but a jockstrap and sneakers. Well, I never complained about the view, but they weren't open. Clover Grill was. And it was a popular spot. The secret had been let out long ago. I had to wait a few minutes for a spot at the bar to free up. At least it wasn't the weekend.

The food was the best—old-fashioned grease. I flipped through the cash in my pocket and ordered a burger with cheese, grilled onions, and an egg. I got tater tots instead of fries. There was nothing better. And that meal would last on my ribs for a while.

Once it was served, I took a few bites of burger and a tot. Then I realized Luc was standing beside me, practically inside me, but not. It gave me an idea. I covered my mouth with a napkin and whispered, "Luc."

"Yes?"

"Can you taste this? If you're, you know, like before?"

"I don't know. May I try?"

I sat the napkin down and casually looked around, making sure no one was paying

attention to me. Then I nodded.

Luc slipped inside. At first, it was like he was sitting on my lap, then in it, then I was in the back again. He picked up the burger. Never had a burger with an egg on it.

I sent reassuring thoughts, not sure what he could or couldn't hear from me.

He moaned so loud that I popped wood. Fuck !

I haven't had the taste of food on my tongue in...you know. A hundred years.

I let him enjoy the meal. It was going in my stomach, but I felt like if I could give him that moment of pleasure, it was worth it. He'd earned the money to eat, after all.

And he finished every bit of it, using the last of the tots to wipe the grease off of the plate before putting it in my mouth.

As the sun set and the cicadas sang, we stood in front of the cute but unassuming 618 Burgundy. In fact, the house next door had all the flash, decorated in all manner of colors and banners as a Krew house for Mardi Gras, but not Lady Geneviève's place. Only a small duplex, the building had two matching doors on opposite ends, complete with a stoop, shutters, and a solid glass window above it—a transom, I think they're called. Between the doors, two matching narrow floor-to-ceiling windows, both concealed by more shutters, as was the style of the Quarter for the most part. It even had decorative moldings, and though no balconies of latticework, it did have gingerbread trim and fancy corbels on both sides. All very typical of almost any small home in the city.

The house numbers were on the glass, leading us to the unit on the right. I had no clue what to expect behind that door, and Luc probably didn't either. "Hey, Luc. I know this is scary, right?" Turning to look at him, I noticed how he squinted in the dying

sun—like anybody else would.

“It is. I’m afraid of making it worse. You know?” He tugged the hat down a little lower to block the glare. “I only just met you.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I haven’t had enough time to get to know you, and I’d really like to.”

Reaching out, I ran my hand along his arm, feeling nothing, but I could see it. I cupped his elbow before sliding down to his wrist and hand. Luc gripped my fingers, but of course, his went right through mine. Still, I wanted to comfort him. Needed to. Though I didn’t understand why, nor did I want to analyze it. “Well, what do you want to know?”

“Huh. Well. What’s your favorite color?”

“Brown,” I blurted without thinking. “Like your eyes.”

His mouth made an O, but he didn’t say anything.

“What about you?” I asked him.

“I’d always thought green like the grass on a warm spring day, but now? I’m liking brown a bit more.”

“Brown? Are you copying me?”

“No.” He shook his head, obviously trying to look serious, but his cheeky grin gave him away. “More like the brown of your hair. Dark and rich, but not too much.” He slid a hand over my head that I very much wanted to feel. That need had been

building in me and it felt like it would explode if I didn't do something—anything—quickly.

“This doesn't even look like a voodoo priestess lives here.”

Luc raised an eyebrow. “And what would that look like?”

“I don't know. Let's get this over with.” I knocked on the door.

And stood there waiting, expectantly.

After a silent minute, I knocked again. From inside, I heard. “I hear you. Wait a minute for my old bones already.” Then the door cracked open and a wrinkled, coppery face peeked out. “What you want? It's getting late. Oh.” The door opened wide, giving us the first full view of Lady Geneviève, the voodoo mambo-priestess in all her hodgepodge glory. She was maybe five feet tall and wore a dress of patchwork in every color of the rainbow. The garish cloth nearly made my head hurt. Her eyes, so dark they were probably black, flew open wide. “This is the most interestin' thing I seen in a while.” Her face was old but timeless. If you asked me how old she was, I couldn't tell you. Maybe somewhere between eighty and infinity.

“We, uh, we came for your help.” I gave her a little bow as if she were royalty. Hell, for all I knew, she was. “Please.”

“Help with what? Getting rid of the spirit attached to you?”

“Oh, God, no. I—” Nearly said things I shouldn't. “We want to make him whole. Corporal. See, he was stolen from his body. And it was wrong. Under false pretenses.”

She glared at Luc.

“Can you see him, then?”

She glared at me.

Luc stepped a little closer to me on the little stoop. “I don’t know. I don’t think she’s going to help.”

“I don’t know if I can.” She eyed him up and down. “And yes, I can see and hear him. I commune with spirits. All my life.” She rolled her eyes. “Most folks think it’s nonsense, but you...” She pointed at me and then clapped her hands. “You have firsthand experience to say it’s not, dontcha ?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I nodded.

“Guess you two better come in.” She went into the house, leaving the door open behind her, so we followed. I shut the door and joined them, walking across dark, hardwood floors. The walls had been painted a charcoal gray, but with the antique white trim and the last of the day’s sun coming in the window, those floors gleamed, and the room felt bright. “Sit, please.” She gestured to a round table in the center of the room beneath a grand chandelier. She had certainly done a lot with the humble space.

Luc stood beside the table, and I pulled out a chair for him. He gave me a look that said he thought I was crazy. “Can you sit?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I haven’t tried. I mean, I sat with you on the stoop, but...” He squatted in front of the chair but sank through it. “This is different than what I’ve done before. Sort of. I don’t have much practice with things like this, either. I never left the cemetery until you.”

“Interestin’. Why’s that?” she asked, sitting across from the empty chair.

I pushed it back under the table. If Luc was standing, I would too.

“Haven’t been able to.” It was nice having someone else hear him. It confirmed I hadn’t lost my mind and made for a smoother conversation.

“Why?”

I held my hand up, showing her the ring. “I found this and put it on, and there he was. Now he’s with me.”

“As I said. Interestin’. Come here and let me see.”

I circled the table and stuck my hand out. I wasn’t going to take it off for her to examine. I wasn’t taking it off until Luc, well, until Luc had a body of his own like he wanted. Though, I didn’t know how that would work. The Rougarou’s first words might be right in the end. We might have to be happy with what we have, though I couldn’t see Luc being satisfied with that. But I hadn’t asked him either. Who knew.

Thankfully, she didn’t ask me to remove the ring. Instead, she turned my hand this way and that. Her hands on my skin were cool and dry. She grabbed a pair of glasses that had been hanging around her neck and slid them up her nose, and then she leaned in closer, inspecting the ring. “This is the ring.” She tapped the metal around my finger. “This is Rose Carollo’s ring.”

“Uh...yes?” I thought that was what Luc had said.

“What do ya know? So you must be the Prince of Jazz . How about that?” She winked at him.

“So they called me.” I didn’t know they called him that, or did I? Hadn’t the tour guide said something like that? I didn’t know, but I could sure understand it.

“He’s fantastic. And deserves—”

“Don’ tell me what he deserves or doesn’t. This is legend. Walking into my house. I know the story. I know what happened to the mambo who done it too. She cursed Rose, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know that. It...I never blamed her. The whole thing broke my heart.”

“I’m sure it did.”

“I thought you were gay?” As if it was my truth to tell. It wasn’t but hearing that this woman broke his heart made me feel. What? Was this jealousy? Maybe?

Luc rolled his eyes. His hat was gone. I didn’t know where he’d put it, and I didn’t ask.

It was Lady Geneviève who answered. “There many ways to break a heart, young man.” Then she tapped the table. “So you want to be a real boy, huh? Want a body?”

I nodded furiously. “Is it possible?”

“Anything be possible. But.” She held up a finger. “It’s gonna cost you. It’s not cheap.”

I was crestfallen. We had been warned. But even though I was broke, there were other ways to pay than money. Right? “What will it cost?”

“First, you need an actual body. I have one. A zombie. He’ll work.” She waved her hand as if dismissing any notion that it wouldn’t.

I wondered immediately if he was cute. Or rotted, but I didn’t voice any of that.

“Great.”

“But a zombie is expensive. Takes a lot to make one, and I’ll need to replace it.”

Luc sighed. I could imagine he was dreading the question he had to ask. “What will that cost?”

She shrugged. “Not for me to say, but that’s not all. You also have to pay the spirits. A sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice? Like a goat or a chicken?” I asked like the idiot I was.

Geneviève slapped my arm. Well, I couldn’t blame her. “No.” She said some words that I suspected were cursing in another language. Maybe French or Creole. It had a familiar lilt to it, though I didn’t know the words. “A sacrifice of the heart. That is what it is and you either can give it or you can’t.”

“I can. What else?” Luc was serious now. This was starting to feel obtainable. At least somewhat.

“What about the zombie? Doesn’t he have a soul?” I was so curious about everything, but at least this was a better question.

She shook her head. “No, dear, he done lost his soul a long time ago. But to answer your lover here, you also need to pay for the services, the ritual itself. And I’m the best mambo in these parts.”

Choosing not to comment on the lover comment, I went with a simple question. “I thought mambo’s were more altruistic?”

“Listen, if I didn’t think this was a worthy cause, you’d be out the door.” She pointed

in that direction. “I know you were done wrong, and I want to help. But these things are expensive. I can’t be expected to cover all the costs. Can I?”

“No, ma’am.” Luc glanced toward the front of the house.

“So, three things. Payment for the zombie and your services. Then, payment to the spirits in the form of a sacrifice. Do I have that right?”

“Yes, boy.”

A commotion in the street had all our attention. Luc moved to the window with a fluid grace. “They found you, Austin.”

“They?” she asked.

“Shit. Sorry, I mean, can we go out the back?”

Geneviève shot me a look that would have me back in that grave if I could die from a glare. Then she hurried to the window faster than she’d moved before. “Deadman mafia? After you? What’s that about?”

“I don’t have time to explain.”

“They’re coming, Austin.” Luc headed toward the back.

“Thank you. We’ll be in touch.” I bowed again, then rushed through the house before she had a chance to give permission. I really hoped she wasn’t offended, though. I did not need anyone else after me.

I heard her say, “I expect you will.” Then, I sprinted down a hallway and into the back. The walls were brick on one side, the good old soft red brick most prominent

throughout the city, and the other was a quaint kitchen with a yellow and white backsplash and a huge island with a butcher block top. And more importantly, a back door. I flew out of it, barely shutting it behind me.

On the other side of a simple courtyard, I climbed over a small wooden fence and into an alley that stretched into the next street. I guessed from where we were that it was St. Peter, so I blindly ran toward Bourbon. If we could get lost in the crowds there, we could get away. The sun was nearly down, and the nightly revelry would be starting.

This was getting out of control. I had no clue how we would pay for Lady Geneviève's services or even how the hell I was gonna get the mafia off my ass. And Deadman Mafia? What the hell was that? One more thing I didn't know. I turned up Bourbon Street. At least I felt a little more confident with so many people around, and the farther we went, the thicker the crowds.

"Woah." Luc turned in circles, looking everywhere at once. "I don't remember this. Oh my!" He was open-mouthed gawking at one of the gay clubs where a couple of young guys, wearing nothing but jockstraps, danced on the bar. Men reached up and stuck money in the strap or handed it to them. The boys flirted. "I never..."

"Welcome to the two thousands, my friend." I gave him a saucy wink and dodged back into the crowd.

"I don't remember most of this. The buildings, yes. Mainly. The architecture of the balconies, yes. But not the people. The noise. Oh my." We passed the Four Points and into the main party area. "It seems bigger and smaller at once."

"Hmm." I looked back, noticing the head of a familiar goon a few blocks back but getting closer. "In here." I ducked into Little Bayou. It was a cool little spot with a double bar for oysters as much as drinks. We needed to find somewhere to hide, and

this wasn't it. We'd be spotted through the big glass windows and doors all flung open wide. I breathed in deeply, taking in the scent of salt and spices as well as the peppery, fruity olives. But I needed to get out of there. Maybe we could double back and lose them.

I darted out and around the corner, down St. Louis. It was quieter, but too quiet. Luc rushed up close to me. "I can feel them coming." Feel them? There wasn't time to question it. And there was nowhere to hide.

Except...

Up.

I couldn't get over the door to any of the courtyards between the buildings. In this area, they built them tall with iron bars on the top, often with configurations that appeared downright medieval but were effective in keeping out tourists or people like me. But I could shimmy up that waterspout. It was close enough to the courtyard door that I could get my foot in there to boost me higher. So I did. Then, I grabbed the latticework on the second-floor balcony. And climbed it like a ladder to the roof. Dropping down into the alley leading to the courtyard was an option, but we could also get stuck. Continuing on the roof made more sense. I worked my way back into the depths of the block.

Crossing over from one building to another, we made it all the way to Dauphine Street before I had to drop back to the ground. The hard and noisy partying of Bourbon Street was not here, and we would be easily seen. I crossed the street, spotting another alley I could get into. It had a lower wooden gate minus all the ironwork. I suspected it led to a parking area rather than a courtyard, but either way, we were going. Up and over. Not too difficult at all. Look at me showing off my parkour skills . Also...ouch. My whole damn body was still bruised and not appreciative of the vivacious activity.

We couldn't be seen from the street, and it was deathly quiet. And I was fucking tired. I slowed to a walk, choosing to stick to the shadows just in case.

"Hey, Austin. Where are we going?"

"Don't know," I said between panting breaths.

"We need a plan. Running willy-nilly isn't going to get us anywhere. Do you know where we are?"

"Ahh...yes? Mostly." I grew up on these streets and oriented myself quickly regardless of where I was at any time. "I've been running around here since I could run. You know?"

"No. I spent time here, but I traveled all over the south, and I'm not originally from New Orleans."

"Oh. I didn't think about that. Where are you from?"

"St. Louis, actually. But, uh...I came here for the music."

"Stayed for the fun?"

Luc snorted.

"Yeah, guess that wasn't all that funny, now that I said it. Let's keep moving."

We came out at St. Peter and cut back down to Bourbon. We moved slower this time. Walking casually through the crowds, not calling attention to myself. But the crowds were thinner. This was an area where all the tourists went who were into vampires, voodoo, and the other supernatural nonsense that flourished in New Orleans. Oh,

right. Maybe not so ridiculous after all.

“This is St. Ann’s.” I waved my hand around. “Let’s go up again...” We were entirely too exposed here. I once again shimmied up a pole. This one was a bit harder, closer to the street than the wall, but I managed. Then I skated across the balcony to the back wall and over an arched gate of brick with iron bars completely covering the opening. I jumped down on the far side and walked around the corner into yet another courtyard. Well, this was more of a parking area, but there was a low wall on the far side begging to be climbed.

New Orleans was full of hidden treasures. This space was incredible. Lush with vegetation and nearly hidden behind palm trees and other bushes. It was secluded. The ground was a cement path, but multiple varieties of potted palms and ferns surrounded the space. A little table with a chair was pushed against the corner. And a pair of long legs happened to be sticking out.

The man leaned forward and peered over at me, blowing out a puff of smoke.

“Man, smoking is bad for your health.” We were busted, but it could go a number of ways, and I had no choice but to play it out.

The smoker ignored my comment. “The tourists are eating down the road at the café, and here you come, bounding into my courtyard. Are you lost?”

“Uh, no, not really?”

He took a slow drag from a cigarette and held it a second before blowing it out again. “Oh, but you must be. My gallery is closed.” He waved the cigarette around.

“Um... We’re just passing through?”

“We?” he asked with a flick of his hand, dumping ashes to the ground beside him.

“Yes, me and... Oh. Right, Luc is a spirit. Now you think I’m crazy.” I had gotten entirely too comfortable with my new lover—friend. Definitely, friend. And I was guessing the vampire couldn’t see Luc’s glow, though it lit up the entire courtyard. At least it wasn’t likely for the goon-brigade to track us like that.

“But you must be. You’re making dangerous choices.” He flashed a fang and stood intimidatingly tall. He was what I’d always thought of as svelte . Perfectly svelte. Flawless. Fanged. Shit. That could be fake. This was New Orleans, after all.

“So, you’re a vampire?”

Luc leaned toward me. “Yes, definitely a supernatural creature. I can tell—”

“Luc, please...”

The vampire flicked his cigarette away. “Do you really see and hear a spirit? Are you an Ongan?”

“N-No. I uh... It’s this ring.” I felt like I needed to tell the truth. If Luc was right and this truly was a vampire, it might mean life or death. Or something in between, and I’d had enough of that. “And we’re working on that. Sort of. But...”

The vampire waved his hand around and sat back down. “I don’t want to know. You get a pass this time. For your spirit friend.”

“I’m Austin. The spirit is Luc. And you are?”

“If I must. Call me Sloane.”

“Sloane. Thank you. I won’t forget this.”

“Something tells me I won’t either.” He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and tapped one out, but I didn’t stick around to see him light it. Instead, I walked around the corner and climbed over another wall, heading back to the streets. I wondered why the vampire couldn’t see him or even tell he was there, but the Rougarou could. None of this made sense, but I didn’t know much about the spirit world. I put it out of my mind, while we made our way down toward the river and across St. Peter Street. Trying to keep moving and simply put distance between us and the goons, though I wasn’t sure where they were now.

A lot of people were around. Maybe we would be okay. “Luc, any ideas yet on the payment for Geneviève?”

“I have the sacrifice. We only need the other two. But if we’re going to figure it out, we need to get rid of your problem first so we can even think. As clever as you’ve been at avoiding them. This is making things difficult. And to be honest, I don’t like the idea of people hurting you.” Damn, he was sweet, and it made me want to taste if that mouth was as flavorful as his disposition.

“We’ve been running around the city all night. I’m sure we’re good now.” An authentic gas light on the building flickered as I walked beneath a balcony.

“Austin, being good for now isn’t good enough. Why are these men chasing you?”

“I don’t think they’re men, exactly.” Not after Lady Geneviève’s comment about the Deadman Mafia. “But also because I owe money. Gambling debt. And whoever the boss is, he’s decided it’s time to collect. And...I don’t have it. Told you. I’m broke.”

“You don’t know the boss?” That seemed like a valid question, but there were circumstances.

“No. The family running the city was falling apart for a while, but suddenly, they weren’t. No one is sure exactly what happened or who is actually in charge now. And honestly, I don’t want to know.”

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The Garden District

We walked along until we came to Esplanade, then we turned there and headed up to Decatur. No one gave us a second look. There were a few tattoo parlors in this area that tourists and locals alike sought out. It meant people and cover. Then we stopped to cross the road and so did everyone else.

A line of fancy black cars drove by in front of us. Not fast, but not slow either, and not stopping for anyone or anything. They drove right through the red light. I heard someone nearby whisper, “Deadman’s procession.” Though I didn’t know what that meant. I spent way too much time running and not enough paying attention to all the legends and stories of the city. Hell, I didn’t even know much about mambos. Sure, I’d heard of them and voodoo, but it never mattered enough to dig deeper. Money. Gambling. That was all I’d cared about for way too long now. The cars came from Frenchman and drove down Decatur.

A hand on the back of my neck made me jump. It squeezed. “Boss wants to speak with you. And you’ve been dodging me all night, you little shit. If it weren’t for the boss, I’d tear you apart for the trouble.”

“Shit.” Caught.

I was unceremoniously tossed into the back of a black car that very well could have been a part of the procession. In fact, I think it was. The goon climbed in the back beside me and shut the door. The driver took off, following as the procession crawled along, ending up in The Garden District and finally going through the gates of a grand New Orleans house. I knew where we were, though this wasn’t my normal

stomping ground. We were, in fact, not too far from Lafayette Cemetery No. 1. That made me super nervous with everything else that had been going on tonight. Deities ! What the hell could I do?

The head goon who grabbed me was a big mother fucker, and deceptively fast.

We sat there in the car and waited, but not terribly long. I leaned forward and caught a better glimpse of the house. It looked pink in the low lights, and the second story was decorated with all the typical New Orleans architectural finery—fancy corbels and trellis and big ferns hanging from the ceilings. This one had multiple balconies over three stories in the front and side, but that was about all I could see.

Finally, someone tapped on the glass, and I nearly jumped out of the car without the door being opened. The goon rolled down the window. “Boss is ready,” the window knocker said.

“Thanks.” The goon opened the door and reached back in for me. “Come on then.” He grabbed my arm, yanking me out of the car. If I dragged my feet, I was pretty sure he would carry me. And he gripped my arm as if I were going to try and escape. Well, I probably would have tried.

We entered a dark space through a side door and the goon pulled me farther in. Though I could hardly see in the darkness—where the heck was Luc when I needed that glow? Finally, we passed through a set of gigantic pocket doors and into what could only be described as a Victorian parlor complete with golden walls and maroon curtains hanging over floor-to-ceiling windows. There was a settee against one wall, upholstered in the same fabric as the curtains, maybe, but definitely the same color. None of it felt welcoming.

But it was the man who sat in the center of the room at a table beneath a large crystal chandelier that made Lady Geneviève’s look like cheap glass strewn together with

twine who truly dampened the mood. “Thank you, Jude.”

The goon, obviously named Jude, bowed and walked away, leaving me here alone with who I presumed was the boss. “Uh...hello?”

“Come in, Mr. Broussard.”

Tentatively, I took a step toward the table. Honestly, I was scared. Luc had disappeared. I couldn’t see him anywhere, and I had no idea what I was doing. I felt very alone. As ever. “You can call me Austin.”

“Austin, then. Do you know who I am?” He had a slight accent that I couldn’t pinpoint.

“Yes and no.”

“Hmm...well, I’m the man you owe two hundred grand for starters.”

That’s when Luc showed up, and he yelled, “Two hundred thousand dollars!”

“Yes, I know how much.” I refrained from rolling my eyes at Luc, but barely. But after taking another look at the man, I knew exactly who he was. Falling back on my smart mouth as a defense, I jumped right in. “And I’m surprised because you’re supposed to be dead.” He was most definitely the old mob boss, Carlos Marcello. That history I knew about. Marcello died at his Metairie, Louisiana, home on March 2, 1993. I had been fascinated with it at the time. Despite his known death, it was definitely him sitting in the fancy chair in front of me, acting like he was very much alive and well. And hadn’t I been warned about him? I should have listened. Fuck my life.

“Yes, but I’m not. You see, I’m, well, I’m here. And the good thing is I get to take

your life to help sustain me. In payment for your debt.”

My life? Sustain him? “Are you a vampire?” Another thing I’d heard about and knew was possible but had never paid enough attention to. But now I’d met one, and possibly two?

Marcello chuckled ominously. “No. I’m not a vampire, but I do need others’ lives to sustain me. Not hard to get, actually.” He waved a jeweled hand around. I imagined he got whatever he wanted as head of the Deadman mafia, which all made total sense now.

But my brain wasn’t getting hung up on that. No, my brain was churning with ways to get out of this mess. “What if I can give you something even better than my life? Something that will sustain you much longer. Much, much longer.”

“What the hell could that be?” Marcello outright laughed, full-bellied, as if I were a comedian or some shit.

But I was serious. My life on the line? Damn straight, I was serious. “I’ll be honest with you, I’m not totally positive about this. I’m only hearing about your situation now, but if I can make it work, will you wipe my slate clean?”

“I’m intrigued.” He stood and walked around the table, entirely too close for my comfort, but I stood my ground. “Fine, but if you don’t return with this thing...I’ll lock you up and torture you for as long as I can possibly drip one ounce of life essence from you. I can make it easy or painful. You sure you want to take this bet?”

Nothing I loved more than gambling.

Luc got right in my face. “Austin, what are you doing?”

“Trust me.” I stared into those beautiful brown eyes and bet our future.

Marcello thought I was talking to him. “I don’t,” he said. “And why should I?”

“May I?” I pulled one of the chairs out. When Marcello nodded, I sat and folded my hands together on top of the table. I had to get him to understand where I was coming from. At least a little. I told him a little bit of Luc’s story while Luc paced and complained behind me. “It was your family, your people, that did this to Luc. I’m trying to fix it. And maybe I can help you, too.” As if I could guilt this man into anything. But...

Marcello crossed the room and opened a cabinet in a dry bar. He poured himself a drink and then turned to face me. “Fine. But you only have until this time tomorrow. Twenty-four hours. Capiche?”

“I understand.”

“And don’t think there’s anywhere you can go that Jude won’t find you.” His smile was very shark-like. And I believed him.

I thanked him and promptly left out the front door.

It was a short walk up the drive and out on the street, but once there, I took stock of the situation. “Shit. It’s going to be a long walk back.”

“Back where?” Luc stood beside me with his hands crossed over his chest.

“I know you’re not happy with me, but I think I’ve got this. We need to get back to St. Ann Street, though. Like I said, trust me, this is going to fix my problem. And give us time to focus on yours.” But damn. I was hungry and tired. And still broke. “Unlike you, I need to recharge, and what money we had before is gone for the most

part.”

“We can go back to the river and see if I can help again.”

“I hate asking you to do that.”

“But it’s something we have right now. Come on. Get going...” He shooed me down the street.

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Frenchman Street

First, we hit the riverfront. A little busking on Luc's part and I had money again. That was dangerously too easy. I headed back to Clover Grill, and this time, I ordered what Luc wanted. Country fried steak, hashbrowns, and a fried egg on the side. Like before, I let him enjoy it while inside me, but that gave me another idea.

When we finished eating and walked back outside, it had to be nearly four in the morning. And I was tired. Without Jude-the-goon chasing me, I felt more at ease, but we were on a time crunch. Still, I had to rest. And it was actually too late to do what I needed to do. The sun would be coming up very soon. "We'll put the plan in place tomorrow night. I have to sleep first."

"Let's head home."

"Great idea. In fact, I have a ton of great ideas." I wiggled my eyebrows. "Just you wait."

We climbed in my back window, avoiding the landlord, because that was a problem for another day, and I didn't want to chance it. I took a quick shower and climbed into bed naked while Luc watched the show. "You look like you want something, Luc."

"Oh, I very much want something. Austin."

"Then take off your clothes and get into bed."

“It’s not that easy.” He shook his head, but the want in his eyes was unmistakable.

“We’ve got this. Like the busking and the diner. Come on.” I flipped the blanket open so he could see all of me lying there in my naked glory, with my hard cock weeping with the thought of having him any way I could get him. But he stood there scowling instead of getting sexy with me. “What?”

“I don’t like seeing all those bruises all over you.”

I peered down at my body. The bruises Jude and his goons had given me had changed color to purple, green, and yellow. I shrugged. “Nearly gone now. Don’t worry about it. Come on. Get naked.”

Luc stood there clothed in his finery one second, naked the next. And his body was just as gorgeous out of his clothes. He had rosy nipples and a long, lean torso that curved at his hips. I licked my lips, waiting for him. “Please...join me.”

Luc crawled on the bed over me without falling through. “I’m getting better at this.”

“You are,” I agreed.

Then he leaned in to kiss me. For half a second, I felt pressure, then he passed through me. He pulled up quickly. “Sorry. I want...”

“It’s okay. Me too. Turn around and do the thing.”

With a quick nod, he turned, lying on top of me. His spectral body sank into my solid one, and I felt him in the front like before. But unlike before, I didn’t passively let myself be shoved to the back. I held my ground.

“Is this good?” I asked.

It is. I felt his words rather than hearing them.

“Good. Now, can you feel this?” I rubbed my hand over my chest and flicked one of my nipples.

Luc gasped. Yes!

“Okay. Good.” I stroked up my thigh with my other hand, then cupped my balls, making Luc gasp again.

This is incredible...Aus...

“Yeah.” We could both feel everything. This was going to be a hell of a jerk-off session.

I touched the tip of my cock and swirled around the head. Then I stopped to lick my hand before grabbing my dick for real. I pulled a couple of times, feeling all of it doubled by Luc’s reaction.

I want to try. I want to touch you, Austin .

How could I argue with that? I let go of control of my arms and hands, relaxing as Luc took over. He caressed my body, ribs, hips. Tweaked my nipples. I felt it right in my dick and balls. Then he touched them too.

It took a few more minutes of practice before we both shared control fully, and everything became more intense. That had been foreplay, and though we weren’t fucking, this was as close as we could get without a real body, so it might as well have been.

I leaned over and pulled the lube out of the side table drawer. Luc was amazed at the

convenience, but I didn't even want to know what they used back in his time. Instead, I slicked up my hand, and together, we stroked my cock. Slow at first, getting into the rhythm of it, and then, to both our delight, we set a pace with him pulling up and me pushing down. It was unlike anything I'd ever done.

I feel you, Aus...oh...

“Yes...like that...Luc...”

And we came together. Two souls, one dick, and an explosion like no other. The stars in the night sky had nothing on what I saw behind my eyelids.

And then we crashed. Sleeping soundly together, wrapped in one body through half the day.

When we finally woke, we were both refreshed. Luc stepped out of my body while I dressed. “I haven't actually slept. I mean, not like that. For real sleeping, since before I died.”

“What do you do then? Do you rest?” I buttoned my jeans and watched him think.

“It's sort of like sleeping. It's resting of a sort, but it doesn't feel the same. It's like you're there but in a dormant state. I didn't do it a lot. I didn't like how it felt. There but not.”

“Hmm... sounds odd. Did you even dream?”

“No.”

“Well, hopefully, we'll figure this shit out and get you a body. Then you can sleep and dream all you want.”

“And fuck.”

I couldn't hold back my grin. He surprised me with that. “Yeah...” I sure hoped he only wanted to fuck me though. He'd seen the goods up for offer in the gay bars on Bourbon, and he was sure good-looking enough to pull any of them.

“Stop whatever you're thinking, Austin.”

“What? I'm not.”

“You were. But...I'm not like that. When I said fuck, I meant you and me. I like you a lot. And trust me, I never had a lot of that in my life before I died. I have changed a lot since then. So, when I say I'm serious about you, believe it.” No idea how he knew, but it didn't matter. He answered my questions. “That's better.”

“We still have time to kill before we find the vampire.”

“Vampire?” Luc put his face in his hands. “Don't tell me...”

“Sloane is going to help us with Marcello. Yes.” I wanted to laugh at his dramatics, but I didn't. This was a lot, but he was catching on to my plan.

“I see. Maybe that will work. How did you think of that?”

“Easy. The joker man. Remember what he said? To find what you need, you need to focus on the needs of others. A need is a need, and everything depends on the needing.”

“Okay. You're filling the needs. But as you said, we have time to kill.”

“We should do something fun.”

“What do you like to do?”

I didn’t have to think about it long. “Let’s go down near Frenchman and see if we can catch some good music.” That was an area that always had something rocking, even in the afternoons on the weekends.

“Music?”

“Yeah.” I didn’t wait for more of a response. I simply crawled back out the window and headed toward Frenchman Street. There wasn’t much I could give him, but this was something, and I wanted to share it with him. We didn’t know what would happen later. Hell, I might not even be able to pull off this vampire thing. Sloane-the-vamp might decide I wasn’t worth anything but his next meal. So I planned on enjoying the time we had.

It took less than ten minutes to walk there. Technically, Frenchman was more a part of the Marigny than the Quarter, and by the time we got close, we could already hear the notes floating in the air. Luc was visibly excited, practically bouncing with every step. “I haven’t heard anyone else play in so long. Not really.”

“Well, this is your chance. Come on.”

A jazz band was taking up the corner at Royal, which is what we had heard as we approached. I made my way around and nearly tripped at the curb because I was watching the joy in Luc’s eyes rather than where I was going.

We didn’t stop there, though. As we continued down the street, we were treated to more jazz but also blues, swing, and even reggae. It was Saturday, so I knew that The Maison would have a drag show with no cover later, but by that time, we needed to be gone, so I figured we’d skip that. Instead, I stopped at the Spotted Cat. There was no cover, but they did have a one-drink minimum. I had enough for a beer left and

that might be something else Luc hadn't had in a long time. And it was only a few feet away before the next block.

The opening band was already on with a trumpet belting out old-fashioned jazz. Luc was practically vibrating beside me. "Want a beer?"

He nodded furiously.

I ordered and leaned against the bar to watch the band. Luc stepped inside me, the experience now as comfortable as putting on a glove.

Ahh... New Orleans was always the heart of Jazz. That cat on the horn is rate. And beer? Prohibition has obviously ended...

Well, Luc was going to experience a lot of new things along with the nod to the old. I made a mental note to bring him to The Maison to see the drag show once he had a body. He'd get a kick out of that.

After finishing his beer, I thought we'd go, but Luc had other ideas. He marched my body up to the stage. "Can I play?" he asked, pointing at the piano.

"You any good?" the trumpet man asked.

Luc simply smiled and saddled up to the keys.

Any good? Luc snarked in my head.

Fuck my life was he ever .

Luc played like the Beethoven of jazz. Surely, I didn't know much about jazz, but even I knew he was fantastic. They hadn't given him the nickname Prince of Jazz for

nothing, apparently.

Everyone cheered. The band started playing along. They were good, but Luc was so much better, outshining them by miles. After the song, he shook the players' hands. Some dude in a suit handed him a card. "Call me. If you're not already represented."

Luc nodded and shoved the card in our back pocket. He didn't stop until we were outside. That's when I noticed his hands shaking. And I felt the collage of sorrow and joy coursing through him. He started to leave my body, but I wasn't ready for that. "Wait."

Austin?

I hugged my arms around my middle. Hugged him. We stood there for a minute.

Thank you.

He didn't have to say any more than that. I got it. This was something he'd had. Taken for granted, maybe. Then it was all stolen away, and we still weren't sure if we could get it back, even if we did manage to come up with something to pay Geneviève.

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St. Ann Street

There was a somewhat grumpy vampire waiting for us to talk to, though he didn't know it yet. On to St. Ann Street. I remembered where we'd been, and Sloane had said something about a gallery, so hopefully, we'd find that rather than breaking into his courtyard again. I didn't want to face his fangs head-on.

We walked down Royal, crossed Esplanade into the Quarter, and continued on until we got to the corner of St. Ann. The laughter that ripped from Luc at seeing the building there was priceless. I loved the sound and the pure joy coming from him. "What?" I asked as if I didn't know.

He thumbed over his shoulder. "We're looking for a vampire, right? Don't suppose he eats here, at the café?" The Vampire Café was bustling with a line waiting.

"I'm sure that's what he meant when he said people were eating. And we were in this area, but..." I turned around. "We came out on St. Ann. And he had a gallery. Somewhere..."

"You don't know for sure."

"Not like we weren't on the run." I crossed my arms over my chest. I wasn't above pouting, and I didn't like being called out. Luc only laughed. "Shut up. I'll find it."

I pointed down St. Ann. Then turned around. The courtyard was behind it, so it had to either be on Royal or Dauphine. We'd been around Dauphine...but it could have been on the other side of the block. I was pretty sure we'd turned right. Or left? It was

worth a look. Since we were on Royal, I went back up that way.

We hadn't passed Lafitte's. That was a crazy place, said to be haunted, so I didn't want to go there now with Luc. It didn't set right.

I stopped.

“What?”

I turned. “This is it.” It was a small, very small, art gallery. “I got confused because we crisscrossed and doubled back. But there is a parking lot back there. Behind this. And the secret courtyard.” I smacked my hands together. “Come on.” And the gallery was still open.

“You feel pretty smug right now, huh?”

“Kinda, yeah.” I pulled open the door and waited while Luc entered first, though I probably didn't have to. Inside was a riot of color, mostly from the art, but the walls were robin egg blue where there wasn't exposed brick, and the art was practically everywhere, but tastefully so. “Woah.”

“You again? Houston, was it?” I turned to Sloane, who was slumped against the one bare spot on the wall.

“Austin.”

“Whatever. Why are you here?” He narrowed his eyes, and I wondered if he contemplated eating me. Deities !

“I have a-a proposition for you.”

The vampire rolled his eyes. "I'm not biting you."

"Uh...not asking you to. Duh."

"Then what are you asking?"

"You're like immortal, right?" I didn't wait for him to answer. "So, if someone took some of your life force, it wouldn't really hurt you, right?"

"No. Not as long as I drink." He was curious now, I could tell. Or maybe I was hoping.

"Okay. So, if you had, say, an unlimited supply of blood. Anytime you wanted or needed, would you be open to exchanging your life force for it?"

"That sounds too good to be true. So it probably is."

I shook my head. "No. I have it all worked out. Easy-peasy."

Luc walked around the vampire, but not too close. "I think he's going to bite." What an expression.

"I'm serious. No joke."

"Why me?"

"You're the only vampire I know."

He laughed. He was lacking in what I would have thought of as vampire attire. He looked like, well, an artist in his loose denim, plain white T-shirt, and a long, lightweight jacket over it. His combat boots were the only vampire-esq thing about

him. And his long dark hair. Oh, and his pale face. And fangs. He smiled, showing them. “Okay. I’ll go along, but if there’s a catch, you better tell me now.” And his expression filled with the promise of violence and death.

“N-No catch. I mean, I’m not sure it will work. The whole exchange of life essence part. I don’t know exactly how that works, but if you’re willing to try, this could be a pretty good gig for you.”

“I’ll try. But what’s in it for you?”

“Let’s just say I’m brokering the deal.”

“What exactly does that mean? Why are you doing this?”

I held my hands up.

“Austin. I don’t know you. I don’t trust you. This could be a trap. So, either you tell me something believable here or get the fuck out of my shop.”

“No need to cuss. Gees. Okay. I owe him money.”

“Him who?”

Now Luc was looking at me instead of the vampire. I had to help him, and this was the way to do it. I took a deep breath before answering. “Carlos Marcello.” And then I cringed, waiting for his response.

“Carlos... The Carlos Marcello?”

“Yes. I owe him a lot of money, and if this works, he wipes the slate clean. He gets the vital life essence he needs, and you get the blood you need. Win-win-win.” I slid

my hands together, back and forth. “Like I said. Easy-peasy.”

“It should work, but it still doesn’t tell me why you’re doing this.”

“I told you why. Clean slate.”

“Eh...if it was only the debt, you would get out of town. Run. What gives?”

I sighed. It felt like I was giving up my secrets to everyone, and to be honest, they were Luc’s secrets as much as mine. I turned to him and lifted an eyebrow. He nodded.

“Fine. It’s Luc. I need to help him. You remember my spirit friend?”

“How does this help him?” What a difficult vampire. Maybe I should have laid out the whole story from the beginning.

“We have a path to his restoration. Lady Geneviève has agreed if we can find the right payment. So I need Marcello off my back so we can figure that part out.”

“Sometimes payments are more than money, more than you think you’re giving. Be careful what you bargain for.”

“Thank you. We’re bargaining for Luc’s life. So...” I held my hands up. What wouldn’t I give for him? I hardly knew him. But I was in pretty deep already. I liked everything about Luc. He was stylish, cool, and talented. His soul felt good. And I had never had that kind of good in my life. After all of this was over, he would probably figure out what a shitty person I was and ditch me, but until then, I would do whatever I could.

“Okay. Let’s go see Mr. Marcello.”

Thankfully, Sloane had a car. A little, tiny electric vehicle that we barely fit into. But it was better than walking all the way back to the Garden District.

I pointed out the house. “Woah. I guess you weren’t kidding, were you?”

“Nope. Not even a little bit. Come on.”

Jude opened the door, a scowl on his face. “I didn’t think you’d be back.”

“I made a promise.”

“Not that it means much coming from you.”

“Hey! You don’t know me.”

Jude ignored me, choosing to greet Sloane instead. “And you are?”

“Here to see Carlos Marcello.” Sloane smirked a little. I didn’t know if he was always a smart ass, if he didn’t care for underlings, or if he was backing me up.

I preferred the latter. “Ahh... you’ve got my back, dude.”

Sloane rolled his eyes. “Can we get on with this?”

“Wait right here.” Jude let us into the foyer, but no farther as he scampered off to assuredly check with the big boss. Did he know what he’d let in the house? That Sloane was a vampire? And did all that invitation stuff actually mean anything or was it a myth?

I didn’t have time to even ask since Jude came right back and ushered us into the same fancy parlor I’d met with him in before. This time, it was empty. I sat at the

table while Sloane looked around the place. I didn't know if he was impressed or interested, and I didn't get a chance to ask that either. Carlos Marcello walked in, his presence nearly bigger than life, and he took up all the empty space in the room.

"Austin." He nodded to me and then looked at Sloane. "And you are?"

"Sloane St. Germain. Well, that's the surname given to me after my maker. I'm of Jacques St. Germain's line, though a bit removed, if you will. Nonetheless, it works as well as any other name."

"Charmed, I'm sure. What's this about, Austin?"

"Sloane is a vampire. He can give you all the essence you want."

"In exchange for blood," Sloane was quick to chime in. "Fresh blood."

"He needs it to refuel the life essence. And he's immortal." I held up my hand. "See?"

"I'm impressed. If this works. If I can get the vital life from the vampire, we have a deal." Greedy-greedy, this one was. "I never thought about that before. Clever, clever, Austin."

Sloane nodded. "Let's try."

I didn't even want to think about what would happen if it didn't work. Carlos escorted Sloane into another room, and Luc promptly followed, leaving me alone with Jude.

"How long have you been a goon?" My smart mouth had refrained from the questions long enough.

“What?” Jude scowled even more. I was afraid his face would break.

“I mean, how long have you worked for the Deadman mafia?”

“Don’t call it that. And long enough.”

Apparently, we weren’t going to have a conversation about it. Well, fuck him anyway.

A minute later, Luc showed up. “I think it worked. Marcello took life force, then sent for blood.” Wherever the fuck he got that from—but it wasn’t my problem. “Sloane is feeding from a nice young man. If it restores him, we’re good. I think.” Well, he did say fresh .

I leaned back in my chair. “Thankfully.”

“What?” Jude asked.

“Nothing.” I didn’t want to get into it with him. Telling him about Luc felt blasphemous.

But it worked.

Carlos was smiling ear to ear when he returned, followed by a strutting vampire who was showing a lot more swagger than before. Maybe it was the blood. Did it get him drunk? I didn’t know and likely would never know.

“Slate is clean. Thank you. Good luck and goodbye.” I was being dismissed for sure, but I looked to Sloane for confirmation. I wasn’t leaving him here if he was distressed at all.

He nodded. "It's good. Go."

I headed to the front door, but Marcello called my name, and I turned around. "One last thing."

"Yes?"

"You are no longer welcome in any gambling establishment in all of New Orleans."

I nodded. And left.

One problem down.

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Café Du Monde

It was nearly dawn by the time I made it back down to the riverfront. My stomach growled, and I dug out my wallet and counted the last of the money. “I’ve enough for a coffee and beignets.” It was extremely early, but people were already lined up outside the takeout window. I joined them, thinking we could share the treat, but I didn’t say anything out loud, not wanting to give the others in front of me in line a reason to shoot dirty looks at me for talking to myself. Once I received my order and paid, I walked down to the riverwalk since we were so close. There were some benches near the stairs, and from there, I could see the wharf, the paddle boat, and the bridge, all sitting on the murky brown water as the sun came up. I sipped my coffee and set it on the ground in front of me so I could eat my donuts. “Want a bite?” I asked Luc.

“No. Thank you.”

“Not fond of sweets?”

“It’s not that.”

“You seem a little huffy. What’s wrong?” I took a big bite, getting powdered sugar everywhere. All over my face, my shirt, my lap. I didn’t care. It was a part of the experience. Luc seemed oblivious, his mind on other things. “Okay. What’s up?”

“We have to figure out how to pay for what we need with the voodoo priestess. We may have your problem settled, but mine is still...”

“I know. I haven’t given up. We need time to think, and we’ve been moving since we met.”

A young couple walked by close enough that they could have heard me. I smiled and took another bite of beignet. They veered away, looking at me fearfully but kept walking.

But Luc was right. We had a big problem. I had nothing. Dead broke. And busking wasn’t going to raise enough money. For anything. There was only one way I knew how to do that. Gambling. The one thing I really shouldn’t even be thinking about, but I was. That made me a shitty person—beyond shitty.

And I did not want Luc to see me like that. I was about to go down a dark path. How I wished things could be different. After finally getting this mountain of debt off me, I could start fresh. But that was bullshit. The truth was I was about to be homeless and hungry. How would Luc look at me then? I couldn’t even survive, let alone come up with some way to pay a voodoo priestess to save him. No matter how much I wanted that.

Jude-the-goat was going to be watching me. I had no doubts about that. Marcello made that perfectly clear. No more gambling. But I had to. And I had to be honest here, with myself if no one else...the truth was that I wanted to do it. I already missed the feeling of living on the edge of a knife. Would my number come up? Would my card be dealt?

Luc had no idea what was going through my twisted brain, but he could surely feel its vibe. He was as worried and desperate as I was. “Hey, Austin. Maybe we could catch that Grunch and use it for the zombie payment? A life, and a nasty one. We’d be doing the city a favor.”

I scoffed at that. “That’s a bit silly and way too dangerous. No way are we catching

that thing.”

“Even if Cecile helps?”

“No. And I don’t think she would anyway.” I didn’t want to get the Rougarou involved in this.

“Well, I have the sacrifice. Maybe part of the payment could be the ring. We sure won’t need it anymore. So we’re two-thirds of the way there. Let’s stay positive.” He spun around and tipped his hat.

“Right. Positive.” I had to agree. He wasn’t wrong, but I still felt like a loser. I needed that last third, and I had no other way to get it. I needed to hit the tables. Maybe an underground room. I knew people did sports betting online, but you needed a phone or a laptop for that, and I had neither. “Luc, uh...”

“Yeah?” His eyes sparkled with hope I didn’t share.

I tossed my empty coffee and beignet wrapper in the nearest garbage can and tried to wipe the evidence from my face, hands, and clothes. Though, I didn’t think I was any more successful at that than managing the rest of my life.

“Austin? What’s up?”

“It’s just...Uh... You don’t know me. Not really. You think you do. I mean, this has been fun, but I’m a broke-ass loser. I’m afraid to go back to my apartment now. Rent is due and I don’t have it. I think there’s about five bucks left from what you made.”

“We can get more. We can figure it out together.”

He stared at me with that please don’t break up with me expression written all over

his face and body. I'd seen it a million times, but never had it broken my heart. And was that what this was? A breakup? I couldn't think of anything else to do or say. I was going to have to take risks that I didn't want Luc watching. Especially if something went wrong.

I slid the ring off my finger. Luc's figure wavered. He frowned, wrinkles marring his brow above his nose. Then he was gone. It wasn't the way I wanted to remember him. But it was what I had. In the distance, I heard his sad song for Rose for a long, slow moment before it faded to nothing.

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Fair Grounds Race Course & Slots

It took over an hour to walk to the one place I thought might be safe. Fair Grounds. Racing wouldn't take place until a little later in the day, and honestly, I was merely hoping a race was scheduled. I hadn't been here in a long time, but there were generally races throughout the summer months. The last time I came here, I won a lot of money, but I lost everything.

My uncle had been the one to get me started in gambling. I wasn't actually sure he was an uncle related by blood, but I had been young. Uncle Sal knew what life was like. He understood hard truths that I didn't think Luc could. Minimum wage didn't pay the rent and keep you fed. Not in New Orleans. Maybe not anywhere. You worked multiple jobs to survive and had no life, even with roommates, because they often came up short. And if you were surviving, you weren't living. But if you could make a ten-spot turn into a grand, you could write a different story.

But there was another side to that story. Darker. Bleak. Because if you lost. And lost. And lost...

Someone always wanted you to pay up. Uncle Sal had eventually had to pay up. And I should have learned. Should have walked away then. But I didn't. It had already been too late.

Now I was back. The one place I thought I'd never go. But I never went to the Fair Grounds so I felt it would be safe. Jude wouldn't look here. Wouldn't expect it. Right?

Or maybe I could get in, get what I needed, and get out before he found out.

There was a niggling sensation in the back of my brain saying I was kidding myself if I actually thought this would work, but I also had no choice. I couldn't see any other way.

I played my change in the slots, pacing myself, so I wouldn't get kicked out before the first race. Loiterers weren't tolerated, even in places like this. The lights, the noise, all so flashy in a dark room. I hated it. I'd never been fond of slots. I preferred cards, but I'd done it all.

Placing a better bet would be easier if I knew anything about the horses, trainers, the teams, but there wasn't enough time to catch up. I'd won a bit from the slots to add to my five bucks and went in for the long shots. If I lost, I'd have a long fucking walk home. If I won, I'd have... Well, I'd have a start.

I thought of Luc's face, his eyes, when I moved toward the window. You could bet online here, but they kept the windows to honor the tradition. That was a damn good thing for me. I could place the bet and collect without a phone, and the actual line was short. I got in the back of it.

"Austin. For fuck's sake. Austin Broussard, what the fuck are you doing?"

Before I could figure out what was going on, the big goon grabbed the front of my shirt and yanked me out of the queue. "Jude? What the hell?"

"What the hell is right. You." He poked me in the chest. "Are not welcome here. Or anywhere that has gambling. You know that."

"I don't have a choice." I went into the song and dance about the rent, but he didn't stop scowling.

“Get a job, man. The rest of the world works for money. What did you do before this gambling shit ruined your brain?”

I huffed. “Waited tables, and before you go on, it doesn’t pay enough. Never did.” Even I could hear the desperation in my voice. If I had another way, I would have taken it.

“You have to figure this out, man. If you keep this up, you’re going to end up dead.”

“Why the fuck do you care? Drag my scrawny ass back to the cemetery—”

“Shut up. That was to scare you. We scare people. They pay. That’s how it works.”

I held my hands out, palms up. “With what? I’ve got nothing.”

“Well. People with jobs who live in the real world and get in over their heads. Works with them, but I see that’s not the case with you. But I also know you’re smart. What you did with the boss and the, you know...” He leaned in and whispered, “Vampire.”

“Doesn’t help me now.”

Jude shook me. “I know you’re smart enough to get a grip on this.” He frog-marched me to the front doors. “I have two hundred bucks in my pocket, Austin. And I’m going to give it to you. And you are not going to gamble it.”

“I’m not?”

“No. You’re going to take it to your landlord and pay your rent. Then you’re going to think long and fucking hard about your next move. Get a job. Go back to school. Ask for help.”

Ask for help? No one helped other people for nothing. But Jude pulled the cash out and stuffed it in my hand. “I can’t take this.”

“You can. You will. Now go.” He shoved me forward.

“I can’t pay this back.”

“It’s not a loan. I don’t lend money. Because then I’d have to hurt people I like.”

Maybe the money would help. Maybe it would be enough. Or maybe I could find somewhere to turn it into more. Two hundred was a lot, but I wasn’t under the impression that it did anything more than put a small dent in my issues.

An old-timer walked up to me. “Dude,” he said. “You better listen to that guy.” He made a weird finger movement. “He’s one of dem. He’ll find you.”

“One of them?” Jude was already gone when I looked around.

“Yesh...” He smelled like alcohol. “He a bokor. Magic man.”

That could actually explain a few things. But not everything. I didn’t know if this old guy was telling the truth, making shit up, or having delusions. But I’d seen too much in the last couple of nights to not heed his warning. “Yes, sir. I’m listening to you, man.” I pointed at the old timer, tapped my chest with my fist full of cash, and then shoved it in my pocket and headed home.

My landlord, Mr. Walsh, counted out the money. His face turned red, and I thought he was going to explode. Then he sighed heavily. “This isn’t enough. Rent is more than two hundred bucks.”

“I know. But I’m having a hard time, and I’m trying. This is a start. I swear.”

“Start for what?” Walsh held up the money as if it didn’t make sense to him. Maybe it didn’t. It didn’t make much sense to me either.

“I’m trying to do better. To be better. I found someone and—”

“Ah...well. You found a man, huh? Love will make you do all kinds of things. The way I see it is either you’ll push through and become that better man, or it’ll break you. Sure hope you do the right thing, kid.”

“I’m trying. I’m gonna try.”

“Okay. For love. I’ll give you a chance. You have two more weeks. Now go.” He waved his hand at me as if brushing me off. I didn’t know what to think of that. First Jude, now Walsh. Both giving me a chance. A chance I never gave myself.

I went back to my place. Through the front door this time. It kind of felt nice. But I was at the end. Tired, hungry, sweaty. It was hot out, as usual. I took a shower and crashed, sleeping the rest of the day. I woke up before the sun went down, still exhausted and hungry, and I had no clue what else to do. The only thing I could. I got dressed and headed out into the city.

Realizing I was heading to the riverfront, I slowed down. It was half an hour later and the sun was trying to set as I stood on the stairs across Decatur Street from Jackson Square. A line of mule-pulled carriages lined the way, their drivers hoping to score a fair. The cathedral loomed over everything. Café Du Mond was down the street, and a little beyond that was where I’d left Luc at the river, tucking the ring in my pocket. I missed the hell out of him, but I was afraid to put the ring back on. Afraid he’d be mad, but worse, that I had so completely let him down. I couldn’t remember ever feeling so hopeless in my life. Even when my mother died. She had been my tether to a normal world. She was kind. She helped people. But when she needed help, there was no one.

Then there I was. All alone, facing the world, but I'd already learned how to survive. And she was no longer around judging me and the stupid choices I made. I gambled away my life after that.

Until Luc.

Hotel Royal

I turned away from the riverfront. I didn't want to think about Luc. I couldn't. No matter what happened with him, I couldn't go back to gambling. I needed to figure out what the hell I was going to do with my life before I could even think about helping him. If I got my shit together, maybe I could get that payment. Somehow. Though I was clueless at the moment.

Wandering around the French Quarter has often been inspirational in my life. So much was always going on. Tourists come here all year round. The partying never ended, but that wasn't my scene. Artists plied their wares along the outskirts of Jackson Square, and I loved seeing their creativity. At this time of night, though, a lot of them were packing up to go home.

Without thinking about it much, I wandered around, finding myself near Lafitte's Blacksmith shop. I'd avoided it earlier, not wanting Luc to deal with spirits that might have been there. He had mentioned talking with others, but I was selfish and wanted him all to myself. It was the oldest building in the Quarter, so I was sure if anywhere had other spirits, it would be that bar. Farther down the road, a tour group was listening to their guide talking about all the horrors of the city. Murder and mayhem on the menu. I chuckled. It was history. Our history. On sale for whoever was interested enough to buy into it.

The city grew darker, but it was never completely dark. The street lamps, either electric made to look like gas or the real deal, came on. I passed a three-story brick with fancy balconies decorated with Mardi Gras banners and ribbons. Another with massive ferns dripping over the railings and rainbow flags flying. I might have been

walking the blocks in circles, but it didn't matter. I loved this city. Loved living here. The flavor, the color, the history. But sometimes, it felt like it chewed me up and spit me back out.

What was I doing? I walked by CC's Coffee House and stood at the corner, staring at the buildings across the way and their lovely architecture. I was pretty sure one was a hotel, though it had a fancy art gallery on the first floor. And my favorite vampire strolled right out of it. He saw me and crossed the street.

"You following me now?" he asked, but he held out his hand, so I shook it.

"I don't know what the hell I'm doing. But I'm not following you."

"You know, they made that stupid TV show about us there." He flicked his wrist back the way he'd come. "That's the building they used for a lot of the scenes. One across town they used for the opening. It's prettier. Odd I find you here." He shrugged.

"Not so odd, maybe. This whole city is vampire crazy."

"Indeed." He looked at me, tilting his head. "How's your spirit friend? Luc, I believe you said?"

"I've put the ring away. The one that allows me to see him."

"So..." He looked confused. Well, I was confused, too. "Why?"

I sighed. "I can't face him. I can't figure out payment for Lady G., the mambo. And I can't even manage my life. I'm broke. I can't gamble. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing."

“How’d you manage before?”

“Nothing I’ve ever done has been enough. New Orleans is not cheap. Why do you think there are so many homeless?”

“I thought it was to feed me.” He grinned, baring a little fang.

I shook my head at his stupid joke. “Speaking of that, Carlos let you off your chain?”

Sloane gave a fake laugh. “You’re hysterical. I’m never on anyone’s chain—but I was actually hoping I’d find you. I have something for you. Turns out Carlos adores me, and our arrangement has been very beneficial.” He pulled a small backpack from his back and zipped it open. “Here.” He shook a velvet pouch at me.

“What’s this?” I took it, feeling its weight.

“It’s for your Luc. It’s very valuable.”

I opened the pouch and peered inside. A stone rested in the luxurious material. I pulled it out, the streetlight shone down on it, making the red sparkle. “A ruby?”

“Yes, but this is no ordinary gem, my friend. No. This is the Blood Stone. The right witch, or in this case, voodoo queen, can store immense amounts of power in this.” He tapped it with a long fingernail painted black.

“Where did you get it?”

“Like I said. Carlos adores me. Turns out, he had it. He can’t really do anything with it. It’s too precious to cut or set. So I asked him for it.”

“He’s not going to come looking for me for it?” That was the last thing I needed,

Marcello on my ass again.

“No. Not ever. Now take this and go fix your Luc. And afterward, I’d like to hear him play. I’ve heard he’s fantastic. That sounds like fair payment to me.”

I couldn’t say a thing. Not a word. My throat was tight, closing up and threatening to choke me. I nodded. I put the stone back in the bag, and as I tucked it in my front pocket, I whispered, “We can do that.”

Sloane clapped my shoulder. “Good.”

Then he was gone as if he’d never been there. I didn’t even see which way he went. But he’d given me such a gift. And more than he even realized. He’d given me hope.

Maybe—just maybe—we could figure out how to make enough money to survive. If Luc wasn’t too pissed at me.

I pulled the ring out of my pocket.

And put it back on.

Masonic Temple Cemetery

Luc

“What the hell?” I was so angry. Never in my entire life—or afterlife—had I been this angry. “What happened to together ? What happened to figuring this out? I thought we were going to make a go of it. No. You lock me away? Like I’m your plaything?” I’d taken a chance on Austin. I cared for him. Wanted something with him that I’d never thought I could ever have, and he gave me hope. Then tore it all away.

“Luc. Luc, no. Please.” Austin held his hands up to placate me.

“Well, I never. I’m done. Take the ring off, Austin. Take it off.”

“No. I’m not. Luc, please. I’m sorry.”

I turned my back to him and stared out across the intersection. It was nighttime again, but it could have been any night for all I knew. I couldn’t feel heat or cold, but I could see the lights and colors, the old buildings, and in the distance, the much taller and newer ones. So much had changed, and yet so little. “I’m too damn old for your games.”

“No games. I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to see me so...broken.”

“I see you, Austin Broussard. I see all the ways you are. You don’t think I didn’t see you broken? You were digging your own grave when we met.” Whipping around, I

pointed at him. “The mafia after you for a massive debt. Massive. You think I ignored that? You took me to your house, and I saw for myself how small and bare it is.”

Austin hung his head. “Luc...”

“I’m not saying this to put you down, Austin. I’m saying I know who you are. I see you. And I chose you anyway. I didn’t have to interact with you. I didn’t have to make love with you.”

“Luc.” He held his hands up again. People on the street gave him a wider berth, going around him and looking back. They couldn’t see me or hear me, so they thought he was crazy. Such small minds, and yet they come to New Orleans hoping for wonders that are right in front of them. “I’m sorry. So. Sorry. I won’t do anything like that again.”

“You bet you won’t.”

“Please give me another chance. Deities! Come on. I-I have something to tell you. Please...”

“Fine. But say it fast.”

“I have the last of the payment.”

“What?” How had he done it? I hoped to the afterlife that he hadn’t gambled for it and risked slipping back into Marcello’s clutches.

“Sloane gave it to me. It’s going to be enough.”

“You are so stupid.” I couldn’t let my anger go yet. “You know, I want to see every side of you. And I want to hold you. For real hold you. Not this slipping inside your

body thing.” If we were doing this for real, I needed to know he was in it with me completely.

“We can have that. I swear. Let’s go and work this out with the mambo and get you that body.”

“Fine.” Giving in and calming a little, I gestured for him to go.

When he started walking, I felt the tug that pulled me to him, to the ring. If I didn’t walk with him, I would still be pulled along, but it didn’t feel good. It was kind of like standing in a hurricane but without the rain. And I’d seen real hurricanes. The worst one wasn’t that long ago and brought death along with it. I didn’t want to see those lost souls again. No, I wanted to go where Austin went. More than anything. And not because he was going back to the Voodoo priestess. Sure, I wanted a new life, a new chance. But it wouldn’t mean half as much if I didn’t have Austin in it.

I walked beside him, even passing through cars, streetlights, or receptacles, but I didn’t like passing through people. Them, I dodged. Passing through the living left me feeling icky, not cold, so much as empty. And there were many places where the crowds were thick. They dressed differently, like Austin, with denim trousers and cotton shirts that pulled over their heads, and again, the colors were riotous. Thankfully, Austin avoided Bourbon Street on his way back to Lady Geneviève’s. That area was insane. And loud. By the time he had to cross over it, we were all the way down St. Peter, where it was calmer. If anywhere in the Quarter could be considered calm. That was something that hadn’t changed. I had once loved the energy of the city, but now it felt too intense with my potential life hanging on the line.

I was pretty sure I remembered the little Victorian cottage where Lady Geneviève lived. The colors were different. Not nearly as garish as they once were. But it wasn’t a home I’d ever been in, either. And unlike Austin, I hadn’t grown up here. But I had

spent a lot of time in the city and had known a lot of people. All of them were gone now.

“Hey, Luc...where did you live? When you were living here, you know?”

“Over on Rampart.” We had turned up Burgundy. “I think around the corner from here, not terribly far. I had a tiny apartment, but it was a great area for jazz.” My whole life had centered around music.

“Oh, I think there’s a park over there named for Louis Armstrong.”

“He moved away from here. Went to New York.”

“I don’t know much about history.”

“Doesn’t feel like history to me.” In some ways, it seemed like yesterday or a different time and place. It seemed unreal and in my face at the same time. And eons had passed while I was stuck in that grave, and the only thing I had to hang onto was Rose’s Ballad. It had become so much more than her song to me. “Here we are.” We stopped in front of the house.

“Did you know him? Armstrong?”

I shook my head. “No. I knew of him and had acquaintances in common. But I didn’t know him.” I didn’t want to talk about my past. I wanted a future. “Let’s do this.” I jumped up on the stoop. “Come on.”

He stood on the street looking up at me. “We can go there. Rampart. I bet it’s different, though.”

I sighed. “Aus, everything is different. The buildings, the automobiles. The way you

dress. I'll adjust." I figured he was worried about how I would cope, but that was something I could figure out if I had the opportunity to.

"Okay." He joined me on the stoop and knocked on the door.

It opened quicker than the first time we were here, but it wasn't Geneviève who answered the door. It was someone younger but resembled her in many ways. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"We need to see Lady Geneviève."

"You have an appointment?"

"No, but tell her it's Austin and Luc."

She narrowed her eyes and pinched her lips as she glared at Austin, completely unaware of me. Perhaps she didn't have Geneviève's gifts, or perhaps she wasn't trained. It didn't matter. She still said, "One moment." Then closed the door on us.

"Well..." Austin said.

"We can wait."

But it didn't take long. The door opened again, and this time by Geneviève herself, and she ignored Austin, looking at me. "Nice to see you again, Luc. Hope you're closer to gaining your body."

"Yes. We have the payments."

"Good. I have a client right now. But I'll meet you at the Masonic Temple Cemetery at three a.m."

“Why there?” Austin grumbled. His face was so expressive. I could read him like a book, and right now, he was frustrated but curious.

“That’s where the zombie is,” she practically spat at him. I wasn’t sure if she disliked him or was simply irritated at his questions. He had a lot, but he also gained information he could use that way. I admired the way his brain worked. He didn’t give himself enough credit for how intelligent he was.

His scowl eased up, but he still asked, “Why?”

“Stop questioning me. It is. Now go.” She shooed him off the stoop, and I laughed. Those two were like oil and water.

“Let’s get over there and wait.” That’s all we had to do anyway, and I enjoyed Austin’s company regardless of where we were.

“I bet there are a lot of spirits there, Luc. You sure you want to go?”

“I’m not afraid of ghosts, Austin.”

“Whatever.” He started walking again. “It’s over an hour away and not far from where I met you.”

It actually took us closer to two hours to get there, and the cemetery was closed, though I could sense other spirits milling around inside. It wasn’t even ten o’clock yet, so we had time to kill. Austin said there was a park nearby where we could hang out . I assumed that meant to sit around and wait, which was fine with me. I didn’t care where we were. And I didn’t tire, but Austin did. And he looked exhausted. The rings under his eyes were getting darker, making him look bruised and fragile. Resting in a park sounded like what he needed.

I'd learned a lot about Austin in the short time we had been together. One thing was how much he pushed himself. He might have been broke, as he said, but he lived every day with joie de vivre. He had a joy about him, no matter what he did or who was chasing him. I hoped that once we settled this, I could get him to slow down. He needed to rest and eat more often. I was pretty sure he hadn't eaten since the beignets, and I estimated that to be about two days ago. I wasn't entirely sure because time did weird things when he wasn't wearing the ring.

With that in mind, I pointed out an eatery. "Look there."

"Uh...are you hungry?"

"No, but I bet you are, Austin. Do you have any money left? I bet you have enough for a bite." The little house with a blue roof set away from the road looked like it mostly had baked goods when a sandwich was what he needed, if not a full-on four-course meal. But he could probably afford something they had.

"Well, yeah. I am."

"We have time. Go in."

It turned out that he had enough for a sandwich. Since they were closing up, they had pre-made ones for half price. He ordered and we took it to his park, finding a quiet spot where he could eat. It was a dark area, but he could see just fine by the aura my spirit-self gave off. "Want to share?" he asked. "The bread is fresh."

"No, go ahead. I want to watch you. I'll be eating soon enough."

He ate slowly, savoring every bite. He was beautiful. Everything I could hope for in a lover he had. His multi-colored eyes and thick stubble along his jaw since he hadn't shaved in a few days. I could imagine what it would be like when it came in fully.

But his insides were as gorgeous as his outsides. Though I didn't think he realized it. No one had ever taken the time to figure out what I wanted or needed, but Austin was tuned in to everything about me. And I wanted to know everything about him as well.

Between bites of his food, we talked quietly. "What do you think your body will look like?"

"Don't know. I don't think it matters. I haven't had one in a long time, so no matter what it looks like, I'll have to get used to it."

"Mmm..." he swallowed. "I will too. I mean, I'm used to seeing you like this. Mr. snazzy-jazzy. And I like it. A lot. But it'll be different seeing you in a different body."

"I've been spectral for so long. Without even human interaction. I think. Well, it will take time to get used to, no matter what."

"Right. I'm sure. Do you? Uh..."

"What, Austin?"

"Will we stay together? Do you think? After you get used to all of it?"

"Yes. I want nothing more right now than to lean over and put my head on your shoulder. To kiss your cheek. And maybe swipe a bite of that sandwich."

Austin laughed, which is what I had intended, and he held up the last of his food. "Eating."

"Good." I stretched out my legs in front of me. "Austin, I know we haven't been together long. Only a few days. But I like you a lot. I've come to care about you

deeply.”

He finished his sandwich and wiped his hands and face with the little paper napkin they’d given him. Then he leaned back against the tree we sat under and closed his tired eyes. “I care about you a lot too. I don’t want to split up. I want you to be my boyfriend, Luc.”

I tapped his foot with mine, though it went right through him, and he didn’t feel it. He didn’t even flinch. It made me sad and excited. “I can’t wait to get a body so I can be that boyfriend, Austin.”

He dozed off, and I let him sleep. I didn’t need the rest like he did, so I waited, imagining what life would be like afterward. I’d seen the gay nightclubs. That had been another thing that had changed dramatically since my day. Those young men would have been arrested back when I was alive. Now, they were celebrated, worshiped. I’d seen Austin naked and touched him. And it still felt risky to me, though he didn’t seem to have any issue at all. Being gay had been dangerous. Could have even meant your life. I surrounded myself with women friends, so I could never be accused of it. But now? So, so many years later, I would be able to be myself. I’d be able to love Austin out in the open. It felt liberating. And scary.

I hoped I could still be a musician. I needed music in my life. I think that was something that would never change, no matter what else I did. If I could keep that, I could adjust.

As the night wore on, eventually, I needed to wake Austin up. We had to walk to the cemetery, and we didn’t want to be late. “Austin.” He didn’t move. I called his name louder. His body needed the rest, and I promised myself that once this was over, he would get it. “Austin!”

“What? I’m up. What?” He looked around, adorable, with sleepy eyes.

“I think it’s time to go.”

“Ugh, yeah.” He stood and stretched, popping his back. “Not the best place to sleep, but I needed that.”

“I know.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

We made our way to the cemetery—but it was actually two cemeteries—and we stood in the road between them. I looked from side to side. “She didn’t say which one?”

“No. And I should have known better. There are so many graveyards in this town that they give them the same name and a new number. But I should have asked where within too. Like which tombstone or by the gates or what?” He threw his hands in the air. “I don’t know. We wait here, I guess.” Austin walked over and leaned against the brick wall of the gatehouse on the number two cemetery. The gate had private property signs hung along with warnings about no tours.

“They’ll probably come to the gate right. What time is it?”

Austin looked at his watch. “Not quite three.”

I paced up and down the street.

Finally, a car turned down, the lights nearly blinding me. I moved to the side, near Austin. Even though they couldn’t hurt me, I didn’t like the thought of being run over. It stopped beside us, and both Lady Geneviève and her younger helper got out of the car. The back end popped open. “I have some things we need. Come help.”

Austin walked over to the car, pulled out a canvas bag, and slung it over his shoulder then picked up a second one as well. “Where are we going?”

Geneviève pointed at graveyard number one. “I actually have a key to the gate, so we don’t have to climb the fence or nothing.”

“How...never mind.” Austin was discovering there were things he didn’t need to know.

I smiled serenely at him, wishing I could pat his head. But no matter. I followed them through the bigger of the two gates, providing enough light that they didn’t need a lantern. There were legends about which gates you went in and out of so the spirits wouldn’t follow you, but as a spirit, I didn’t think the living gave us much credit.

Austin glanced around as we made our way through. “Any spirits around?”

Geneviève shook her head, and I didn’t feel anything either. “No, Aus, don’t worry.”

“Okay, then.” Austin relaxed a little, shoulders dropping away from his ears. I suspected he was actually afraid of the spirits rather than concerned for me, as he said.

We walked nearly to the back gate before we turned. We stopped in front of a huge monument close to the fence. It was almost in the corner. “Here then.” Lady Geneviève looked around, then at Austin. “I hope you don’t waste my time. You have the payments?”

“I hope this is enough. Luc says he has the sacrifice, but I don’t know what that is.”

“It’s the song. The one I play for Rose.”

Geneviève put her hands on her hips and scowled at me. “You know it will be gone forever.”

“I do understand. Is it enough?” The song meant so much to me, and I did understand what losing it would mean. Some of the memories would fade, and though I thought they were ones I could part with, painful memories of what she’d done to me and how I’d led her on, it was also dangerous to lose them. But the song had also become more to me over the years. It had become a part of me, a lament, a little bit of hope. But I would part with all of that for a new chance at life.

“It is. The spirits will take the pain. The things you’ve loved and lost, and the things you’ve learned. You may be doomed to repeat the mistakes you lose. But it’s enough.”

“Good,” Austin said, but I didn’t think he understood exactly what that meant to me. And I didn’t know if it mattered.

Lady Geneviève held her hand out. “And the cost of the zombie? And the ritual?”

“The ring.” Austin held up his hand, showing it to her. “And this.” He pulled a velvet pouch out of his pocket and opened it, showing her what was inside.

“Is that?” she asked, putting a hand over her mouth.

“It’s a bloodstone.”

“It’s not a stone; it is the stone. Where did you get this?” She touched the edge of the bag.

“Long story, but it is mine and I’m free to give it.” The stone that Sloane had given Austin. I didn’t know what all of that was about, but it seemed valuable enough.

“Then we have a deal.” She motioned for the bags Austin had carried in and opened one. “You must first build a man.”

“What?”

“Out of dirt and mud. And natural things. Beside this monument here. In that other bag, I have water because there’s not much mud around. It doesn’t have to be too big, but large enough to hold your payments as we sacrifice to the spirits for your needs. Understand?”

“Not completely, but okay.” Austin pulled out a spade and a bucket.

Geneviève pointed to an empty plot farther back. “You can get some dirt from there. Don’t mind the grass. I’ll help it stick together. I brought Salina to help us, but this part you must do yourself.”

“Okay. Got it.” Austin hurried over to the spot Geneviève had indicated and started digging.

“And hurry up. We need this done before sunrise.” She snapped her fingers, and Austin got to work.

He spent nearly an hour constructing a little man out of the dirt and grass, using the water to make it muddy. His hands and clothes were filthy again.

“Good. Good.” Geneviève waved me closer. “It’s time to give your song.”

My part was as easy as it was difficult. I had my violin in hand. It always appeared when I needed it, though I never knew how, and I began to play, pulling the bow over the strings. When the words came, I stopped playing to sing, but the music continued. I could almost see the song settling over the little mud man and sinking into it. When

it was over. I looked up at Austin, trying to wipe a tear and only succeeding in getting more dirt on his face.

“Now, you must give the ring.”

“Give it where?”

“Place it on his head.” Geneviève pointed at the figure.

“But when I take it off, I’ll lose him.”

Geneviève sighed, but then she patted his arm. “Yes and no. You won’t be able to see or hear him, but I will. And he will be right here. Waiting for his body.”

“I thought we’d just put the ring on the zombie.” Geneviève reached up and popped him upside the back of his head. “Ow.”

“Put the ring on the totem. We’re running out of time.” She mumbled something about dealing with nonsense.

“It’s okay. I’m not going anywhere. Do it.” I wanted to reassure him.

He stared at me for a long minute as if memorizing me, and then finally, he gave a curt nod and took the ring off, placing it on top of the mud man.

“I hope the zombie will be cute. He’s not decayed or anything, is he?”

That earned him another smack on the back of the head, and Geneviève looked over at me. “You sure you want this one?”

“I’m sure. I adore him.” And that was the truth to the core of my soul.

“To each his own.”

Austin chimed in with, “What did he say?”

But she didn’t answer him. She went into some kind of a trance, muttering words in what sounded French, but I didn’t know what she said. Then I felt a vibration. Apparently, Austin and Salina felt it too. They held their arms out as if trying to balance on shaky ground. “Salina, unlock the tomb.” She handed the girl a key, and she unlocked a gate on the side of the giant tomb we were next to. Geneviève said a few more words and held her hands up.

And then it came. From inside the tomb, Salina had opened. He was slow and maybe not looking so good. His blue eyes were unseeing, and I couldn’t feel anything alive or supernatural coming off of him. He was like a void.

Austin stared at the zombie, glanced over at Geneviève, then back to the zombie. He opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, she put her hand on his face, shutting his lips tight.

“When Luc’s soul goes in, his life force will repair the body. So stop worrying...”

Austin nodded. Then she let him go to perform the ritual. She and Salina moved back and forth between the zombie and the totem, making jerky movements in almost a dance, but not. The whole time, chanting more words I didn’t understand.

And then I felt it. A tug. Not unlike when Austin moved without me, but different. I was yanked toward the ring, becoming small and smashing into the totem, ruining it.

Geneviève and Salina raised their hands above their heads. Salina continued chanting and Geneviève moaned. Then I was shoved—thrown—at the zombie. I couldn’t stop. I entered the body, much like I had entered Austin’s previously, but again it was

different. I went in deeper. Down a dark tunnel. I felt like I was spinning faster and faster, but I couldn't see a thing.

When I shared Austin's body, he was always there. I felt his consciousness like a rubber ball. Inside the zombie, there was nothing.

I stretched out. I took over. I owned every bit of it.

I opened my eyes. "Austin..." the voice was not mine.

Geneviève brushed her hands together. "Pack this stuff up." Salina jumped to it, loading their things in the bag. She snatched the velvet pouch from Austin and picked up the golden ring from the leftover mound of mud. She nodded. Looked at me and smiled. "Don't exit through the main gate."

Madame X Mansion

Austin

We lucked out. It took a bit, but along with the zombie body, Lady Geneviève came through with papers. A birth certificate, passport, and driver's license, although Luc most certainly would not be driving anywhere. But with that in hand, he got a great job. Well, it took time for his soul to heal the body enough to actually play piano. But once it did, he was ready to go. The music came back as if it had never left, and that led to the job and a better apartment, in turn. Some of Luc's new connections helped us land a great deal on one we could afford. A charming one-bedroom in Madame X Mansion on Toulouse.

I paid Walsh what I owed him in back rent before we moved. But this new place was worthy of Luc. He deserved it with all its character, brick walls, hardwood floors, and high ceilings. And we even had our own balcony. And it made Luc happy. And Luc being happy made me happy.

He came out of the tiny bathroom wearing a negligee—black and silky. Deities ! It looked so good on his skin, hanging above his knees. It was so amazing how his appearance had changed. His new body had lighter hair and a gaunt look when he first entered it. Now it looked more like Luc with darker hair and good health. The body's eyes had been blue. I remembered that. Blue and vacant, they actually had creeped me out when we first saw it. I nearly called the whole thing off, but I trusted Luc, and I wanted this for him. But now those eyes were more hazel. Closer and closer to Luc's lovely brown by the day. I didn't know how it happened, and I didn't care.

Luc twirled around the living room. “What do you think?”

“Fucking sexy.” It was the first time I’d seen him like that, though I’d known he bought the lingerie weeks ago.

“I learned that things like this are a lot more acceptable now. When I was alive the first time, wearing this could get me beat or killed. But I love it. It feels. Like me.”

His voice had changed too. It was scratchy and deep at first. He couldn’t sing a lick. It took weeks to get to a range Luc could do something with. Now, it was nearly as close to the voice I remembered as it could be.

And he was so talented.

He loved jazz, but he started playing other genres too. His regular gig was at one of the fancy hotels, The Davenport Lounge at The Ritz Carlton, and that paid most of our bills.

And me? I went back to waiting tables...to get me through school. I enrolled in business courses in Hotel, Restaurant, and Tourism Administration at The University of New Orleans. I loved this city, but waiting tables wasn’t enough. I wanted more out of life. I wanted to have more to offer my Luc.

No more gambling. It was time to be that better man. Someone he deserved.

Everything else with that body was in working order as well. “Come here, sexy.”

Luc smiled and slid closer, sitting on my lap. He wasn’t as tall as his spirit had been, his overall build was smaller, and I loved wrapping him up in my arms. He felt so good, warm, and real. I kissed the side of his head, but then he turned and wrapped his arms around my neck and smiled mischievously. Then he kissed me for real. His

tongue danced with mine as I rubbed down his back. He was gentle and kind, and I wasn't kidding when I said sexy as hell in the nightie.

I wasn't the biggest guy, but since I'd been eating and sleeping regularly, I'd put on some muscle, so picking him up was nearly effortless. I slid my arms under his knees as I stood and then walked slowly toward our bedroom. It had a fireplace that we put oversized candles in front of. The mantel had gorgeous white paneling on the sides with more of that red brick above it. It stood between two closets and opposite French doors that led to the balcony. In between? Enough room for a queen-sized bed. And ours was loaded with pillows and quilts. The room was light and airy and full of comfort. I set my lover on top of the bed.

I rubbed his legs, and he instantly spread them. "Damn, I am so lucky."

Luc shook his head. "No. I am."

"Well, you're about to get lucky."

"Prove it, Sass-mouth."

"Sass-mouth, huh? Is that how it is?"

Luc winked at me, daring me to give him more, and I certainly would. I loved nothing more than playing with him, except maybe listening to him play. Either way, I was the luckiest man in the world. He did more than share his new life with me. He made me better in every way.

There was no room for side tables, so we kept the lube in my closet. I opened the plantation-style shutter doors and grabbed it off the shelf inside. "Here we are. Just what I need." I showed him the bottle.

“Well, then...” We hadn’t known enough about this body. Even though Geneviève had assured us Luc’s spirit would heal all of it, and we had seen it do that and then some, we still got tested several times before we dropped the condoms. Going all-natural with him was a dream come true that I never even knew I had. I wasn’t one to fool around. And the few years leading up to Luc were too full of surviving to worry about hooking up. But I’d been tested too. And it was worth it.

I crawled over Luc’s body, pressing my hard cock into him and leaning in to kiss him again. It was delicate and sweet at first, but it quickly turned demanding.

“You have entirely too many clothes on, Aus. Get naked.” He tugged at my shirt.

I stood and gave him a quick show, dropping my clothes on the floor and flinging my boxers across the room. Luc laughed, which wasn’t smart, probably, since it only encouraged me. I shook my ass back and forth. “How’s that?”

“Better, now get up here and take care of me.”

“With pleasure.” I made my way back and kissed his knee before sliding down between his legs. I licked his balls, making him wiggle. He’d never had anyone treat him with such care. In his day, it was quick fucks, if that, because if they got caught, it could mean death. Well, no death here. I sucked them into my mouth, tonguing them, bringing him as much pleasure as I could. He deserved it. He’d waited a hundred years for me, and I planned on making every one of the rest of his days as good as I possibly could for him. In turn, it made my life better as well. Win-win-win!

He never talked about Rose and how he died the first time. I wondered how much of it was lost to the sacrifice and how much he simply didn’t want to dwell on the past. Either way, I made it my mission to make sure none of it mattered. It was all about what he needed.

To find what you need, you need to focus on the needs of others. A need is a need, and everything depends on the needing .

I pulled off his balls and licked a stripe up this cock. It was a nice one. I took it down to the back of my throat. I loved practicing on him and was progressively improving my deep-throating skills. His moans of pleasure proved it. While I played with his dick, I used my lubed up my fingers to open him up.

When he was begging me, humping into my mouth, I knew he was ready. “Want to get fucked, Luc?”

“Ah...yes...please...” he panted.

“You got it, sexy lover.” I ran my hands over the silky lingerie, pushing it up so I could see his abs and chest. I flicked his nipple, making him gasp. It was one of his favorite things. Then I lined up the head of my cock with his hole and pressed in.

“Aus...”

“Yes, baby.”

He moaned loudly as I pressed all the way in and stopped. “More...” It didn’t take long to build up to a punishing pace with Luc’s legs over my shoulders. All his little noises of pleasure encouraged me to keep going...there...there...more... And when he finally came, I exploded right behind him. “So good, Aus...”

“It was everything, Luc. Just like you.”

He kissed me, then we cleaned up and crawled back into bed. I held him close. “Luc. I love you so much. Thank you for sticking with me.” He certainly didn’t have to. Why he wanted a washed-up, broke-ass ex-gambler, I would never know. But I was

damned determined not to be that guy anymore. My mother would have been proud of this change.

“I don’t know, Austin, it wasn’t difficult. You’re adorable, so loving. I couldn’t ask for more in a partner. You have all the things that matter.” He kissed me.

I couldn’t ask for more, either. “I think we’re pretty good together.”

“Me too.”

“Now get some sleep. Sloane said he was coming to hear you play tomorrow.” Sloane had become one of our best friends. How could he not?

Yep. Everything was perfect. I needed this man, and he needed me.

Thank you for reading these Hot Nights in the Big Easy ...

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Character List

Austin Broussard: Gambler down on his luck.

Carlos Marcello: Undead Mafia Godfather.

Cecile: A Rougarou.

Grunch: Goat-headed monster that haunts the swamps of New Orleans. Originally, it was meant to protect the carnival people who had settled in the area.

Joker Man/Wildman: Native American Mardi Gras has a “Wildman” to bring the chiefs together and protect them. The Jester is the symbolic inversion of the king, a figure associated with duality. Additionally, the Fool (from the tarot cards) represents new beginnings, having faith in the future, being inexperienced, not knowing what to expect, having beginner's luck, improvisation, and believing in the universe. And is the wild spirit of Mardi Gras. In this story, the Joker Man is a spirit conjured from belief through the years and embodies all three.

Jude: Deadman Mafia enforcer/casino bouncer. Might be a bokor.

Lady Geneviève: Mambo, voodoo priestess.

Luc Marchand: “The Prince of Jazz.” His soul was trapped in a ring.

Rose Carollo: Pined for Luc and caused his death and soul trapping. She was related to the mob boss of the 1920s, Sylvester, Silver Dollar Sam, but Luc isn't sure what

that relation is.

Sloane: Vampire. In Jacques St. Germain's line, but well removed from it.

Uncle Sal: Austin's uncle, but perhaps not by blood.

Walsh (Mr. Walsh): Austin's landlord.