

Matthew Lee

**CRESCENT
CITY
NIGHTMARE**



A Stand-Alone Detective
Almond Tale of Erotic Horror

Crescent City

Nightmare

A Detective Almond Story

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By Matthew Lee

Chapter 1

Pilgrim Church sits at the corner of Broadway and Mercer and has for almost two hundred years. The small red brick building is overgrown with shrubs and flowers and trees and barely visible from the street. The bell tower rises above the tallest trees to look down on Seattle, my city.

I sat inside the church, one pew back from the family I'd followed in. When I got up this morning I had no plans to follow them. I'd left the house to buy some ice.

Beckett, my partner, was coming over and we were out. Rachel was making a large pitcher of tea. But I'd encountered this family walking on the sidewalk ahead of me and my heightened senses had detected the smell of fear oozing from the woman, gunpowder from the man, and fresh blood from the two little girls. I knew in that moment I needed to investigate. So, I'd followed them into this lovely Sunday morning service and taken a seat two rows behind.

At the pulpit, the earnest preacher proselytized about the advantages of faith in Jesus. He meant well, but he was fully unaware he missed the mark. I know the truth. I've seen the other side.

I shuffled to take the pew directly behind the family of four. Closer now, in the still air of the church, I also detect the scent of old bruises. The daughters were two beautiful little girls, angelic blonde angels dressed in their Sunday best. I knew beneath those pretty dresses lay old purple bruises.

This fucker was not content to beat his petite and frightened wife. This fucker also turned his anger on his children. This fucker throws fists at his kids.

I would not stand for it.

My phone buzzed and I discreetly checked the message.

Come fuck me before Beckett gets here, my wife, Rachel, wrote. You've been gone too long. I'm crazy horny.

This was the new Rachel. Her experiences with Rashad and his minotaurs changed her. My wife wants sex often, more frequently than I can manage. I drank the blood of Kali and that has enhanced everything about me, but still I cannot keep up with her lusts.

She's going to fuck him, said Janet, my first girlfriend, deceased, and one of the three voices living in my head.

Before I could respond my father, second of the three voices, chimed in.

Rachel is a slut. Divorce. Why are you still with her?

Because I love her, Dad, I fired back. It's not her fault she's this way now. I'm hoping she returns to normal.

You're a good husband, added Miss Mapleberry, dead grade school teacher and the third and final voice. Beckett is a good man too.

Beckett is my partner and new to the police force. He's a non-practicing Mormon who transferred in from Salt Lake City. His original assignment to help me was temporary but the case we worked on changed his entire world view. He signed up as my partner in a permanent way. Unfortunately, the case he helped me with also resulted in him fucking my wife, but I don't blame him. As I mentioned, Rachel is different now. She demands sex and can be incredibly persuasive.

Beckett is merely a man and a sheltered one at that. He never knew what hit him.

Rachel seduced him before he understood what was happening.

All of you need to be quiet, I told them. I will handle my wife.

I punched keys on my phone.

Something came up, I texted her. Behave yourself. Leave Beckett alone. I'll take care of you soon.

I put my phone away. Tension gripped my neck and shoulders. Beckett's a good man but like I said, Rachel is compellingly seductive. That they've already crossed that line together only made the likelihood they do so again greater. I was sure if I didn't leave this church right now, my partner would end up balls deep in my wife.

My stomach churned. No way could I walk away from this abuser.

"They are babies," the wife one pew ahead muttered, too low for others to hear but loud and clear to my enhanced hearing.

The husband aimed a murderous look at her. She flinched, but stood her ground, terrified. He looked beyond his wife to his daughters.

"They're old enough," he growled.

"Leave them alone," she insisted.

"They're already sexy," he murmured. "They're going to learn about that stuff sooner or later anyway. It's best if their father teaches them."

My skin crawled. My blood ran cold. I was filled with dread about what Rachel would do with Beckett, but there was no way I could turn my back and walk away from this asshole. But what could I do? Zero evidence that I could present to a judge or even my shift commander. If I went after this guy, it would be vigilante-style, and I had no right.

"I'll kill you if you touch them," the wife muttered.

"I'll kill you if you try to stop me," he replied.

The main room in this church is narrow, like a shoebox, with an altar, podium, and organ at the front. Two rows of pews run to the back with double doors then leading to the street. Along the walls are doors leading to other rooms spaced beneath stained-glass windows. About eighty people enjoyed this morning's service, all of them unaware of the evil man in their

midst. Husband and wife kept their voices low to avoid detection, low enough to evade everyone in that room except me.

You should kill him, Dad said.

No, Miss Mapleberry corrected. You should scare him. Scare him so badly he turns his life around and becomes a better man.

Men like him, I told Miss Mapleberry, do not respond to fear that way.

I knew threatening the man would do no good. Any fear I put into him would convert to anger and he'd take it out on his wife and kids.

For this bastard, I needed something more permanent than fear.

The sermon continued. I examined the architecture and all the people filling this beautiful space. I could tell them things, but they'd never believe me.

At last the preacher finished. I didn't blame him for spreading untruths. He meant well. He believed he helped mankind. But he did not have my insights.

Instead of faith I have knowledge.

The crowd began to disperse. I hovered, waiting for an opportunity. The husband told his wife to wait while he used the men's room and threatened her with violence if she tired anything. I followed him at a casual distance.

The restroom was small, two-man, with a sink, a mirror, a paper towel dispenser, a wall urinal, and a stall toilet. Mister Wife-Beater took the wall urinal. I pretended to aim for the stall and then stopped once I was behind him. I reached around to grab his cock and balls with one hand and covered his mouth with the other. Against my shirt I felt a gun tucked under his jacket in back, the source of the gunpowder I'd detected. My speed and strength are extra-human, thanks to the blood of Kali, and I held him like a vise. His struggles met my iron grip. I squeezed his genitalia hard and smothered his scream. I squeezed harder, bruising his nuts. He tried to fight,

tried to struggle, but his strength was nothing compared to mine. I pressed him into the toilet and his own piss. I wasn't prepared to kill him today.

"I know what you do," I hissed. "I know you hurt your wife, touch your daughters."

He struggled again, harder, but he might as well fight a mountain. I'm so strong now. I released his genitalia but kept my arm around him covering his mouth.

One hand was enough to hold him motionless. I withdrew his wallet from a back pocket. I read his driver's license.

"Hank Elva," I read out loud. "Five seven five Green Street. I know who you are, Hank, I know where you live. If you ever lift so much as a finger against the females in your life, I'll come back and rip your balls completely off. When I uncover your mouth, tell me you understand."

I removed my hand from his mouth.

"You crushed my nuts," he sobbed. "Call me a doctor."

"It's better that you suffer. Do you understand the new rules I've given you? Do you understand your life can get worse?"

He spat in the sink, fury rising.

"Who are you?" he challenged. "Nobody tells me how to run my family."

"That's no longer true, Hank. I'm telling you. Get that through your head. The days of abusing your wife and children are over."

He sized me up, wondering if he could take me, wondering if he could draw his pistol faster than I could move. I packed my voice with menace. I let him hear the violence in me. There was no mistaking my seriousness.

"I'm your wife's guardian angel," I continued. "I'm the protector of your beautiful girls. Do you understand, Hank? If you harm them again, I'll rip

your cock and balls off and let you bleed out. I have access to police files. I will hunt you down."

He held his genitalia in both hands, his face a mask of pain. I'd damaged him, given him something to think about. This was probably the first repercussions he'd had to face. I hoped he'd alter his behavior. I hoped he got the message and learned to control himself. I doubted it. He sank to the dirty bathroom floor, fetal, holding his smashed genitals. I left him there. His family waited in the church. I approached with my best friendly cop smile. I introduced myself and explained that I'd just had a conversation in the men's room with Hank. I told her I'd given Hank some new rules. She was confused but understood.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Maria."

I gave Maria my card.

"Hide this," I said. "Or commit my number to memory and throw my card away.

If he ever crosses the line again, call me, and I'll remove him."

Her eyes were big. I'd exposed her family's secret shame. Hopefully she'd see beyond that and let me protect her and the girls.

Chapter 2

Beckett's car was in our driveway. I carried the bag of ice and entered my home.

I smelled delicious wet pussy before I heard Rachel moan softly from the back of the house.

Goddamn it.

I sat the bag of ice in the freezer and crept down the hallway. Rachel was pressed against the sliding glass doors that led to the backyard. Her simple dress was flipped onto her ass. She held her panties aside with a thumb. Beckett, still dressed in jeans and T-shirt, with his big hard cock sticking out of his pants, fucked my wife from behind. I heard her wetness. I tasted her pussy in the air.

I wish that was me, dead Janet droned. And that Beckett was you. And that I was still alive. And you were fucking me. Against the glass. Hard. Like he's fucking your wife.

Shut up, I barked.

I heard Janet giggle in my head.

You should divorce— my father began.

All of you! I shouted, shutting them down. Enough!

Rachel had her feet spread far apart and her ass lifted, putting a curve in her lower back. She pushed away from the glass each time Beckett thrust, helping to impale herself on his fat cock. Her tits swung in time, swinging free before mashing against the glass again. She lifted higher, on her toes, to drive him deeper, craving penetration, desperate to be fucked like Rashad and the minotaur had fucked her. She longed to be taken like that again, and in a strange way, my heart went out to her.

I hated the sight before me. Most of me did, anyway. I was crushed to see my wife stuffed by another man but, if I'm totally honest, part of me loved the chaos of the scene. I loved the pure eroticism. My dick began to engorge. It was impossible to see Rachel in such a highly-charged sexual way and not get caught up in the moment.

In the weeks that followed her rescue and the death of Rashad and the minotaurs, I'd seen no abatement in her lust. I understood I may never see her lust diminish.

Kali warned me I might not. Rachel could maintain a conversation at a dinner party. She could buy groceries, get her nails done, function perfectly in the real world. The problems arose when desire struck. When something, anything, made her horny, even a little, she acted on those emotions without restraint.

Beckett had no chance against her charms. Poor boy was raised Mormon and sheltered all his life. I'd given him his first taste of alcohol and Rachel had given him his first taste of pussy and now he was hooked on both. He became a high school boy around her, simply unable to control himself. Rachel had learned to tap into a man's brain, make it so no man could resist her advances, not for long, anyway. Rashad had given her insight into how our minds work.

"Ungh!" my wife moaned. "Don't stop, Beckett. Just like that. Here it comes.

Your big cock is getting me there."

Her moans filled our bedroom. I couldn't interrupt. Not now. Not when she's about to climax. I just couldn't. Pragmatically, this would calm her for a while.

This tryst with Beckett would satisfy and she'd relax. Although it killed me to see her with another man, there was no denying the beauty of it, the glorious erotic charge of it. I stiffened in my pants almost against my will. Rachel was gasping for air, hugging the glass door, fucking herself on his dick.

Suddenly she groaned loud and long and Beckett thrust stronger and deeper and faster. My grateful wife orgasmed all over his solid meat and kept cumming, gasping and moaning as her climax continued. A heartbeat later Beckett thrust once, all the way in, and then grunted over and over. His buried meat spat his hot load into her body and I stepped away, down the hall, all the way to the front door. I listened closely, waiting for their orgasms to subside. When they did, I opened and closed the front door hard, loudly dropping my car keys on the tiled kitchen counter. My enhanced hearing caught their mad scramble to separate, to adjust clothing and catch their breath. I waited several heartbeats and then strode down the hallway.

Rachel sat at her vanity, pretending to apply lipstick. Beckett leaned against the far wall, pretended to casually chat with her.

"Hi, Baby," Rachel said, cheerfully. "What kept you? Did you get the ice?"

"I did. It's in the freezer. I had to confront a wife-beating child molester and warn him off his ways."

"Did he listen?"

"We'll see. If not, I'll pay him another visit. What's up, Beckett? How are you?"

"I'm good," he said, avoiding my eyes. "You?"

"Fantastic. Glad you're here. Let's get to work."

He nodded and we left the bedroom for my office. Rachel told us to have fun. I sat at my computer and told Beckett to bring a chair around. He did, and then he rested his arms on my desk and his head on his arms. He stared at the carpeting.

"Damn it, man," he confessed. "I did it again. I'm so sorry."

"Did what?"

"I fucked Rachel. I promised you I wouldn't and then I did. Just now, before you got home. I'm so sorry. You should dump me, brother. Find another

partner. Find someone stronger."

He lifted his head. I met his eyes. He was sorry. I shook my head sadly.

"I don't have time to explain this world to someone else," I said. "I appreciate the confession but no man is stronger enough. Rachel has powers of her own. I blame you both but there's more at play here than you know. You've been through crazy shit with me. I can trust you in every other way. Hell, man, you did not hesitate to step through that portal and save that little girl. I need courage like that on my side."

"I can't be trusted!" he yelled. "Fuck! I can't tell Rachel no. I try so hard. I want you to know that. But I can't tell her no and make it stick. I just can't be around her. I'm sorry."

I shrugged.

"I don't like it," I admitted. "But I'm over the shock. Rashad and the minotaurs made sure of that. I've seen obscene things done to her. I've seen how she welcomed those obscenities. Yet, I stick. She's my wife and I love her and I always will. We're going through some things right now, difficult things, but I believe we'll get all this behind us. She's better off with me than out on the street, picking up random guys to satiate her needs. If I abandon her, she'd fuck herself to death with strangers in a few weeks. I don't like it, as I said, but better me and you than some diseased junkie. Rachel has a problem, an addiction, and I'm going to help her with it. Think of yourself as human methadone, if that helps."

"What?"

"Methadone. Methadone is a drug that—"

"I fucking know what methadone is. You're suggesting sex with me is a way to ween Rachel off Rashad, a way to nurse her back to health."

"Yes. That's what I tell myself."

He pondered my words.

"I would hate to be in your shoes," he said, finally.

"Thanks. I hate being in my shoes. Can we work now?"

He gestured at my computer monitor.

"What do you have?"

I hit some keys. The monitor came to life.

"New Orleans PD requested help," I began. "Captain reviewed their request and told them they could borrow me, and that means you, too. Orleans PD has a string of disappearances going on and zero leads. An investigation found nothing because those interviewed refused to talk. Cops got nowhere. They did discover an abandoned shrine with indecipherable writing, and that's when my name came up. Word has spread about the girl we rescued and the details surrounding that case and that word eventually reached Louisiana."

Rachel entered my office wearing a short satin robe, loosely tied. Our eyes went to her gorgeous cleavage and shapely legs.

"You boys need anything?" she asked. "Sandwiches? Coffee?"

"I'm good," Beckett stammered.

"Me too," I said.

She cut across the room and dropped onto the loveseat.

"I'm lonely," she said. "Can I hang out with you?"

"Sure," Beckett said.

"We're going to New Orleans," I said. "You're coming too. People are disappearing and they're stumped."

"A new case?" she asked, interested.

"Yes," Beckett answered. Then, to me: "Is it wise to bring her?"

"She's a fiend on research and her intuition is vastly superior to mine. Also, there's no way I'm leaving her home alone."

Rachel chuckled.

"I'm still the same woman, Officer Ridgeway," she told Beckett. "I'm still myself. I just love sex now."

You should divorce—

Shut up, Dad.

Chapter 3

Orleans PD gave us our own office and left us alone. There were aspects to this case that made them uncomfortable. Voodoo sounds like a joke to most of us, a Hollywood movie gimmick, but down here they take it as seriously as life and death. We, meaning Beckett, Rachel, and myself, spent the first few days reading every scrap of information they had on the case so far. We learned about each of the victims and the circumstances around their disappearance. We read eyewitness reports. Only when we had that bedrock in place did we ask to be taken to the shrine they found.

Officer Liam LeBlanc drove us in an unmarked police cruiser.

"Voodoo is real," he said. "Voodoo came to North American soil via the slaves captured in West Africa and Haiti. Some spell it V-o-d-o-u. Same thing. Those people discovered ways of putting themselves in trances. There's dance trances and sound trances and silent trances. All kinds. In a trance a person can access areas of their mind which are restricted when they're conscious. It gets sealed off, like a door or window closes on it. In a trance, they can hear things, see things, speak, they say, to ancestors and learn things."

"I believe it," I said.

"Me too," LeBlanc agreed. "Not when I first joined the force, but now, after a few years. I've seen shit and heard of shit you wouldn't believe."

"I'd believe you," I said.

He glanced at me and kept driving.

"Once it got here," he continued. "It changed, like every religion does. It absorbed the Catholicism that was already here, borrowing things that worked, discarding things that didn't, and it grew, becoming more powerful. Maybe they use powders and animal parts and whatnot because they've unknowingly discovered chemicals in those things that do something to us."

Make us act certain ways, see certain things. Maybe even hear voices, but not made-up voices in our head but voices that are around us all the time that we just can't hear. Like those voices can't pierce the veil until we take something to bring the curtain down. You know what I'm saying?"

"I do," I said.

"You just believe in all this shit I'm saying, don't you, Officer Almond?"

"I do," I repeated.

We drove in silence for a while. Beckett and Rachel were in the backseat and I'd not thought about them for a while. I discreetly turned to catch a glimpse from the corner of my eye and saw Rachel's hand rubbing the front of his pants. She had him stiff. I saw the obvious outline of his penis under her fingers.

LeBlanc took us deep into the heart of the town. The homes were shaped like rectangles but beautiful two and three-story rectangles, rectangles adorned with all the charms of the South. The facades had columns and balconies and gables.

They all faced the tree-lined streets with a little strip of grass in front and a small plot of land in back. They sat shoulder to shoulder under oak, cypress, and magnolia trees.

"I love this place," Rachel said. "New Orleans is beautiful."

"Yes, ma'am," LeBlanc agreed. "I had the same reaction when I first arrived many years ago. There's no place like it. All cultures and peoples crash together here, drawn by the mighty Mississippi River. That storied waterway catches everything between the Rockies and the Appalachians, from as high as Canada, and drains it all through the heart of our town, and has been doing so for millennia, way back to the Native Americans and even older. The wash of the continent passes through here, mixing everything." He pulled up to the curb.

"Here we are."

We sat before an old brick building.

"A church?" Beckett asked.

"That's right," LeBlanc said. "Canal Street Church. Tattoo parlor to the left and a haunted house to the right. Lake Pontchartrain is only a few miles down the road."

"Canal Street Church?" Beckett asked. "Where's the canal?"

"There is no canal," LeBlanc explained. "They planned on building a canal and even named the street which would run alongside, but then never started the project. The street name stuck and here we are. That's a sample of the New Orleans way."

"How did Orleans PD find the shrine?" I asked.

"They were going door to door, interviewing, looking for witnesses. The couple they tracked, Mr. and Mrs. Bank, vanished after visiting Tattoo Temple. Mrs.

Bank got a little fleur-de-lis in black just above her lady parts. Temple artist said they were celebrating their trip to New Orleans. Said they were headed to The Mortuary after. That's a kind of touristy haunted house at the end of the street.

They never made it."

"Why'd we stop at a church?" Beckett asked.

"Our interviewing officers said a few witnesses had seen them taking pictures of the old church but then they were gone. The officers started exploring, discovered a hidden doorway, followed that path under the street until they found the shrine. I need to warn you, especially with a lady present, the shrine is obscene."

"How so?" I asked.

"First off, it's demonic. Like, a life-sized gargoyle demon looking creature.

Second, it's realistic, and by realistic, I mean it is anatomically correct, except it isn't exactly correct, because the penis is much too large."

I felt Rachel's sudden interest from the back seat.

"The demon has a penis?" she asked.

"Yes, Ma'am. A big one."

We exited the car. Inside, the church was much like the one I had entered earlier, much like any church: long and narrow, four rows of pews, windows, podium, altar, and a raised stage. LeBlanc led us through a door at the back. He stopped to explain to a priest who we were and what we were doing and got the okay. We continued. The place had a basement and LeBlanc guided us down the stairs.

They mostly used this lower level for storage and had partitioned sections off.

"Water's always a problem this close to the lake," LeBlanc said. "Seeps in everywhere. That's how they found the hidden doorway. Water stains."

At the rear of the basement were stacked crates, recently moved. A faint outline of salt crystals hinted at a small door. LeBlanc pressed both top corners and a panel swung open. A dark tunnel led away to the northwest. LeBlanc produced a flashlight and handed me an extra.

"This way," he said. "We'll be under the first of the graveyards in about two-thousand feet. Watch for puddles."

"Graveyards?" Rachel asked.

"Cemeteries, technically."

"What's the difference?" Beckett asked.

"Graveyards are attached to church property, like the front, side, or back yards of a house. Cemeteries stand on their own, just sections of land for burying the dead."

"I noticed on the drive in," Rachel said. "Why so many tombs above ground?"

"The city of New Orleans is at or below sea level," LeBlanc explained. "Bodies get waterlogged or caskets can even break free and become disinterred. We bury above ground and use concrete or marble."

We walked a while in silence. Soon LeBlanc announced there were bodies in tombs above us. Rachel shivered and moved closer to me. I felt pride until she grabbed Beckett's sleeve and pulled him closer too, making us a pair of bookends protecting her.

I started to sweat.

Dark.

Trapped.

All my fears of being buried alive returned. My heart began to race. My palms, already sweaty, began to itch.

You'll be all right, Dear, Miss Mapleberry said.

"You okay?" Rachel asked, sensing something amiss.

"A little freaked," I said.

"Claustrophobic?" LeBlanc asked.

"In a way," I answered. "I have a bad history with dark enclosed places."

I controlled my breathing.

You're doing great, son, Dad said.

I was suddenly twelve years old and in my father's arms, the mean German Shephard that had just chased me, snarling and barking, was trotting away, defeated by the mere presence of my father. I felt his spirit surround me and I relaxed a little.

I'll never leave you, he said.

Soon the tunnel sloped down and before too long we entered an area with a high ceiling. LeBlanc shined his light all around until he found an alcove off to one side. We moved that way and his beam illuminated a statue of a large, muscular, stout-limbed and winged gargoyle-style demon, arms raised in triumph. The creature stood on a raised marble platform with a strange language carved around the base. A perfectly realistic but obscenely over-sized erection jutted out from his crotch. Massive balls hung beneath. He looked carved from marble and almost alive. Rachel rested her hand on a muscular thigh and pushed her palm higher, fingertips grazing the pendulous ball sack hanging beneath.

"Dead end," LeBlanc offered.

I turned from Rachel and her antics.

"Check the walls," I said. "No way there is only one way in and one way out.

Check the floor and the ceiling. I promise we'll find another hidden door. Maybe several."

LeBlanc looked surprised. He glanced around like that was something he should have considered.

"How could you know that?" he asked.

"I know how these people think. No way they box themselves in. They are always hunted. All through history these types of people are hunted. They've learned how to survive. There's another door somewhere."

I switched my light on and we spread out, scanning the rough-hewn rock. I glanced at Rachel and discovered she now stood directly in front of the beast and had closed the fingers of both hands around that marble erection. She stroked the stone cock and gazed into the creature's eyes, no doubt wishing he was real. She slipped a hand under to fondle his smooth balls

"He has four testicles," she said, amazed and delighted.

She ran one hand over the polished scrotum while the other stroked the shaft. I would have been embarrassed but I was the only one who noticed. LeBlanc and Beckett searched the walls and floor.

I moved closer to the statue and drew my phone, recording a short clip of the carvings. I walked a slow circle and ignored my wife.

"I found something," Beckett said.

LeBlanc and I hurried over. In a small carved out section of the back wall, Beckett had discovered hidden behind large rocks a man-sized opening in the ground, easily overlooked. He crouched to listen.

"Give me your flashlight," he said.

I handed him mine and he aimed the beam down, illuminating a stone floor about fifteen feet lower and a new tunnel leading away into darkness. Holes in the wall, evenly spaced, led down.

"I hate the idea of going deeper," Rachel said, joining us. She put a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "I'm sure you do too."

The glow from LeBlanc's flashlight caught a glimmer on her shirt.

"Did something drip on you?" I asked.

She looked down. LeBlanc aimed his light at her. Her shirt gleamed with sparkling drops. The same sparkle glittered on her hands and lips.

"What are these holes for?" Beckett asked.

"I'd speculate that rungs were there at one time," Rachel said. "But have been removed. We'll need pegs now."

"What do you mean, pegs?" LeBlanc asked.

Rachel stuck a finger in a hole.

"Put a peg in the hole and place your foot on it," she said. "Brace yourself against the back wall and work your way lower, placing pegs for hands and feet.

Awkward but doable. If we had enough we could just fill the holes and leave them, making up and down movement much easier."

I visualized what she said and the others did too.

"Back to the church," LeBlanc said.

He led and we followed. I hurried to catch him.

"How many people are missing, total?" I asked.

"About a dozen."

"Any similarities?"

"All couples, male and female, and all between twenty and forty."

I asked more questions, mostly about working for the New Orleans police department. Eventually I noticed Beckett and Rachel missing.

"You go ahead," I said. "I'll go back for them."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely. They probably stopped to take a leak."

I suspected they'd stopped for something else.

LeBlanc marched on, determined, excited by our new discovery. I hurried back and found Beckett with his back to the rocky wall and Rachel crouching before him, sucking his cock with abandon, stroking his inches with both hands.

"What the fuck?" I said. "This is not the time or place."

Rachel moaned deeply, delighted that her husband caught her.

"She attacked me," Beckett explained. "I tried to stop her but she was ferocious.

Better to give in so we can then move on."

Rachel's brow was deeply furrowed. She sucked his cock with intense concentration and desperate need. I again spied the glittering substance in the light.

"Did that statue spray something on you?" I asked. "You examined that gargoye's genitalia. Did his cock spit?"

Rachel nodded as she sucked, moaning softly. Beckett looked at me.

"She's drugged," he said. "That sculpture must have a substance on it. She would not be denied."

"Just ejaculate," I said, shaking my head. "Give her what she needs."

He looked away from me, down at my pretty wife working his cock in her pretty mouth. He watched her, marveling at her skill and desire, and soon closed his eyes. His chin rose.

"It's coming," he murmured.

Rachel went nuts at his announcement, sucking and stroking frantically.

"Look away, Almond," Beckett gasped. "Don't watch this."

The man lurched and shot and Rachel groaned with deep satisfaction, sucking hard and swallowing every drop he spewed. His knees buckled but she did not stop. Finally, he was forced to push her away. I helped, holding her back. She spun on me and dropped to one knee. She pawed at my zipper.

"Catch up to LeBlanc," I said, as my dick entered Rachel's mouth. "Tell him we'll be right there."

Beckett nodded and stumbled away, zipping his fly. I watched my wife feast. She was starved for dick, thirsty for sperm. She rubbed her clit as she sucked. I gave in to her addiction, allowing her to get what she needed. She rubbed her pussy and sucked ravenously and when my sperm rose, I just blew my load into her vacuuming mouth. She welcomed it, masturbating herself to orgasm as I filled her cheeks.

Since drinking the blood of the succubus, sex with Rachel has been

overwhelming. My new heightened senses can barely handle the spectacular pleasure I feel. My dick gets harder and feels bigger than ever before and when I explode it's like I'm dying. A roar filled my ears and my mind. I shot my massive load into her vacuuming maw and felt gravity leave me, the floor tilt. I poured jizz down her throat until the world spun.

At last I leaned against the tunnel wall, reeling. I took long minutes to recover, slowly coming back to myself.

"Do not," I scolded, breathless. "Try that shit with LeBlanc."

She looked abashed and ashamed.

"Goddamn it," she said, wiping at her mouth. "I was doing so well, Baby. I was keeping myself under control. I need to focus on this mission. I know that. There are people missing. This is serious. I felt that familiar craving rise but I controlled it. Then we found that fucking demon statue. Did you feel the power radiating from it? I did. It got to me. I'm okay for now. I'm under control. Two loads will hold me for a while. Let's catch up with LeBlanc and Beckett."

I kissed her forehead. I felt for her. Like any addict, her physiology had been altered, body and mind. Penises and semen was everything to her now, her highest priority. I damned Rashad and his kind for the millionth time.

"Let's go," she insisted. "I'm sorry, my love. I promise I'll do better."

"You know that statue drugged you."

"I know it."

I saw the sparkles around your mouth. Did you suck on the head?"

"I did. If that cock had been lower, I would have fucked myself on it. Keep me away from that thing. I'll embarrass myself."

"That's good advice. Let's catch up."

We hurried.

Chapter 4

We returned to the shrine with sturdy wooden dowels from the church gardening shed and flashlights for everyone. I stayed between Rachel and the demon.

LeBlanc filled each hole with a stout peg and left it, creating a crude ladder. We all descended deeper into the Earth. At last we stood in this new tunnel.

"It slants down," LeBlanc said.

Keep it together, Dad cautioned. You're doing great.

I'm okay, I replied. For now.

We stayed close and began to explore. The tunnel widened and soon opened into a cave. A tunnel led from the cave on the opposite wall. Three rusty iron cages sat in the center. One cage was empty. One held two skeletons. The final cage held two bound, gagged, and absolutely terrified civilians, a man and a woman, naked. LeBlanc drew his service revolver and advanced. Beckett and I drew ours as well. Rachel hurried to the cage. It was locked but she grabbed a rock off the floor and smashed it open. I holstered my gun. Beckett and LeBlanc stood guard and I helped Rachel free the captives. She removed the woman's gag.

"Get us out of here," the woman whimpered. "Please. Before it comes back."

Heavy footsteps sounded from the far tunnel. LeBlanc and I exchanged a frightened look.

"I'm here to rescue victims," he said. "Not to kill a monster. We'll come back with help for that task."

"Sounds good," I said.

Rachel had helped the naked man stand. They were weak but must have been some of the recently vanished.

"Can you walk?" Rachel asked them.

"I can run," The woman answered.

They knew the way. We followed, guarding our retreat, and helped them climb once we reached the pegs. I caught Rachel stealing looks at the man's bare penis but she controlled herself. LeBlanc ran ahead to the church and returned with blankets and a priest. Above ground, he used the police car radio to call for backup and medical services.

"We left the tattoo parlor," I heard the man say. "We were headed to the haunted house. We stopped at the church to take pictures. I'm an architect. Something dropped from the roof of the building, something heavy. Sacks dropped over our heads and we were flown away. We didn't enter that tunnels through the church.

There's another way in, off the lake, a way to fly in."

Rachel, Beckett, and I moved aside and let LeBlanc and the New Orleans police do their jobs. An ambulance arrived and so did a police captain. They had a perimeter established by the time the press arrived. The captain and an aide took our statements and then the captain thanked us personally.

"I'm sending a SWAT team down there to capture whatever it was that did this.

You think it's a deranged man?"

Those that don't know always try to frame things in a way they'll understand. I knew I could never convince this man that the creature was real. Better to let him think he was right or close to right.

"Possibly," I said. "But be careful. I've seen strange things in my life. This could be maybe a little more than a man. Maybe a terribly strong man on drugs."

The captain looked doubtful. They left Rachel, Beckett, and me alone.

"What now?" Beckett asked.

I held my phone up to show the video I'd captured.

"We get that language deciphered. I recorded the carvings around the base of the statue."

"I don't speak Latin."

"It isn't Latin," Rachel said. "I don't know what it is."

"I'll call Evelyn," I said.

They both looked at me funny.

"Remember the older woman from the college? She helped with that little girl lost through the portal. Evelyn is the woman that read from the book."

"Whatever happened to that book?" Beckett said.

"I have it somewhere safe," I replied. "Don't worry about that right now. Right now, I need to get Evelyn on the phone."

I wandered away, punching buttons. Evelyn answered and I explained the situation. The whole situation. She said she'd fly in tonight.

"I can send you the recording," I said. "You can attempt to decipher it and if you succeed, you can email it back to me. There's no need to fly in."

"Based on your description," she said. "There's a lot more work to do. It would be better if I were there. Send the recording. I'll get started."

I thanked her and attached the video to a text and hit send. Beckett and Rachel were talking when I got back.

"Lunch," Rachel said. "Now."

"Good idea," I said.

LeBlanc was busy so Rachel checked her phone.

"There's a Tex-Mex restaurant three blocks away."

"Take us there."

She did.

Along the way we passed a beautiful three-story mansion, windows and doorways sealed with red bricks. Filigree ironwork circled the three balconies that ran around each floor. Flowering ivy grew thick, covering the gorgeous black metal and decorating the place with flashes of brilliant color. The whole villa smacked of a long forgotten age. We were mesmerized by the sight of this gorgeous behemoth, too lovely to sit abandoned like this.

"Rachel, look this building up on your phone, please," I suggested. "Why would the citizens of this city turn their back on such a striking and fantastic estate?"

We kept walking.

"They call that the Sultan's Mansion," she said. "This article says it was built almost two-hundred years ago. This entry tells me who built it but not why or when it was closed. I'll check again as we eat. Here's the restaurant."

We stepped inside. The smell was fantastic. I was instantly famished and my companions were too. We'd placed our order, plus something for

LeBlanc, and just started our drinks when my phone buzzed. Number unknown. I answered.

"He hit me," a weak female voice said. Feeble, exhausted, but filled with rage.

"He— He touched the girls. Again."

"I'll be right there," I heard myself say.

"Okay."

"Do nothing until I get there."

"Okay."

"Tell no one I'm coming."

"Okay."

"Stay safe."

She disconnected.

Rachel and Beckett had questions. I explained. Rachel grew furious. Then she turned sad.

"Go," she said. "Now."

"We're kind of in the middle of something here," Beckett said. "You can't fly back home. To do what?"

"The flight is four and a half hours," I said. "I'll be back tonight. Tomorrow morning at the latest. We must wait for Evelyn anyway."

Beckett filled his lungs to continue his argument but Rachel silenced him with a hand over his.

"Don't, Beckett," she said. "I'd tell you to think about the children but I can see that's unnecessary. I know Andy. I know that look in his eyes. We should get out of the way and let him do what he must do."

"Fine."

I kissed Rachel and called an Uber. Our food arrived and I ate mine quickly. I bought a plane ticket over the phone on my way to the airport. I was lucky in that the next flight out left soon. I was unlucky in that I was leaving Rachel alone with Beckett.

Chapter 5

Hank left the house and drove away. I followed. Twenty minutes later he entered a seedy downtown bar and took a stool. He grumbled something and the bartender sat a bottle of beer in front of him. He placed his phone on the bar and watched the game on the television overhead. I spied the lump at the small of his back that meant he carried his pistol again.

I contemplated my next actions. Kali's blood had altered me, body and mind. I was far faster and far stronger, but I also had a rising desire for violence. I was smarter, quicker of thought with flawless memory and rapid insight, but I also now contained a growing beast within. My new strength cried out for release. I wanted to shred and destroy. I'd pursued justice almost my entire adult life. That force had shaped me. That force now shaped the rage I felt and demanded I do something about the injustices of Hank enjoying a beer.

Hank lacked empathy. Hank wanted what he wanted and thought nothing about how those desires affected others. Hank deserved to suffer as he'd made others suffer. I suspected there would be no teaching moment, no insight I could give him that would alter his behavior going forward. Hank lacked the depth for even something that simple. A hot stove teaches some children. Some children it simply turns mean.

I decided I would not kill him. Not this time. I convinced myself there was still hope, a tiny grain of a chance he could reform. I knew that was a lie but my sense of right and wrong, skewed by these new powers or not, would not allow me to murder outright.

You murdered Hailey, Miss Mapleberry said. You threw her off a building to her death. You already are a murderer.

Funny, I thought. I can't tell if you're reminding me of that fact so I go ahead and kill Hank, or if you're calling me out as a hypocrite to calm me down.

He's a child molester, Dad interrupted. Kill him. If you don't, he'll molest again.

Every molester deserves death.

Hank opened his phone to look at pictures. My new eyesight is great but I slid a few tables closer behind him to get a better view. My blood froze. He sat at the bar boldly viewing explicit pictures of him and his daughters.

Blind rage filled me.

You're right, Miss Mapleberry, I thought. I am a murderer.

I saw red. I should have assumed he'd record his foul deeds but seeing them caught me by surprise.

I left my seat and grabbed his hand from behind, crushing bones and phone together. He howled in pain, shocked and stunned by my sudden attack. The bartender shouted at me to leave the man alone but I ignored him. He knew nothing. I slipped my free arm under Hank's chin and lifted him from his barstool, dragging him backward. We were out the door in a moment. I pulled him around the corner and into an alley. I pushed him against the wall behind a dumpster and grabbed a handful of his crotch. I squeezed, hard, ignoring his screams until I felt his testicles rupture like grapes. He screamed louder.

"I warned you about your wife and kids," I snarled, squeezing harder still. "This is your last chance. Next time, Hank, I'll kill you."

He screamed again, pounded on my arm, and passed out.

I lifted his jacket and removed his pistol and holster before I tossed him in the dumpster. I took his phone and broke it into several pieces. Hopefully all those photos weren't saved on other devices. I left him, already dialing an Uber to take me to the airport.

He'd live, but his dick would be useless for a long, long time and hopefully ugly once it healed. His balls may never heal right. The hand I crushed

would never make a normal fist again. I considered stomping his other hand too but the man did need to work. He did need to keep his job for his family. I'd crushed and mangled him and hopefully broken his spirit.

On the ride to the airport I rode with the window down. I waited until the car crossed a bridge and tossed Hank's gun out the window and into the deep water.

The driver noticed nothing.

Chapter 6

My flight was delayed, of course, but even with that setback I was in New Orleans by late morning. I texted Rachel and she gave me directions to the quaint antique hotel where they'd rented separate rooms.

I held my breath as I approached her door, anxious that something had happened between her and Beckett in my absence. I'd been gone almost twenty-four hours.

Could Rachel control herself that long? I paused outside their doors and closed my eyes, drawing air through my nose. Had she strayed? Did my partner betray me again?

I caught traces of a wet and excited pussy from the air escaping beneath her door. I detected fresh warm sperm. I smelled sweat and hot breath.

They'd fucked. I hung my head in sadness and disappointment. The scents lingering in the air were exceedingly faint, like their tryst was many hours ago, possibly yesterday, probably minutes after I'd left for the airport. They'd raced to this hotel and procured our rooms for the night and then thrown themselves into each other's arms, clothes flying. I imagined Beckett, conflicted but hard and eager for my hot babe. I couldn't blame either of them.

I knocked on the door. I heard movement inside and then soft feet padded across the suite and the door opened. Rachel, happy to see me, wearing panties only, looking utterly scrumptious. Her hair was mussed and her eyes sleepy. I smelled his semen in her through those sheer panties. She was alone, thank God. He was in his own room, no doubt hiding from me and his guilt.

"You fucked Beckett," I said.

Her eyes went big with surprise and then narrowed with understanding.

"Oh," she said. "Your new senses."

"Yes."

She sighed.

"Not Beckett," she confessed. "The bellhop. I'm sorry, Honey."

It was my turn to be surprised.

"Big dicks make me stupid," she whimpered. "I tried to seduce Beckett but he fled to his suite and locked the door on me. You have a good friend in that one. I ordered room service and a young man said he'd bring it to me so I left the door to the suite open so he could bring the cart in. I left the bathroom door open too so he could catch me showering. I didn't expect him to take his cock out and masturbate while he watched, but he did and he was big."

She shrugged, hopeless and helpless. I ran my eyes over her body, imagining what the bellhop saw. Lucky bastard.

"Big dicks make me stupid," Rachel concluded. "I have no defenses against them. I don't care about the man they are attached to. I'm not looking for a partner. I'm beginning to suspect Rashad altered my brain a little. I've always loved sex and dicks but now it's like I can't resist. I'm obsessed."

She's my wife and I love her. I wrapped my arms and hugged the woman.

"Did you do what you needed to do?" she asked.

"Almost. The man is still alive but I broke his dick."

"I thought you'd kill him."

"I considered it. I crushed his nuts and his hand will never make a fist again, but I let him live with a warning. Next time, he dies."

"How can a man do that to his wife and kids?"

She snuggled closer. The back of her hand touched the front of my pants. I inhaled, detecting her growing arousal. As her pussy turned wet the smell of

semen grew stronger. She carried some young stud in her right now. Primal, competitive juices began to flow, arousing me. My wife had strayed, again, but I might be growing accustomed to that. I was more interested in taking her back.

She pressed her breasts against me and I felt her temperature rise and my dick began to engorge. Nature demanded I reclaim her. I was tired from my travels and lack of sleep but still had enough energy for jealousy. Her hand bumped me again and she felt me growing. She slid lower, facing my crotch, and unzipped my pants. She pulled my cock free and stuffed me in her hot mouth, electrifying my body and my mind.

I undressed quickly. She had only panties in my way and I stripped those fast.

She rolled onto her back on the floor and spread her legs, offering me the cunt I craved, and my eyes dropped to the semen leaking from her aroused pussy. I held my stiff dick and plunged into her tight cheating hole, feeling my inches glide through his semen.

"Fuck yes," she groaned.

I went a little crazy. The last forty-eight hours had been difficult and tense. Here was a way to pour all I felt into action. I pumped faster until I was hammering my unfaithful wife into the floor. She wrapped arms and legs around me and whispered nasty, encouraging things into my ear. I sought to punish my wayward wife with my dick but all I truly did was reward her. She got to be as salacious as she wished, fucking whomever she desired, and when I discovered her infidelity, she got to fuck again. She growled with lust, slamming her hips to meet my thrusts, urging me to take vengeance on her pussy. She cried out in orgasm but I only fucked her harder.

My head spun. My body trembled. My new senses poured more into my mind than I could process and I lost touch with Earth, cartwheeling through cascading waves of mind-boggling pleasure. I distantly heard Rachel orgasm again and then I shot into space and released a flood of sperm. I was

a firehose inside her and she hugged me with all her strength. My hips were wild and out of control and I groaned from deep in my chest.

When it ended, I crumpled, spent in every way. My chest heaved. My heart jackhammered. I was covered with sweat in the humid New Orleans air. I slowly opened my eyes and discovered Beckett, standing over us, gazing down.

"I got a call from LeBlanc," he said. "We need to meet him."

Rachel reached for Beckett's fly but my partner stepped away.

"Urgent?" I asked.

"Sounded like it," he said.

I rolled off Rachel and Beckett gazed at my nude and sweaty wife, running his eyes from her pretty face to her pretty feet.

"Fresh cock," she said, playfully, reaching for him again.

"Hit the shower," he said. "Both of you. We've got to move."

Chapter 7

Leblanc met us at the Canal Street Church. My Captain had called on the ride over and said he'd spoken to the captain in charge of the investigation and everyone was pleased with our work. I was to stay and continue. Beckett too.

Rachel was unofficial so everyone turned a blind-eye to her presence. I said she was necessary and they all left it at that.

Evelyn met us at the church. She said she needed to see the statue because the video wasn't clear enough.

"Don't touch it," I warned. "The marble is imbued with a salve. Your libido will go off the charts."

She laughed.

"My libido could use a jolt but I'll heed your warning."

I introduced her to everyone and we entered the church. Minutes later we stood before the statue. Evelyn circled slowly, examining each inch but keeping her hands to herself. She returned to stand in front, eyes glued to the massive erection and four hanging balls.

"This is a stylized version of the ancient god, Hadad," she announced. "Or, more accurately, Adad. He's originally from the Amorite civilization which existed well over four-thousand years ago. He's had many names but Western civilization came to know him by another: Baal. He's a god of fertility. What he is doing under a Baptist church in the New World is impossible to guess. A sect that splintered maybe? A cult that has endured? Who knows? I will venture that the presence of this idol speaks of archaic evil and primordial lust."

She shivered, gazing at that impressive erection. Her hand drifted up to touch the blatant symbol of masculine power but she caught herself.

"You feel it too," Rachel murmured.

"Yes," Evelyn whispered.

I feel it too, Janet whispered in my mind.

Shut up, I replied. You do not.

Rachel and Evelyn looked at each other, sharing a coy grin and a knowing look.

"Feel what?" LeBlanc asked.

The women ignored him.

Evelyn bent to read the inscription around the base of the sculpture and opened a notebook, writing notes quickly. Leblanc pulled me aside.

"SWAT found nothing," he said. "The tunnel exiting out the other side of the cave turned out to be a small chamber and not a tunnel at all. Dead end. We're back to square one. At least we rescued two captives."

I shook my head.

"We have Evelyn," I said. "We have the name of an ancient deity. That inscription is sure to provide more clues. We aren't finished. We're only getting started. These things are leads, hints that lead to more clues. Give us time. We'll unravel the whole thing. We just need to keep working."

"May I see the room with the cages?" Evelyn asked.

We gathered our things and marched on. We passed forensic techs and law enforcement and eventually arrived in the cave. The skeletons were determined to be people that died almost a hundred years earlier. The couple we freed were resting comfortably in a local hospital. They'd been placed in their cage only a day or so before we found them. They'd been unconscious at the time so provided little information about how they got there or who abducted them.

Our group spread out. Evelyn and I entered the tunnel on the far side, blocked by a rock wall after only a few feet. LeBlanc joined us.

"I heard heavy footsteps from this room," he said. "I know I did."

"Me too," I agreed. "Now we learn it's only a small chamber? How is that possible?"

I examined the walls. LeBlanc searched the floor. Evelyn circled slowly with her flashlight, scrutinizing each inch of the craggy, uneven surface.

"Here," she said, after a while.

I looked where she pointed. Deep within the recess of a rocky crater lay a small insignia, as if pressed into the stone by a signet ring. The glyph was ornate and intricate.

"This is the exit," she said, gesturing at the large stone wall.

LeBlanc and I stared at each other.

"I don't know how," she admitted. "But I'm telling you this is the way out."

"Then let's find it," I said.

"It's a dead end," LeBlanc insisted. "The tech guys have been all over it."

"They missed the insignia," I said.

"True, but so what? Their instruments told them this is solid rock. They scanned this whole place."

Evelyn and I exchanged a look. She was steadfast.

"It's here," I said. "I trust Evelyn."

"It's a dead end," he insisted. "My people were thorough."

"Listen, LeBlanc, your people need to understand something. It doesn't dead-end. It never dead-ends. These people do not build dead-ends. Ever."

I stepped back, taking in more of the wall. I stepped back again, now viewing the entire end of that small cave at once. A razor-thin line ran in a twisted and convoluted rough circle, floor to ceiling and back down again.

"I see it," I said.

They stepped back with me. I waited for them to spot what I had but the hairline seam was lost to their eyes. Only my superior eyesight allowed me to see it. I returned to the cage room and lifted a crowbar from one of the techs. I returned to Evelyn and LeBlanc and rammed the chisel tip into the almost invisible seam.

I lifted. Nothing happened. I dug deep and used all my strength. Nothing happened. I consciously called upon the blood of Kali coursing through my veins and tried again, using all the strength I had and all the strength I had but was unaware of. A huge circular door moved a sixteenth of an inch, hardly at all, but that was enough. Now the seam was visible to others. LeBlanc called for help and we got eight men in position, eight crowbars wedged and ready. We strained with all our combined might. In truth, the door was a giant boulder cut and fitted to perfectly fill that space. We rolled it aside, into an alcove carved for that purpose. Fetid air rolled up the tunnel at us, filled with the stench of wet decay.

"I don't get it," LeBlanc said, examining the massive rock. "There's no mechanism, no lever or gears. How did they move this thing?"

I was busy examining the back side of the boulder, inspecting deep scrapes along the rock.

"Strength," I said. "Same way we did."

LeBlanc joined me. He looked at the markings.

"So, we're pursuing a group of them?"

"I hope so."

"Why would you hope that?"

"Because otherwise there's a single thing capable of moving a rock it took eight of us to move, and I'd rather not face a monster like that. A gang of men I can handle. A beast powerful enough to shove this boulder around? No thanks."

LeBlanc examined the markings again, weighing my words. Evelyn walked by, headed deeper underground.

"Let's wait for backup," LeBlanc said.

"There are people down here," she said. "People taken from their families, people terrified and clinging to life. Your police force would take hours to launch a search. By all means, call them. Get them mobilized. But in the meantime, I'm going to see if I can help those people."

LeBlanc checked his phone and, discovering he had no signal, stepped into the cages room and told the tech to summon backup. Beckett and Rachel stopped their search to join us. I drew my gun and so did LeBlanc and Beckett.

"Hang on," I said, dragging the butt of my pistol along the wall, carving an arrow. "We don't know what awaits us. We do not want to get lost down here."

"Glad someone has their wits about them," LeBlanc said.

We proceeded down the tunnel.

Chapter 8

The main passageway soon branched into a maze of crisscrossing smaller tunnels, all interconnected. As the main tunnel narrowed it became more difficult to determine which was the path forward. Soon we were hopelessly confused by the random honeycomb around us. The marks I'd been making

allowed us to return to our original path but did nothing to help us know the way forward.

"This is impossible," LeBlanc said.

I noticed Evelyn looked exhausted.

"Let's take a breather," I said. "We need a plan."

LeBlanc checked his phone in the dark, surprised to see he'd regained a signal.

He glanced up and down our current tunnel.

"According to the GPS on my phone," he said. "I think we're close to the old Jean Lafitte's absinthe house. We've drawn close to a bend in the Mississippi River."

"That explains the increasing humidity," Evelyn said.

"Maybe we'll find Lafitte's lost treasure," LeBlanc said. "They've discovered portions of it around the city over the years but never the big mother lode.

Historians say there's a fortune hidden somewhere."

"Who's Jean Lafitte?" Rachel asked.

"A pirate from about two-hundred years ago. He prowled New Orleans and Galveston and all the lakes, rivers, and bayous between here and there. He helped defeat the British in the war of eighteen-twelve. Jackson pardoned him and his men for his help."

LeBlanc checked his phone again.

"Oh. Shit."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"We are close to Lafitte's house, but right now we're directly under Saint Louis Cemetery Number Two."

"So?"

"So all these intersecting tunnels we've been exploring match the walkways between tombs on the ground above us."

"These tunnels match the graveyard above?"

"Yes."

I placed my hand on the rocky wall.

"So the column of earth between tunnels matches the tombs above? There's a tomb sitting on this dirt?"

"Yes."

A long dead hand emerged from the moist earth and rock, curling foul and rotten fingers around my wrist. I admit I screamed. Everyone looked to see why and a second hand emerged to also grab my wrist. I pulled hard but the strength of their grip was otherworldly, too much even for my Kali-infused blood.

Run! Miss Mapleberry shouted.

Rachel screamed. Not a scream like my little yip but a full-throated howl. Hands erupted from the craggy walls all around us, grabbing arms and shirts and legs and hair. Our group was pinned in seconds.

LeBlanc had acted quickly when the hands first grabbed me and drawn his gun.

He couldn't aim at the hands that held him, but he could aim at the hands that held me. Evelyn was gagging and choking, pinned to the wall by hands at her wrists and throat.

"Shoot mine!" I shouted.

He understood immediately. A roar filled the tunnel. His shot grazed my wrist, drawing blood, but one of the hands holding me blew apart into chunks of decaying meat and moldy bone. Now my Kali-strength mattered and I yanked my arm free, tearing the hand off the buried cadaver it had been attached to. I drew my pistol. I'm a better shot than LeBlanc and fired three times, deafening our group but freeing Beckett and LeBlanc. We smashed hands with the butts of our guns, rapidly freeing Evelyn and Rachel. Evelyn collapsed, neck swollen and badly bruised. We looked at each other, stunned and disbelieving. Rachel left Beckett to come hold me.

"What were those things?" she asked.

I shook my head, preparing to answer.

Corpses of those long dead emerged from the rocky soil, reaching for us with cadaverous arms, many missing the hands we'd already destroyed. Some were mere skeletons dressed in breeches and waistcoats, white ponytail wigs askew, corsets rattling around desiccated torsos. Some with more meat on their bones because they were more recently interred, wore pantaloons and tailcoats. Dirt and mold clung to the dead. Worms and other insects scurried. Laid to rest in their finest or buried quickly in a pauper's tomb, they all came for us. Our flashlights danced across a nightmare. We all screamed. The women cowered.

The stench of decay hammered our nostrils. Beckett vomited. LeBlanc, raised to care about the departed, raged in anger at the desecration. He kicked and hit and toppled cadavers.

The horde came for us and I began to fire. Bones shattered, bodies crumpled.

Rachel grabbed a solid femur and began caving skulls. The tumult was horrendous. Our minds reeled at the dead returned to life, except they weren't alive but merely animated. There were so many! Centuries of dead. We fought hard but the press of foul bodies was too much. We gave ground.

"They're forcing us deeper underground," I shouted.

"Should we run?" Rachel fired back.

"No!" a furious LeBlanc cried. "Kill them all!"

"They're already dead," Beckett shouted. "We can't kill them and more keep coming. If they grab one of us, we're fucked."

I lifted Evelyn from the ground.

"Let's run," I said. "They move slower than us. Let's run until we find a place we can defend."

We turned and headed farther underground, glancing over our shoulders, awestruck at the sight. Each of us were terrified. Each of us looked ready to panic.

We ran.

Chapter 9

We got lost, twice, in the twisting tunnels beneath the graveyard. We stopped when Evelyn came around and all caught our breath, but soon got moving again.

Eventually we found our path, grateful to leave the honeycombed passages behind. LeBlanc announced we were headed towards the Mississippi River so we were surprised when the natural tunnel began to take a manmade shape. Soon we traveled a rough-hewn corridor carved by intelligent hands which became a brick-lined corridor.

At the end, stairs led up.

"Check your phone," I told Leblanc.

He scanned the map and zoomed.

"This is not good," he muttered. "We're directly beneath the Sultan's Mansion.

Bad shit happened there. That door at the top of the stairs must lead inside."

Rachel and Beckett turned to stare at me.

"We discovered that place on our walk to a restaurant," I explained to LeBlanc.

"It's closed, sealed off. Nobody lives there."

"Nobody has lived there for over a century," LeBlanc said.

"Why did they barricade the place?" Rachel asked.

"A rich foreigner bought it," LeBlanc began. "They called him The Sultan. He moved in and brought a harem of gorgeous young girls. He held parties for secretive friends. The neighbors didn't like it but could do nothing. Then

one night, the story goes, as a loud party raged, a scream rang out, followed by many more. Soon everything fell silent. A neighbor went to check on the place and found blood seeping under the front door. The police were called and entrance gained and they discovered everyone inside was dead, and not just dead but dismembered, torn apart, heads and limbs strewn everywhere. The floors and walls were soaked with blood. They found the sultan buried in the backyard, one hand sticking out of the ground. He'd been buried alive and tried to claw his way to freedom but suffocated before he could."

"That's horrible," Rachel said.

"Who did it?" Beckett asked.

"The murderer remains a mystery. How they gained access remained a mystery.

Everything was locked from the inside so how they escaped remained a mystery.

The cops' theory at the time assumed one of the guests did all the mayhem and then somehow dismembered himself too, joining the bodies on the ground."

I scoffed.

"Yeah," LeBlanc said. "Police work has gotten more sophisticated over the last hundred and fifty years. If those stairs do lead to the Sultan's mansion, we are about to discover a secret door. I recall the house has a basement but it's a dead-end, there's no way out. We are approaching from the other side."

We climbed the moldy stone steps. At the top, we found a large heavy mahogany door sheathed in hammered iron. Nails as large as my finger held everything together. Beckett mentioned the door should be in a museum. The handle was an antique hook and latch system and LeBlanc carefully lifted the small lever and tried to ease the portal open. Nothing happened. He increased the pressure and the door slowly swung.

"This thing weighs a ton," he grumbled.

I helped. He wasn't exaggerating. The door was twice the normal size. We heaved. Once the opening was wide enough, we filed through, spreading in a half-circle to examine our surroundings. Rachel turned to examine the door from the room side.

"Just like in the movies," she said.

We were in a wine cellar filled with mostly empty heavy wooden wine racks like bookcases. One such rack was actually our secret entrance to the catacombs beneath New Orleans. Scattered bottles were covered with thick dust.

"That wine has been here a long time," Rachel said.

"Probably soured by now," Beckett said.

"Fine wines can last over a hundred years," LeBlanc said. "The sultan was obscenely wealthy. Those bottles might still be good."

"Let's hope we find some whiskey," I added.

Evelyn upended an empty crate and sat.

"I'll wait here if you don't mind," she said, rubbing her bruised throat. "I'm spent.

You all explore, just don't forget me."

"Never," I said. "Keep an eye on the door to the catacombs. If you hear anything, call us."

"What could I hear?"

"You could hear an army of undead shuffling up the stairs," Beckett said.

Evelyn's face fell and I gave Beckett a hard look.

"Sorry," he said. "Just if you hear anything unusual."

She waved him off, too tired to speak. We left her there and examined the cellar.

Wide wooden stairs headed up to the house. The door at the top was ajar.

We drew our guns.

"I'm low on ammunition," Beckett said. "I used a lot on the undead."

"I have extra," I told him, handing him cartridges. "LeBlanc can't help us. He uses a different gun."

We reloaded our weapons and climbed the stairs cautiously. I felt protective but I knew better than to suggest Rachel stay behind.

"It will be dark up there," I said. "All the windows are bricked over. No light gets in. Sweep your flashlights quickly, around and overhead. Be ready."

LeBlanc eased the door open wider. There was a source of light beyond. The moon shined brightly through a crystal domed ceiling high overhead. The massive front room had a staircase climbing up three walls to the second story.

Old and moldy paintings followed the rise, passing windows filled with brick and mortar. All around the room furniture had crumbled into ruin. Tables were ringed with the remains of disintegrated tablecloths. Some vases stood filled with desiccated stems. All the walls and floor were spattered with blood so old it had turned black and grown fuzzy fungus. Marble sculptures of gorgeous young women adorned this huge main room, posed seductively but now mostly covered in black mold. A pile of boulders, black and smooth, sat centered in the room.

"Think those stairs will still support our weight?" Beckett asked.

"Why is there a stack of large rocks inside the house?" Rachel asked.

All eyes landed on the pile of rubble.

"Excellent question," LeBlanc said.

We were all staring when the pile of rubble lifted a massive stony head, revealing a gargoyle face and dimly red and intelligent eyes. All the air left my lungs in a single terrified gasp. Rachel squeaked, unable to draw the air needed to voice the scream which matched the terror she felt. Beckett staggered backward. LeBlanc froze.

The gargoyle uncoiled slowly, as if waking from a deep sleep, rising on thick muscular legs, wings unfurling, arms unfolding, penis swinging freely. The naked beast was at least twelve feet tall, heavily muscled, stout and strong. He stretched his massive wings far to each side and sniffed the air in our general direction. He stood tall and shook his head like a dog. His heavy penis swayed slowly.

"Dear God," Rachel gasped.

Look at that thing, Janet said. God, I wish I was alive.

The creature snuffed the air again.

LeBlanc raised his gun.

"No," I hissed, too late.

The boom staggered us. LeBlanc's bullet ricocheted, striking a wall and burying itself there. The monster tilted a head back and roared in anger and Beckett tried to shove Rachel out the door. She resisted, and the creature, with one beat of its wings for a boost, leapt the distance between us and landed before LeBlanc. The gargoyle used his wings as weapons, beat them and buffeting LeBlanc with strong gusts of air, throwing the man off balance. The gargoyle balled a huge fist and slammed LeBlanc in the chest, knocking him off his feet and backward where he smashed into a wall. Beckett drew and fired out of instinct and the creature swung a backhand, knocking Beckett's gun to the ground and spinning the man. The gargoyle opened his fang-lined mouth and grabbed Beckett by the arm, pulling him closer. I grabbed Beckett's other arm, halting his progress towards that gaping mouth.

Rachel reached for the creature's dangling cock.

"Goddamn it, Rachel!" I shouted.

LeBlanc got to his feet and grabbed a nearby chair. The rotten wood splintered easily over the creature's head, causing no harm, but successfully distracting the beast away from Beckett. Rachel squatted at the feet of this monster and held its penis with both hands. She stuffed as much in her mouth as she could get, oblivious to the battle raging around her. The monster's thigh knocked her over as the beast lunged for Beckett again, but she righted herself and grabbed that swinging dick once more. I had the best chance of altering this fight with my strength so I charged the creature and threw a shoulder into its gut. It was like ramming an armored truck. I knocked him backward a step but the jolt shook me.

"Take Beckett and Rachel into the cellar," I shouted at LeBlanc.

I charged the monster again and when it swung a wrecking ball of a fist at my head, I thanked Kali for my new speed. I ducked, grabbing its off-balance leg, and heaved, hoping to topple the monster.

This was the moment where I learned the dangers of battling a creature with wings and trying to knock it to the ground. It can't be done. The gargoyle beat its wings and stayed right where it was. LeBlanc grasped at Rachel but she fought him. He grabbed again and succeeded, pulling my wife away from that cock she so desperately craved. She shouted to leave her alone but LeBlanc dragged her and Beckett into the wine cellar. I threw three hard and fast punches, backing the creature up another step, and prepared to dive for the cellar door myself.

"Stop!" a strident voice called out, clear and strong.

The gargoyle obeyed instantly, standing tall, curling wings against his body. I stepped back to see who'd spoken.

The man was dressed in a kaftan, a long silk robe with billowing sleeves, and a turban. Sparkling jewels adorned his torso and arms. A bright red feather waved at the front of his turban. His sideburns followed his jawline

to arch up and cross under his nose, one continuous line of whiskers. He carried a jeweled walking stick as tall as himself. He studied me carefully.

"What are you?" he asked.

"I'm Detective Anders Almond," I said, holstering my gun.

"Not whom," he corrected. "What."

He moved closer. I knew the gargoyle would obey his command in an instant.

One word from this man and I'd be in the fight of my life.

"I am a human man," I said.

"No."

"I am a human man with a little something extra."

The cellar door opened. LeBlanc and Beckett entered with guns raised. Rachel followed with Evelyn close behind. Rachel's eyes darted to the behemoth standing idle, large cock hanging.

"Get Rachel out of here," I said.

"No," the sultan said.

LeBlanc studied the man.

"You died," LeBlanc offered. "Cops found you buried in the backyard."

The sultan swung his attention to the New Orleans cop.

"The police found my brother," the sultan said. "Right where I'd placed him."

"How are you even alive?" Beckett asked. "You must be two hundred years old."

"I am far older than that."

"You killed all those people?" I said. "You buried your brother alive? Why?"

They were your guests."

"My brother stole my name and all my women," the sultan said. "He fled our country, crossing the great salt water divide, believing I would not take such a risk. He was wrong. My fury would not be denied. I sailed after him and when I found him in this house, bedding my women and wasting my wealth on flatterers, I chastised him."

"Chastised?" LeBlanc said, horrified. "Chastised? You slaughtered everyone.

You ripped apart beautiful young girls, guests and their children, old men and women. We have that police report in our archives. I've read it. You buried your brother alive. "

"Yes," the sultan admitted. "A handful of dirt at a time. I took days to finish. He went mad as I slowly and gently covered his face. He struggled so long, raging against the drug that held him. He fought so hard. Fought, and failed."

I was dying inside. The sultan's description of burying his living brother had my heart hammering, my hands trembling.

He's not talking about you, Miss Mapleberry cautioned. Take deep breaths.

"One drop of Midnight Lotus juice was all I needed," he continued. "My brother's muscles failed him. I laid him in that shallow pit and stood over him, smiling. He was so angry. The lack of bindings on wrists and ankles was a kind of torture unto itself. He was so close to freedom. Nothing held him in that pit except his own weak will."

The sultan had an expression of serene pleasure as he fondly remembered the torture of his brother.

"Why kill the others?" LeBlanc asked. "His guests did nothing to you."

"They adored him. The girls had relations with him. I made him watch as I forced them to drink Purple Rasmina tea. After that, they did anything I told them to do. I had them perform terrible acts before his eyes. Mothers ate their children. Fathers gouged out eyes. First, their children's and then their own. The wailing reached the heavens. Finally, I gave them to Cana."

"The gargoye?" I asked.

"The creature's name is Cana," he said. "Although he's had many names throughout history. He's far older than me."

"What about all the missing people?" Beckett asked. "Did you kidnap them?"

"Will we find them down here? I don't care that you killed your brother two centuries ago. I care about the people missing right now. Do you have them?"

"The men sustain me."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Beckett snarled.

The sultan lifted his chin and smiled broadly, revealing, for the first time, silver incisors almost an inch long.

"They are in me," he said. "I am Sultan Pasha Ibrahim, and I claimed them." He swung his attention to me. "I believe you will be delicious, whatever you are."

Cana will have the others. Cana! Benum dak sul!"

The gargoye reacted with blinding speed, but I was faster. I suspected the sultan was about to try something and so I was prepared. The creature swung a talon at Beckett but I shoved my friend out of harm's way, beating the monster's slash by a hair's breadth. I raised my gun lightning fast and fired point blank into the sultan's face but my bullets passed through vapor. He'd turned to fog before my eyes. LeBlanc shouted for a retreat but Rachel threw herself on her knees again, trying to stuff her mouth with that great

cock. Pasha formed into a man again and shook his walking stick at me. Droplets splattered my face and hands.

"Kneel," he commanded, and I felt his presence in my head.

I understood he'd splashed me with some kind of mind-control liquid. His order was hard to resist but the blood of Kali saved me. I pretended to comply, going down to one knee, but then whipped my pistol up and blasted him in the chest.

He recoiled, crying out in pain and shock. I remembered when Beckett and I reloaded I'd used my gold-tipped cartridges, left over from my battles with Rashad and the minotaurs. The gold didn't kill the sultan but it sure hurt him.

"Beckett!" I cried. "Use your gold bullets!"

My partner's face lit with understanding. He raced to load his gun.

Cana grabbed Rachel with lightning speed and beat his wings, carrying her high above the room to a perch just under the crystal dome. He then dropped like a rock to land with a boom at Beckett's feet. Cana slashed at Beckett's throat with a razor talon and I barely managed to deflect it. Beckett was gashed through his clothes along his thigh. He howled in agony and dropped to the ground, grabbing his leg.

The door to the wine cellar slammed open and the long dead citizens of New Orleans burst into the room, bringing with them the foulest stench of death. One dragged Evelyn's body along as an afterthought.

"No!" I screamed.

Despite his anguish Beckett raised his gun and fired, catching Pasha in the leg.

The sultan shouted and grimaced, unaccustomed to pain. The gargoyle swung and razor claws tore through Beckett's arm at the elbow. My partner

screamed from blinding pain and dropped, unconscious. I needed to staunch that wound quickly or he'd bleed out.

I threw myself at Cana. I had strength and speed but the creature outweighed me by a lot, and one rake of those sharp claws and I was done. I drove him several steps away from Beckett but then Pasha barked a command and the beast doubled the ferocity of his attacks. I was forced to give ground. I searched frantically for LeBlanc, hoping he could help me save my friend, but the officer was busy trying to save his own life. The New Orleans dead had forced him into a corner. He blasted away and bodies crumpled but there were so many.

A gap opened but too much time had passed. I shouted in frustrated rage.

Beckett, by now, was most likely dead but Evelyn might yet live. I leapt into the brief opening and yanked Evelyn away from the undead man that held her. I shot him in the face and he fell.

"Up the stairs!" I shouted.

Leblanc shot two zombies blocking our path and then I scooped Evelyn into my arms. We climbed fast, leaving the first-floor madness behind. My eyes landed on Beckett, ashen, lying in a huge pool of his own blood. He was gone.

"Find us someplace to barricade," I growled.

Cana flew to the perch high above and lifted Rachel in his massive arms. My wife went willingly, eagerly, clinging to the creature, wrapping arms around his thick neck and legs around his waist. Pasha, bleeding from the chest and thigh, saw LeBlanc and I were trapped behind a putrid wall of struggling bodies and turned his back on us, exiting the room through double doors, moving deeper into the mansion.

We reached the landing and I laid Evelyn down. She was scratched and bleeding but suffered no major injury. LeBlanc and I began to shove old furniture at the top of the stairs, blocking the undead from below. Cana spread his leathery wings and glided from the perch, sailing smooth and fast

through the double doors. He landed and turned. The last thing I saw before that damned creature shut the doors on us, was my wife clinging to his muscular body.

"Fuck!" I screamed.

"How do we get out of here?" LeBlanc asked. "The windows are bricked over."

"How do we get Rachel back?" I said, "That's the real question."

"She didn't fight that monster, Almond. She went willingly. She's more on their

side than on ours. Let's save ourselves first and then see to her."

"She doesn't know what she's doing. She's drugged. She's my wife and I must get her back."

LeBlanc drew his phone.

"I have a signal again so I'm calling for backup. I'll tell them to break the front doors down and let us out. Be ready for a fight."

Our eyes landed on Beckett, faintly blue and certainly cold.

"Horrible," LeBlanc said. "Sorry. Were you partners long?"

I shook my head.

"No, but we went through a lot in a short time. He was a good man."

"None of this seems to upset you too much. You take everything in stride, like you were expecting it. I've seen zombies and monsters and even a fucking ancient vampire. I'm barely hanging onto my sanity. You don't seem bothered at all. I see why they called you in. You've seen all this shit before?"

"Something like that."

"I bet you go through partners fast too."

I shot him a look. He dropped his eyes.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Losing a partner is fucked up. I apologize."

I put a hand on his shoulder.

"I have seen a lot," I said. "I've seen things I wish I did not. Call backup. I'll check on Evelyn."

We got to our tasks. Evelyn was stunned but coming around. The undead struggled with the stairs and could not get through our barrier of stacked furniture. LeBlanc used the moment to catch his breath and call in, explaining everything and asking for help. We sat for ten minutes and then heard pounding on the front door. The cops came through easily, blasting away as the undead turned on them. There were screams of terror but the police were armed and armored and cut through the ancient dead easily. When it was over they helped remove our barricade. Medical services examined Beckett and Evelyn, removing the older woman from the scene.

The captain arrived and asked a million questions. He wanted me to make a statement at the station but I told him it would need to wait.

"Pasha has Rachel," I said.

"I could order you," he warned.

"No," I replied. "You couldn't. I'd tell you to shove your order up your ass. I must save my wife."

LeBlanc stepped forward.

"Send me with him, Captain," he said. "This shit is real. He needs me."

The captain studied us both.

"Goddamn it," he said, marching off to do some other police captain task.

"Let's go," LeBlanc said.

"Wait."

Beckett's body lay covered with a white sheet, awaiting the examiner. His pistol lay nearby. I approached his body and pulled back the sheet as if saying my final goodbye. I lifted his gold-tipped ammunition from his belt and slipped his gun into my pocket.

"What are you doing?" LeBlanc asked. "That's evidence. You're corrupting the crime scene."

"You'll need gold to hurt this guy," I said. "Regular bullets don't work. Maybe something else works better but for now all we have is gold. Beckett would want us to take it."

LeBlanc thought he was going to protest but didn't.

Beyond the double doors was a huge library. The books were in terrible shape and many crumbled when touched. Crime scene investigators scrutinized every inch of the place. Pasha had been living here for decades, maybe a couple centuries. More corpses were found, including many of the recently missing.

Everybody had been drained of blood and the husk cast aside. LeBlanc and I spoke with the techs and studied the bodies.

"Only males," I said. "The women are still missing."

LeBlanc studied the bodies.

"That's ominous," he said.

"My experiences in these matters agrees with you. I don't want to imagine what Pasha and Cana are doing with those women."

The library ceiling went all the way up to the third floor. A huge stained glass window, now shattered, filled one wall. Pasha and the gargoyle had escaped with Rachel through the shattered window.

"They could be anywhere," LeBlanc stated. "Where do we start?"

Panic threatened to overtake me but I fought it back. Whatever effect that creature had on my wife, it had for a reason. Yes, she was far more susceptible than the average woman to the power of the beast, but if they wanted her seduced, and they seemed to want all the women seduced, she was at least physically safe. For now. LeBlanc and I moved closer to the smashed glass.

"If I understand what we know so far," I said. "Pasha lives off the blood of others. He has his gargoyle servant, Cana, capture the unsuspecting and bring them to him to feast. Is that what you have?"

"That sounds right."

I stared at the colorful shards of glass on the floor, running this case through my mind. Something nagged me.

"Wait," I said, at last. "Back in the cage room under the church. The woman we freed said they weren't brought in through the church, they were flown in over a lake. That means there's yet another entrance to the tunnels."

"If that's true then we missed it," LeBlanc said. "We entered through the church and exited in this mansion. We missed a tunnel somewhere that leads to the outside."

"That also means we probably missed other tunnels too. Let's check a map to see exactly which graveyards and cemeteries the tunnels run under. Maybe they have a lair in a huge tomb, entered from beneath."

Evelyn staggered into the room. She was bandaged and limping and followed by three medical personnel scolding her.

"Here," she told me, waving notebook paper. "The writing is traditional cuneiform but much younger. It's a poem." She seemed to notice the library for the first time. She stopped and gawked at all the moldering books on shelves.

"Oh. Oh, lord. We must take steps to preserve what's in this room."

"What about the cuneiform?" I asked.

She came back to herself.

"Pasha's brother," she said. "Find his tomb. The police interred him somewhere."

Pasha loves to gloat. Find the dead brother and you'll find Pasha and his pet."

LeBlanc punched buttons on his phone. Moments later he spoke to someone with a police computer.

"How are you?" I asked Evelyn.

She shook her head and steadied herself on the shoulder of an EMT.

"Weak. Old. This is too much adventure for me. I love it but the body is unwilling. Find those poor women, Andy."

"We will, Evelyn. I promise."

She met my eyes.

"Rachel is under a spell of some kind. She touched the statue and now they have her. They control her. Be prepared for what you will find, but don't blame her.

Males tend to be bastards. Nature."

I swallowed hard.

"I know," I said.

The EMTs led her away.

"Got it," LeBlanc said.

"Let's go."

"Should we bring help?"

I looked around the room, everyone busy.

"No men to spare," I said. "Besides, we'll find my wife in an unseemly way, I'm sure of it. I'd rather the New Orleans police department not see her like that."

He nodded. We exited the mansion out the front door. A crowd had gathered despite the late hour.

Chapter 10

We hurried through the city. Evelyn had deciphered the ancient writing, a poem, and deduced Pasha spent time antagonizing his dead brother. LeBlanc learned the sultan's family owned a tomb at the Saint Louis Cemetery Number Two. We entered through the high brick walls surrounding the lot and began a search. At last we discovered a large mausoleum built inside a circle of unkempt grass. A crescent moon and single star adorned the lintel, carved into the moldy white marble. A handful of stray cats meandered around the place. Ferns and other flora grew in every niche and crevasse.

"No pride," LeBlanc said.

"Because he's not buried in there."

"Not yet."

Cut steps up led to a marble door.

"Now," LeBlanc said. "How do we—?"

I dug my fingertips in along the edge and heaved. The large stone block moved sideways half an inch. A puff of foul air hissed. Now that I knew the direction the block was supposed to go, I set my feet and used all my strength, sending the stone slab grinding along the bottom. Stairs down greeted us.

"How strong are you?" LeBlanc asked.

"No idea."

"You told Pasha you were a little more than human. Is that true?"

"Yup."

"How'd that happen?"

I faced my new friend.

"I drank blood from a she-demon's neck while she drank mine."

His eyebrows shot up. I continued.

"The exchange left me with powers, like heightened senses, stamina, strength.

Shit like that."

"You swapped blood with a demon?"

"Yup."

"Was she scary?"

"She was terrifying, but also the most beautiful and alluring female I've ever seen. She made my eyes ache just to look at her."

"You fucked her, didn't you?"

"Yes."

He looked at me with a new regard.

We aimed our flashlights and headed down. We quickly entered the room where the sultan's brother had been laid to rest but the open sarcophagus was empty. A tunnel had been dug in the soft moist earth so we followed it deeper. Before too long we approached a larger chamber. Torchlight flickered ahead. A mix of voices drifted up to us, deep male voices with soft feminine moans mixed in. We slowed, moving cautiously.

At the end of the tunnel was a domed cave, dug with razor talons from soft earth.

An open casket sat in the center, a cadaver propped in a sitting position. The body wore a kaftan and I presumed we'd found the sultan's brother. A step closer and we cleared the entrance, revealing the entire cave.

All around the room gorgeous women, transformed into world-class beauties through ancient harem magic, fucked themselves on oversized, smooth glass cocks rising from the ground like large crystalline mushrooms. Contained within each replica translucent penis were the swirling ghostly faces of men's' trapped souls. The women writhed from unspeakable pleasure as they fucked themselves, inflamed by not only the physical sensations from being stuffed with a large unyielding cock, but also driven by an emotional arousal like no other.

The ensnared men's souls coaxed a cruel excitement from them. The women twisted and squirmed, impaled, orgasming relentlessly, spitefully, vindictively.

The lost men wailed like haunted spirits, plaintive cries of despair to be used so, to be imprisoned forever, slaves to wanton decadence. The women dragged pussies up and down the slick veiny erections, taunting and teasing themselves and the men held captive.

Nice, Janet said. Lucky girls.

The air was filled with specks of silver glitter, all of it drifting slowly towards Pasha and stood over his dead brother's corpse, eyes closed. A sneer twisted his lips. The glitter flowed through the air to him like a magic spell and his skin absorbed it all. He appeared lost in an ecstatic trance, drool leaking from the corner of his mouth. This was his harem, all of them, somehow, fucking him at the same time.

"What the hell?" LeBlanc muttered, rocked by the carnal display.

I ignored him. I ignored the wild sight. My eyes had landed on Rachel, nude,

pinned against the loamy wall, fucked deep and hard by the gargoyle beast. The creature had her entire head wrapped in a claw. His other claw circled her waist, holding her helpless as his thick cock impaled her gushing cunt over and over.

My wife sobbed with desire, urging the beast to fuck her deeper. His huge ball sack, weighed down by the four testicles he carried, swung out of sync with his thrusting shaft, smacking her clit repeatedly and driving her insane. Her toes barely scraped the ground. She was skewered on his polished cock, impaled and loving it. She added a hip rotation each time he thrust. One hand reached under to fondle his big balls, coaxing the load she so desired, and the other rubbed her clit, enticing one orgasm after another, each more powerful than the last. Her strident cries were the loudest of all the women lost to lust in that chamber.

My first instinct was to blow a hole in the creature's head. I even raised my gun.

Cana withdrew his large cock and turned my wife to face him, placing her back against the wall. Rachel was more beautiful than I'd ever seen her. The same harem magic that affected all the women also affected her. Every woman was now a breathtaking beauty. My wife looked down her body at the hard dick resting on her stomach and told the beast to put it in. He hesitated, seemingly mesmerized by her beauty. She did not wait for him to comply. She grabbed his marble cock and lifted her hips. She found her opening and lowered her body onto his spear, groaning as she was filled. Her eyes were wild with a frenzied excitement. Whatever floated in the air in that room drove everyone into a sexual fever.

Cana wasn't my true target. Pasha was.

I swung my gun around to point at the sultan's head. The women's moans echoed inside my skull but none so loud as Rachel's cries of pleasure. She fucked herself on the monster with an urgent and desperate need. I had to turn and watch as her gasps and moans became shrieks, an epic orgasm ripping through her head to toes and back again. The gargoye held her fast, pumping his powerful cock.

Rachel wailed, overcome, and Pasha gasped loudly, feeling what she felt, feeling what everyone in that cave felt.

Which is how he detected LeBlanc and me.

I returned my attention to him, raising my gun again, and his eyes suddenly opened. He understood we watched too and leapt from his stance over his brother. Rage twisted his face. Silver fangs flashed and I fired my gun but either he was supercharged from sexual energy or I was sluggish from the drugs in the air. I was too slow. he was no longer there.

Pasha landed before LeBlanc and teeth sank and blood spurted and Officer LeBlanc collapsed into the sultan's arms. Pasha gulped LeBlanc's life blood for only a moment, but a moment was all I needed. I raised my gun again, faster this time, faster than this blood-sucking bastard, and fired point-blank, tearing out a large chunk of the sultan's neck. Pasha spun in agony, screaming like he'd never felt real pain before, whirling as he turned into a fog again and floated towards the rocky ceiling.

Cana made no move to protect his master. Cana fucked my wife deep and strong and then threw his demonic head back and wordlessly screeched like a banshee.

His massive ball sack jumped and jumped and jumped again, each lift a gush of hot sperm into my wife's womb. Rachel sobbed with desire, grinding her hips lower, forcing his girthy spear all the way in as it sprayed. She clawed at his body with hands and feet, desperate to pull him impossibly deep. I aimed my gun at the creature's broad and muscular back, careful to avoid Rachel, and fired.

I pulled the trigger until the clicking of an empty clip stopped me.

The smoke cleared and I faced an angry demon. Cana strode towards me, penis still terrifyingly erect. His leap was boosted by a beat of his wings. His backhand knocked my gun from my hand and then his balled fist smashed my ribs. I flew several steps up and then he was on me, hammering my face and arms as I sought to protect myself. I planted a foot on his chest and shoved him away, regaining my feet. I would lose this fight. I knew it. My gold-tipped bullets, effective against Pasha, had done nothing to this beast except make him angry. I turned defensive, blocking or deflecting every blow I could, but the ones that got through hurt like hell. I got some strikes in and managed to back Cana up a step, but I needed an answer and I needed it fast.

"Cana!" Pasha shouted, in human form again and bleeding profusely. "Dena bak!

Dunkala mak!"

The gargoyle wheeled from me and flew to his master. He scooped Pasha in his arms and rocketed down a tunnel, wings beating hard. I glanced at Rachel who dabbed at the copious pure-white semen leaking from her pussy. She looked fascinated and content. I dropped next to LeBlanc and stripped my shirt to wrap around his bite.

"Did you kill him?" he mumbled.

"Nope. Fucker flew. They both got away."

He closed his eyes. I checked his pulse: weak, but steady. I looked around the cave at the women pleasuring themselves on glass sculptures. Rage and frustration filled me. One by one I circled the chamber, pulling a woman off her cock before firing my gun and smashing the thing to bits. Wails of despair accompanied each sculpture I destroyed as the trapped souls were swallowed by dark oblivion. The women hated me, spitting and cursing, clawing and scratching. These were the last of the missing and they preferred servitude. I hoped the doctors would be able to bring them back and give them a normal life, but I had my doubts.

I got Rachel dressed and left her with LeBlanc. I raced up the stairs until my phone showed a signal and called for medical services. LeBlanc would live but he'd need time to heal.

Chapter 11

I told Rachel she could not accompany me for the next leg of our mission and she argued, insisting her knowledge would be useful, reminding me how we would never have come this far without her. All that was true but I knew I could not trust her around Pasha and Cana. She'd turn on me, choosing Cana over everyone. She'd fondled his statue and absorbed whatever liquid it was that oozed and her loyalty rested with that beast now. I still didn't blame her. She'd had these changes thrust upon her. Creatures like Rashad and Pasha draw their power from easily corrupted humans. Most of us are weak, almost defenseless. I was lucky to have Beckett as a partner for as long as I did. Rachel meant well but was a liability.

For this last stage of the job, I'd go alone.

I stayed with LeBlanc until he rested comfortably in a hospital bed. I learned

Evelyn was in another bed just a few doors down so I paid her a visit. She would be fine with time. She talked about how exciting it was to go on adventures with me and how grateful she was that I'd called.

"You almost died, Evelyn," I said. "I would hate to live with that."

"I'm old, Anders. I'm old and I've lived a long full life. Because of you the mystery of life after death has become knowledge. I rest easy. I'm not afraid. I know something real awaits on the other side and I take comfort in that."

I took her wrinkled and withered hand in mine.

"I would hate to lose you," I said.

"But you will."

She wanted the details of what happened after she left us and I told her everything. She cautioned me that Rachel was not herself.

"She can't help it," Evelyn said. "I felt the power of that creature too, even at my age. I was drawn, eager for salacious acts. Rachel is not the same woman you've always known. Her mind has been altered. Perhaps permanently."

"I know. I don't blame her."

You should divorce her, Dad chirped.

"What you need to do is kill Pasha Ibrahim," Evelyn said.

"I'd love to. My gold bullets hurt him but not fatally. I must discover what kills a creature like that."

Her face fell. She looked distraught.

"Oh, dear," she said, fretting.

"What? What's wrong?"

"I am so, so sorry I didn't say something," she said. "I thought it was obvious. I thought you'd figured it out like me. I'm a fool. Pasha told us what can kill him when we first met. He was so sure none of us would live he was unguarded. "

My jaw dropped.

"If he did," I said. "I completely missed it. What did he say?"

She shook her head, upset with herself.

"How can I be this old and still be an idiot?" she lamented. "Salt. His brother put an ocean of salt between them, believing that afforded enough protection. Pasha said hate overcame fear and he sailed after his brother."

I gawked at her.

"Salt," she said. "His fear of it is great for a reason. Find a way to use it against him and you'll get your victory."

I kissed her on the forehead.

"You're a brilliant woman," I said. "I gotta go."

"Get the fucker."

"I'll do my best."

Hours later I descended the steps inside the Ibrahim family tomb. I carried two pistols filled with hollow-point cartridges, except the hollow was packed with rock salt. Strapped to each thigh I had sawed-off shotguns. Illegal, yes, but approved by the captain. Each was fully loaded with rock salt cartridges. I wore twin bandoliers fully stocked with more shells.

I didn't need to kill the gargoyle to stop it. I needed to kill Pasha.

The crime scene techs looked at me like I was crazy. The officers on scene kept their distance. Nobody wanted to venture down that hole. At the last moment, a young officer approached, feeling it was his duty to help. I thanked him but asked that he remain behind.

Techs still scoured the cave when I arrived. The women were gone. LeBlanc's blood still smeared the steps. I made a pass around to see what I could see and paused at the sultan's brother. Someone had placed a sheet over him which I drew back. Pasha had pursued his brother, at great risk, because his ego demanded it. He'd stood over his dead brother and absorbed the sexual energy of multiple women and gloated. Everything I knew about Pasha spoke of an obsessive desire for revenge against his sibling. I knew if we left his brother here he'd find some way to claim the body again.

An idea formed.

"Hey," I called out to the young officer. "There is a way you can help me, if you're still interested."

"Yes."

"I want to bag this body and carry it down those steps. Will you help?"

A few techs raised their heads at my request.

"That's evidence," one said. "We haven't examined that body yet."

I ignored him. I ignored them all.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Gilbreath. Anthony Gilbreath. Friends call me Gil."

"Call me Andy."

I extended a hand. The young cop hesitated.

"If you don't want to go down those steps," I said. "At least help me bag this guy."

He's the bait I need to catch the bad guy."

The officer joined me. We used a tech body bag and held each end as we descended. The mummified man had been dead a long time and weighed little.

The stairs gave way to a sloped tunnel which grew rougher, eventually becoming a crevasse. Moisture was everywhere. Water ran down the walls and dripped on us from high above.

"Sewers and caves," I complained. "It's always sewers and caves."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing," I told the young man. "I've just spent too much time underground."

"That's what they say about you."

I laughed.

"Do they? What else do they say?"

"You're more one of them than one of us. That your nympho wife is possessed and will betray you. That you're a badass fighter and braver than any man they know."

I laughed again.

"That's all surprisingly accurate," I said. "Except the bravery part. I don't know about that. Mostly I'm stubborn and vengeful."

"They also say your partners never last long," he added.

That one stung. I had nothing to say. We carried the body lower.

"We are under Lake Pontchartrain," Gil said, nervous.

"Relax," I said. "This fissure is natural and probably thousands of years old. It won't break just because we're in here."

We lugged the body farther under the earth. Water oozed from the walls and ran along our trail. Rain fell from shadows overhead.

"What's your plan?" Gil asked.

"Discover where Pasha went. Lay his brother on the ground. Blast away when the sultan comes to investigate."

"Simple."

I scoffed. He grinned.

Soon we entered an open area. Stalactites and stalagmites abounded. Rubble from the ceiling high overhead had fallen into piles of boulders. Water ran in a million rivulets through the area, each contributing to create a ubiquitous roar.

We set the body on the ground and I scanned the darkness with my enhanced eyes.

I spotted two eyes glowing like embers.

"Hiding now?" I called out. "No longer the rich and powerful sultan? I keep hunting and you keep running."

I opened the body bag and threw it wide.

"Here is your brother," I called. "I'm giving you one last look before we cremate him and scatter the ashes over a landfill. No longer will you stand over him and gloat. He wins!"

I stepped away, hand twitching. I'd need every bit of my new speed. He was ancient but in many ways, Pasha was still a child. I'd goaded him hard. Pasha stepped forward. I aimed my flashlight at him and officer Gilbreath gasped.

"That's a goddamn vampire," he stammered, fishing a crucifix on a chain from under his uniform. He summoned his courage and held the cross forward. Pasha saw the Christian symbol and grinned.

"You believe that protects you?" he purred. "Such are the myths passed down through generations. I slaughtered your kind at the battle of Bapheus. I gorged on Christian meat at Dimbos and Bursa. Christian generals spread the rumor that the crucifix protected you just to get their soldiers to march. Centuries later, you still believe their lies. Cana! Dena cul demond!"

A nearby pile of rubble unfurled and stood. The gargoyle, hiding in plain sight, so close I tasted his scent in the air. Gilbreath's eyes went wide, drifting down the massive muscular body to land on the prodigious tube of hanging cock.

"Why—?" the young officer stammered. "Why is it naked?"

"Gil," I said. "Get out."

The terrified man backed away.

Cana lunged at me and I dodged towards Pasha, freeing a shotgun as I moved.

Both of my enemies expected me to fight the gargoyle. After all, the gargoyle

had fucked my wife. I didn't. Instead, I raised the shotgun to my hip and dove as far as I could towards the sultan. I pulled both triggers. Buckshot and rock salt flew like a fist and slammed Pasha in the belly, threw him against the wall. His walking stick clattered, lost in the darkness. The buckshot carried the salt deep into his body and he howled in shock and pain. Cana sliced the air over my head as I ducked and pumped the stock, ignoring the demon for now to aim at the sultan and fire again. I caught the bejeweled man in the chest and he groaned loudly.

"No," he whined, shocked by his injuries. "No, no, no."

I did not wait to assess how much damage I'd done. I'd stop when I ran out of shells. I rolled forward under another rake of gargoyle talons and pumped and fired again. I moved closer with each dodge, firing and pumping and firing again until I stood over Pasha's limp body. He lifted his eyes to me, clinging to life.

His hand searched the shadows for his lost stave.

"How did—?" was all he got out before I set the shotgun under his jaw and blew the back of his head off.

I turned on the beast. Cana stared at the pile of ornamented robes and twisted flesh. He ground his teeth, turning to look up the long tunnel Gil and I had descended.

"Gil!" I yelled. "Watch out!"

Officer Gilbreath threw himself against the dripping wall. Cana lifted from the ground with a beat of his wings and then turned in the air to align himself with the tunnel. Gusts of wind buffeted me as the creature flapped hard and shot like a gothic rocket up the tunnel. I called ahead to warn the techs but Cana had already blown through, arching through the air and out of the tomb into full sunlight.

He was gone.

"That thing was a horror," Gil gasped.

"What?" I joked, adding a little levity. "The monster? Or his naked cock?"

"Both. Did you kill that man in the robes?"

"I did. Evelyn was right. Salt."

Gil rolled Pasha on his back with a booted toe.

"Who's Evelyn?" Gil asked.

The sultan's features began to melt. Eyes, mouth, and cheekbones shifted and moved. Soon the ancient bastard looked more like a bat.

"He wasn't a man at all," Gil said. "He was a thrice damned vampire. You live in a nightmare world, Detective Almond."

"Help me with the bodies," I said. "We'll take the brother back to the techs and return for Pasha. You can grab a couple of those jewels off his robe if you'd like.

Consider them payment for your courage."

Chapter 12

We finished with the last of the questions from the officers on site. I leaned against a New Orleans squad car and called my captain, explaining how everything played out. I ended that call and still held my phone when it rang.

Maria, Hank's wife.

I answered.

"Talk to me, Maria. What did Hank do now?"

"Daddy hurt mommy," a small frightened voice squeaked. "She's with the doctors. She said call and tell you."

I understood instantly.

"Did your dad touch you again?" I asked.

"Yes," came the quiet reply.

"Did he touch your sister too?"

"Yes. More than me."

Rage infused my blood, my bones. I barely heard her. My head filled with an angry white noise.

"Are you with mommy now?"

"Yes. At the Mercy hospital."

"Stay there," I said. "I'll see you soon."

"All right."

Chapter 13

Rachel and I arrived back at our hotel room, exhausted. We shuffled through the door and dropped our belongings on the floor. We were walking dead, utterly drained of emotion.

"I love you," I said, softly.

She shambled closer, hugged me fiercely, refusing to let go. I returned her embrace, happy to be alive. We'd survived another one. We kissed, tender, slow, realizing our luck and how close we'd come to losing everything. I gazed at her beautiful face.

She was always pretty but now she took my breath. Pasha's harem magic had altered my wife slightly, changing her face into something angelic and otherworldly. Her body too. I knew it wasn't her true face but the gorgeous beauty stunned me anyway. Pasha's magic was powerful. The vampire had spent centuries surrounding himself with all he desired. If the women he captured weren't beautiful enough, he'd make them so.

"I almost got you killed," she croaked, beginning to cry.

"Not your fault."

I held her as she sobbed. I knew those tears were for our danger and what we'd risked, but I also knew she shed tears for Beckett. It's a rare woman that can have repeated sex with a man and not develop feelings for him. My wife is not one of those women. Their relationship had ended suddenly and brutally.

"Poor Beckett," I said.

The dam burst. She buried her face in my neck, relieved I knew of her secret feelings and yet still hugged her, and that only made her love me more. Loving couples, truly loving couples, give each other what they need, care more about the other than they care about themselves.

We are all only human. I let her get it all out.

LeBlanc was still hospitalized and would be for a while. My captain had ordered me home. Beckett was already on his way in the belly of an airliner. New Orleans captain had thanked me for finding the missing persons and recommended me for a commendation. I told him LeBlanc and Beckett were the heroes.

I held Rachel and felt my own sadness rise. Poor Beckett. Gil is right. I live a nightmare life. My eyes filled with tears and I let them come, I let the tears flow, weeping with her for my lost friend. My dam burst too. I cried for loss. I cried for fear. I cried for Rachel, tangled in all of it. We ate a tasteless dinner and tried to watch a movie but she stopped me about halfway through.

"Will you make love to me?" my wife asked.

I took her hand and led her to the bedroom. Our sex was surprisingly passionate.

I looked down on her face that wasn't her face and her body that wasn't her body and despite my hesitations, blood surged. I grew harder than ever. She dazzled me. She tickled the primitive root of my male brain and forced an animal reaction. I fucked her slow and deep and felt our passion build.

She orgasmed fast and strong and then soon orgasmed again later, her face even more alluring lost in the throes of passion. I hated Pasha for changing her even while I lusted for her new look.

When I climaxed, I exploded so hard I saw stars.

We fell asleep.

In the morning, we ate breakfast and stayed near each other, rubbing elbows and bumping hips as we moved about the suite. In the bathroom mirror she studied her new look and announced she approved. She cupped her bigger, firmer breasts. She slid a palm down her tight flat abs. Her body was changing as much as her face. I smelled her growing arousal.

"I don't just look better," she said. "I feel sexier. Pasha did something to me."

We spent the next day we taking care of loose ends and then we booked our flight home. Evening arrived and we went for a walk before dinner. We entered New Orleans City Park and admired the many sculptures and artistic displays. I thought I detected a familiar scent but couldn't place it.

We walked slowly, holding hands, bumping shoulders. After a while we happened upon a statue of a nude male, anatomically correct, and Rachel laughed. The first time I'd heard her do that in a long time. We studied the naked man cast in bronze.

"Always surprising when they include the penis," she said. "Breasts are fine.

Vulvas are okay too. Buttocks work. But penises? Penises must be hidden. I find it refreshing when an artist gets brave and shows one."

"You do appreciate them."

"Penises are the most wonderful things," she said. "They come in all kinds of sizes, all types of personalities. They shrink when you don't need them and then grow big and hard when you do. You have no idea the thrill a woman gets from making a man hard. It's like a trophy to our sexiness. If I make it hard, I own it."

I laughed. We studied the bronze man again.

She's right, you know, Janet offered.

I caught a whiff of the same scent from earlier. I tested the air. Then I remembered. I recognized. I tensed. I scrutinized the hedges and shrubs and trees around us, studying the shapes, searching.

"What?" Rachel said. "What's wrong, Andy?"

A shadow moved. A tree shook. An enormous figure rose and stepped forward, footfalls landing with dull and heavy thuds.

Cana emerged into the dim streetlight. The demon had changed, transformed into something thicker, denser. Spidery veins of dull ember red latticed his forearms and legs. His skin looked renewed, gleaming in the low light. His deep red eyes, clear, unclouded. He radiated strength and power.

Rachel gasped and I shoved her behind me. I'd left my goddamn gun at the hotel room, not that the weapon granted me any edge against this brute. He was here for Rachel, I felt sure of it. His wings were folded tight against his back.

"You can't have her," I growled. "I'll fight you. I'll fight you until I'm dead."

"I know you would," he said and his unexpected voice, like the jostling of bowling balls, shocked us.

"You— You speak," Rachel croaked, amazed.

"I do," he said, deep voice echoing.

He straightened his shoulders, standing tall. Another couple wandering the park spotted Cana and stopped. They quickly turned and ran. My eyes scanned the beast but I saw now tension in muscles or sinew. He was not poised for action.

He threatened no menace.

"You freed me from Pasha," he rumbled.

Rachel's eyes traveled a slow and sensual curved path down his heavily muscled body. She arrived at the hanging shank of cock, soft, yet seemingly sculpted from marble, and her attention riveted. Her brows furrowed. Her expression turned to lust. She lifted a hand as if to touch vibrations traveling through the air from him to her.

"I thank you," he said. "The sultan held me prisoner over seven-hundred years. I never broke free."

"How?" I asked. "How was he able to do that?"

Cana grinned.

"He learned my true name in my true tongue," he said. "No one will ever again learn my true name."

Rachel knelt on one knee, lifting his polished snake in one hand. I moved to pull her away but she shrugged my hand off. She lowered her head to kiss the tip and then curled her tongue around the crown. He rested a huge hand on her head and scanned the park, eyes landing on a three-story church topped by a large cross.

He bent to circle her waist with a muscular arm and then did the same to me.

One jump and beat of his wings and we were flying, flying over trees and sidewalks and street lights. We landed on the church at the foot of the cross.

Rachel ran her hands over his hard skin. I stepped back. I thought to call her away with me but understood that cause was already lost. She lifted his cock in both hands and tugged, moving closer to stuff the head between her legs. He gripped her shirt in both claws and pulled, shredding her clothing. She helped him rip away her top, exposing pale skin and bare breasts.

He eyed her the way she eyed him.

My wife quickly kicked off her shoes and shed her pants. In less than a minute they stood naked before each other. He eyed her hungrily. She looked fucking delicious. Pasha's harem magic was changing every inch of her.

"You may not be the beast I thought you were," I told him. "But you're still a monster. She's my wife."

He laughed once.

"How should a god of fertility behave?" he asked.

"You implied you were grateful."

"I am, but my connection to this one is strong, and she to me."

He waved Rachel closer and my wife instantly obeyed. He filled a talon with her long hair and guided her mouth down, down to his hanging cock. Rachel gobbled the head, slipping the large plum in and rolling it around. Her hands went to his ball sack and a deep-throated moan filled the air. She played with the four testicles contained within, caressing them, hefting them just to feel their impressive weight. Her lust climbed fast in the presence of this overly masculine creature. Her hands and mouth brought him erect quickly. His thick shaft was coated with saliva, preparation for penetration, but she needn't have bothered.

She was dripping wet. Her labia were engorged and ready. My wife was desperate to get him inside her body again.

I could protest. I could harass the creature. I could shout at Rachel. But Cana would scoop her up and fly away and I'd stand here alone, waiting, hoping he returned her. They both followed lusty instincts. They both stayed true to who and what they were. I'd seen her fucked enough to know I could take it.

She circled his neck with her arms and jumped, whipping her strong legs around his waist. His cock curved upward now, just under her ass. My wife lifted slightly and moved her hips, locating his stiff spear with swollen labia and settling her hot and wet cunt around him. She let her weight ease her pussy down his fat cock. There was no way for a human mouth to kiss a gargoyle face so she buried her face in his neck and fucked herself on him. Her pussy was gushing.

She was fevered, desperate, filled with need for this beast to claim her. My wife was so eager to give him everything she orgasmed after only a few minutes, sobbing with delight. She pumped her hips up and down his length even faster.

Pasha had changed more than her face and body. Perhaps the damage Rashad did to her psyche made her more susceptible to Pasha's spells and liquids, but I felt her slipping away from me. I realized I had felt it for a while.

She orgasmed again, a long howling wail of mind-altering pleasure. She was leaving the human world behind, bonding and connecting to Cana despite her love for me. I was losing her and I knew it. Would this transformation run through her and fade? I could only hope.

She plunged her pussy to the root and ground her hips, growling like a creature of the night. My heart ached. I was watching her transformation right before my eyes. Cana bit softly into her feminine neck and his wings scooped bushels of air. He lifted from the rooftop, slowly turning as my wife fucked herself wildly on his stiff dick. Another beat of his wings and they lifted higher. Cana sucked on her flesh and my wife cried out in ecstasy and then the gargoyle beat his wings and carried my woman high into the sky, vanishing through the clouds overhead. The sound of her voice faded slowly to my enhanced ears.

Sweet Jesus, Janet moaned.

My phone chimed. I checked the message.

Orleans PD found another shrine, my captain texted. Stay and help.

Fuck.

Chapter 14

I stood before a massive painting, eight feet high by twelve feet wide. The scene was a red-headed girl, young, nude, trapped inside an intricate symbol drawn on the ground with silver dust. Skinny Dante demons, mostly human and nude too, stood on her ankles and wrists, pinning her to the ground. Each demon was well-endowed. A voodoo doll with a human skull performed cunnilingus on the bound girl. Her face perfectly captured all the passion, pleasure, revulsion, and fear she felt. I forced myself to focus and not think about Rachel with Cana.

Above me, at street level, an ancient and withered black man sat behind the sales counter at a voodoo museum. Federal agent sat with him as other agents scoured the place.

Down here, under the museum and further along the wall, was an alcove where a statue of an erect demon, much like the statue of Cana we'd discovered, leaked a psychoactive liquid which proved a powerful aphrodisiac to human females.

Pasha had built a network of these shrines and used them to sift through the populace for the most beautiful lovers. The husbands he drained of their life force. The women he enslaved, consuming a different kind of energy until they died.

With Pasha dead, all that would end.

"Job well done," Officer Gilbreath told me.

"Thanks," I said. "But you and the feds did all the work."

"We would never have known about any of this without your courage and personal sacrifice. The guys on the force may be leery of you, but we recognize what you did for us, and we thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Are you and the wife headed out now?"

"Yes. My flight leaves in about an hour."

He extended a hand and we shook. I did not mention I'd be the only one on that flight. I did not mention this trip to New Orleans had cost me Rachel. She'd left last night with Cana and never returned. I was sure she was with him still, engaging in other-worldly sex. She'd stay until she eventually came around to herself, but that might take days, maybe months. She was the safest woman on the planet with him, so I didn't worry about that, but thoughts of him fucking her drove me insane. I missed her. The pain of her absence tormented me.

My phone chimed and I checked the message.

"My ride's here," I told Gil. "Time to go."

We shook hands again and I was gone.

I tried to sleep on the flight but my mind raced. I thought about Rachel and I thought about Hank and I thought about the hidden world all around us, wondering when my skills would next be called upon. My name and reputation were spreading across police departments nationwide. I expected I'd only get busier with each passing week.

I drove from the airport to the hospital to check on Maria. To prevent social services from taking her kids, she'd lied to the police and blamed her injuries on a mugging. The girls were home with Hank and Maria was losing her mind.

"What can I do?" she groaned. "I try to keep them safe but instead hand them to him. I must get out of this hospital."

I placed a hand on her shoulder.

"I'll protect the girls," I said. "I'll deal with Hank."

She was afraid to believe me.

"You fear the unknown future more than your life with Hank," I said.
"Imagine life without him. Imagine the life your girls will enjoy without him. Have faith.

Things can be better."

My words struck a nerve. Maria was thoughtful for a moment and then began to softly cry.

"I'll never be rid of him," she said. "I'm too weak."

I patted her arm.

"That's where I come in," I said, rising.

Her old fears returned but this time she forced herself to face them. She met my eyes. She gave me a little nod.

"Do what you must," she said. "Do what I can't"

I turned to leave. The less she knew the better.

"Goddamn it, Maria," I heard Hank say, from out in the hallway. "Enough with the bullshit injuries. You're milking this thing now. I need you home to cook dinner. The girls need a bath."

The man entered his wife's hospital room. His eyes landed on me. Anger flashed and then he recognized my face, remembered what I'd done to him, remembered the warnings I'd given.

He shoved his daughters aside and ran.

"Stay with your mom," I told them.

No way I could allow his escape. He'd seen me speaking with his wife. He almost certainly believed Maria and I shared a connection, maybe going all the way back to that day at the church. All his hatred for me would get directed at her. I could not allow that.

I gave chase. I smelled gunpowder in his wake and knew he was armed. He entered a stairwell and I heard his heavy footfalls echo on the steel steps. He headed higher, trying to lose me. I imagined throwing him off the roof and hurried. I entered the stairs too and a shot rang. He'd fired down on me. I raced up the stairs, sprinting, aided by my enhanced strength and a burning rage. Hank would be the recipient of all my anger, all my loss, all my fears. Unfair, yes, but he was a nasty man deserving of worse.

I caught him two floors later. I ran fast enough to take the sharp corners in stride and then leap the final fifteen feet. I flew across the gap and smashed a fist against his jaw. He crumpled.

"She's my wife!" he yelled. "I can do whatever I want!"

"That applies to your daughters too?" I asked.

His face went ashen. He raised the pistol and I grabbed his hand, aiming the gun up the stairwell. I slowly bent his arm back until the barrel pointed at his face.

"Open your mouth," I said.

He shook his head, clamped his jaw. With my free hand, I pinched his nose. His mouth opened in seconds. I pushed the barrel in beyond his teeth.

"Goodbye," I said. "You piece of shit."

I used his finger to pull the trigger. The gun roared. Smoke and flame belched.

Brains and blood splattered the wall behind him in a red spray. I held him as all light left his eyes and they turned to glass.

I took a hard look at what I'd done. Many would say his crimes deserved this fate, but was that true? He'd murdered no one. While despicable, did his crimes rise to the level of execution? I looked inward. Was Kali's blood, the gift that gave me all my powers, also influencing my actions, my anger?

Was Kali's blood turning me evil? That thought hit hard. I stared at the mess I'd made, the bone and blood and gray matter. The life I'd ended.

Maria was now a widow. The girls had no father. I would funnel them money for the rest of their lives. Gil had taken a few jewels from Pasha's kaftan and I'd taken the rest. I'd located the bejeweled walking stick and plundered that too.

The appraisal of those gems had me suddenly wealthy.

I stepped back. I believed Hank's behavior would have only gotten worse. I believed Maria's life was endangered, the girls were endangered. I executed Hank as much for the crimes I knew he'd commit as for the ones he'd already committed. I'd called him a piece of shit, and that's exactly what he was.

I left him like that. The hospital would find his body and rule it a suicide. An investigation would uncover his foul deeds regarding his wife and children and the conclusion would be guilt finally caught up to him and he ended his own life.

Chapter 15

Gil used a squad car to drive me to the airport. The empty seat next to me cut like a knife. Rachel should be there. I'd stopped the sultan and his demon but it had cost me my wife. My heart ached. She wasn't dead and probably wasn't even gone for good, but she was gone for now and with Cana and that tore me up inside. I knew who and what he is and I could start learning his weaknesses. I'd discover how to kill the creature and take back my wife before he changed her further. Pasha's harem magic had begun a transformation that life with Cana would only accelerate.

"You're deep in thought," Gil said.

"Rachel."

His face turned serious.

"I'm real sorry about what happened, Detective Almond. You came out here to help us and paid a high price. Too high."

"Just part of my nightmare life."

"I want you to know I'll never stop looking for her. I have your number. I'll call with any information, any clue at all."

"Thanks, Gil."

"I'm going to interview every one of those women we saved. I won't rest until we get a crack in this case."

I smiled. Gil was earnest and loved playing cop.

"You're a good man, Officer Gilbreath."

"I'll even go back and question that couple you pulled from the cage. They're set to be released from the hospital today. Doc said they'll be fine. I'll arrange—"

"Wait. That couple we pulled from the cage?"

"What about them?"

"What did they say? Let me think."

To his credit, Gil shut his mouth. I searched my memories.

"Take me to the hospital," I said. "Cancel my flight. We left a stone unturned."

"What'd we do?"

"There's an entrance to the tunnels off the lake. That's what the wife in the cage said. We never found it. We never even looked. Evelyn told us about Pasha's dead brother and we went in another direction. There's more to discover. I need to talk to LeBlanc. He was there."

Gil hit the lights and siren and whipped the car around.

"The husband said he was an architect," I said. "He mentioned they were flown in. They had sacks over their heads but their hands weren't tied. If I assume Cana held them in his arms, then he never set them down or they'd remove the sacks."

He must have entered the tunnels while still flying. Like a cave entrance or something like it."

"New Orleans is at or below sea level," Gil said. "We don't have caves. We don't have mountains. We don't even have hills, truly. Nothing but flat land surrounds Lake Pontchartrain. Even the buildings are only one or two story. The tallest structures for a demon to fly into would be the water processing plants. Those go up three and four stories."

"Water processing plant? What are those?"

"We have water everywhere," Gil explained. "All around us. We must control it or it will take over. Storms, tides, and floods all threaten us. We must control the runoff, channel where we want it to go. Plus, it needs to be

scrubbed of the city waste. Human waste too. We can't have toxins washed into the lakes and gulf.

All that water needs to be processed. There's a series of pump stations all around the lake. All the water gets directed to them. The biggest is a pump station down by the marinas. That whole area is restricted. I know they dredged real deep when they built the place. They installed huge machinery to filter and treat the outflow. You think they cut into some of those tunnels when they dug?"

"It's worth the time to take a look. Forget the hospital. Let's go there. Use your badge to get me in."

Gil shook his head.

"Self-automated," he said. "Self-sufficient. Nobody visits unless there's a problem. I'll call it in but we made need to break a padlock or two."

Gil drove like I wanted him to. We arrived quickly. The place sat on a canal behind a high security fence. Huge grates sat in the water flowing out of the city, with venting stacks to handle tidal surges. The mass of complicated machinery stood four-stories tall and looked like something right out of a futuristic movie.

Large towers sat next to huge vats with steam rising. Gil parked at the gate and circled around to the trunk. He grabbed a tire iron to handle the padlock and we were in. I studied the complex equipment as I approached.

"That tower," I said, pointing at a giant concrete chimney. "They'd need to dig deep to set the foundations. There's room down the middle for the full spread of Cana's wings. That seems our best first shot."

Gil did not question my conclusion. I jogged across the open grass and set my feet to the rungs, climbing swiftly. At the top, I looked over the edge and down.

"There are rungs inside too," I shouted down to Gil.

"I'm coming with you," he yelled.

I climbed up and swung a leg over, headed back down on the inside. I reached a

concrete landing. To my right four large sea gates, all open, handled the outflow of New Orleans water. A walkway vanished inside the structure. I worked my way down to it and drew my gun. I waited for Gil to catch up.

"That's our way in," I said, pointing to the ledge.

He nodded. We moved.

The walkway narrowed as the roar of a distant waterfall grew. We continued, eventually reaching a flight of metal stairs headed up. The roar was now blasting our ears. Wind blew our hair back as the spray from a massive sheet of falling water buffeted us. I scanned the stairs and then back the way we'd come.

"We don't want up," I shouted, looking around. "This can't be a dead-end. I was so sure they came this way."

Gil held his policeman's hat on with one hand. He searched around us too.

"Maybe this isn't it," he yelled.

Frustration boiled over in me.

"Goddamn it!" I shouted. I pounded the rock wall. "This must be it. There's no other path for them."

He put a consoling hand on my shoulder.

"We'll just keep looking," he said. "We know the entrance is waiting for us to find. It's only a matter of time."

Dejected, I stared at the ground. The walkway ended at the stairs but rocky outcroppings along the wall continued, vanishing at last under the torrent of

falling water. I lifted my eyes to the huge waterfall. The flow was not uniform.

Natural obstructions under the water forced the flow around, thinning the cascading sheet beneath.

"He went through!" I yelled. "Cana had them in his arms and shielded them with his wings. He came in off the lake with speed and punched right through the falling wall of water." I pointed to the craggy step stones. "I can get there along those rocks."

Gil looked dubious.

"That's dangerous," he said. "Those rocks are wet and slippery. You'll slide off and land in the water and get swept into the lake."

"Then I'll get out and try again. I can feel it. We are on to something."

I stepped off the walkway and onto the first rock. He was right, they were slick, but an abundance of caution kept me upright. I moved slowly, creeping forward.

The wind and spray were intense. I saw a veil where an outcropping high above split the falling water and reduced the hammering force. I coiled my legs and jumped, blasting through the slight opening. I landed on a wet rocky ledge behind the water. A large tunnel blocked by another seamless boulder led away into the earth. I was drenched but thrilled.

"Follow me!" I screamed.

Gil aimed his flashlight at the place where the waterfall thinned and I'd vanished.

"Yes!" I screamed again. "Right there."

I waited, blinded to his efforts by the sheet of water falling in front of me.

Moments later he exploded through the gap but his jump was not strong enough to overcome the pounding water. I grabbed him with both hands and

pulled him to join me on the ledge. He shook his head and stamped his feet.

"That was a close one!" he yelled.

He looked around and so did I. We stood in a naturally carved out area behind the waterfall. Engineers had taken advantage of nature. I examined the tunnel that led away.

"What did you find?" Gill shouted.

"A blocked tunnel."

He couldn't see it. I drew a finger along the nearly invisible seam but he still could not separate the rock from the wall. I dug my fingers in and heaved, rolling the large boulder aside. He looked amazed. Dank air blew out, carrying the smell of decay.

"I never would have found that," he said.

I was excited to start the hunt anew. I set the boulder so it wouldn't roll back and close us in and examined the walls. I sniffed the air, catching traces of mold, fungus, wet earth and sex. Cana had definitely brought my wife to this place. I set my shoulders, ready for whatever awaited me. I glanced at Gil's face. The man was terrified. My enhanced eyes had enough light but to him this dark and murky hole was filled with danger top to bottom.

Go easy on the guy, Dad said. He's only human.

"Gil, you can wait here for me," I said. "You brought me this far."

"No, sir. I admit I'm frightened. But if we can get your woman back, that's what we need to do. I couldn't live with myself if I turned away now because I'm afraid. Let's go."

"That's true courage," I said. "Thank you."

We entered the tunnel. It was wide and only ran about a hundred feet before dropping and expanding into a cave. Three cages sat in the center. Two housed skeletons. The remaining cage held two people, a man and a

woman, naked, unconscious. They looked frail and thin, clearly down here longer than the others had been. We raced to the cell and smashed the lock. Gil tried his radio and phone but there was no signal.

"I'll get them out," I said.

"No, you keep searching. I'll run back to the entrance once I make sure they aren't about to die and I'll call for backup."

I glanced around while Gil checked their bodies for injury. Piles of clothing ringed the cave, all of it tattered, some of it old fashioned. How many poor souls had met their end in this place over the centuries? I spied something familiar and moved closer. Rachel's outfit lay discarded on the rocky floor. Cana had brought her here after their escape and I knew why. I tried not to think about his thick cock and four testicles. Her wallet and phone were here too. She'd abandoned her last connections to her human life. She was his now.

I circled the chamber, examining the floor and walls. This cave and tunnel had

originally formed from natural processes and then had been enhanced with crude chisel and hammer. The work looked ancient. I investigated the perimeter and discovered a small side room tucked behind boulders, easily missed. I pulled my phone out and lit the screen to provide extra light.

Set in the floor was an ancient trapdoor, hidden beneath dirt and mold but obvious to my superior eyesight. I found the edge and yanked.

Gold coins. Gems. Rings and bracelets and earrings, all set with diamonds and rubies and emeralds. Jean Lafitte's last hidden cache, discovered at last, secreted away behind a waterfall and a secret door and dumped into a pit. The engineers that built the plant had been so close but never realized.

I began plucking diamonds and emeralds and a few gold doubloons. I know I should have left it all to a museum but I knew what I found in this hole would never make it intact. The temptation was too great. The treasure would pass through too many hands. I know I justified my theft by

rationalizing others would do the same, but I had bigger plans, plans larger than merely a cop working his beat, and rationalizing was something I was becoming adept at. The world needed a person like me and I'd need funds to make that happen. Let the monsters steal my wife. I will come for them all around the world.

Chapter 16

I helped Evelyn walk to LeBlanc's hospital room. He was awake. I told them both the tale of Jean Lafitte's treasure and the final and certain loss of Rachel.

"She'll come back to you," Evelyn insisted. "Magic fades. Pasha is dead. His spells will unravel and she'll return to herself."

"I think Evelyn is correct," LeBlanc added. "Trust love."

I sighed.

"Officer Gilbreath did the department proud," I told LeBlanc. "A commendation is in order. The last couple we found would have died a slow and miserable death if not for him. He was brave."

"I'll tell the captain," LeBlanc said. "So, what now?"

Evelyn turned to look at me.

"Now I go home," I said. "I file my report with my captain and I get back to work. The loss of Rachel is too much to bear. I need to stay busy. I'll take every case that comes my way and bury myself in work. When do you two get out of here?"

"I'm released on Friday," Evelyn said.

"The doctors still aren't sure," LeBlanc said. "That bite drained more than just blood from me. The doctors are stumped. One described it as a loss of life force, like the bastard drained my energy along with my blood. It's returning but slowly."

"You'll get there," I said.

"What will you do now?" Evelyn asked.

I sighed.

"Go home. Sleep. Begin to search for Rachel although my gut says wait for her to come to me. I might take some vacation time. I have a lot saved."

"How would you feel about a little working vacation?" Evelyn asked.

I raised an eyebrow at her.

Oh boy, Dad said. Here we go.

Hush, Pop.

"I have a friend who has a friend," Evelyn began. "She lives out in the country.

Something killed several head of her cattle, something with claws and fangs, yet smart enough to open a locked latch. I told her I'd check with you."

"Out in the country, where?" I asked.

"England," she answered. "Glastonbury, Somerset, England, to be precise. She's a sweet girl. Gwen."

"I'll think about it," I said.

End.

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