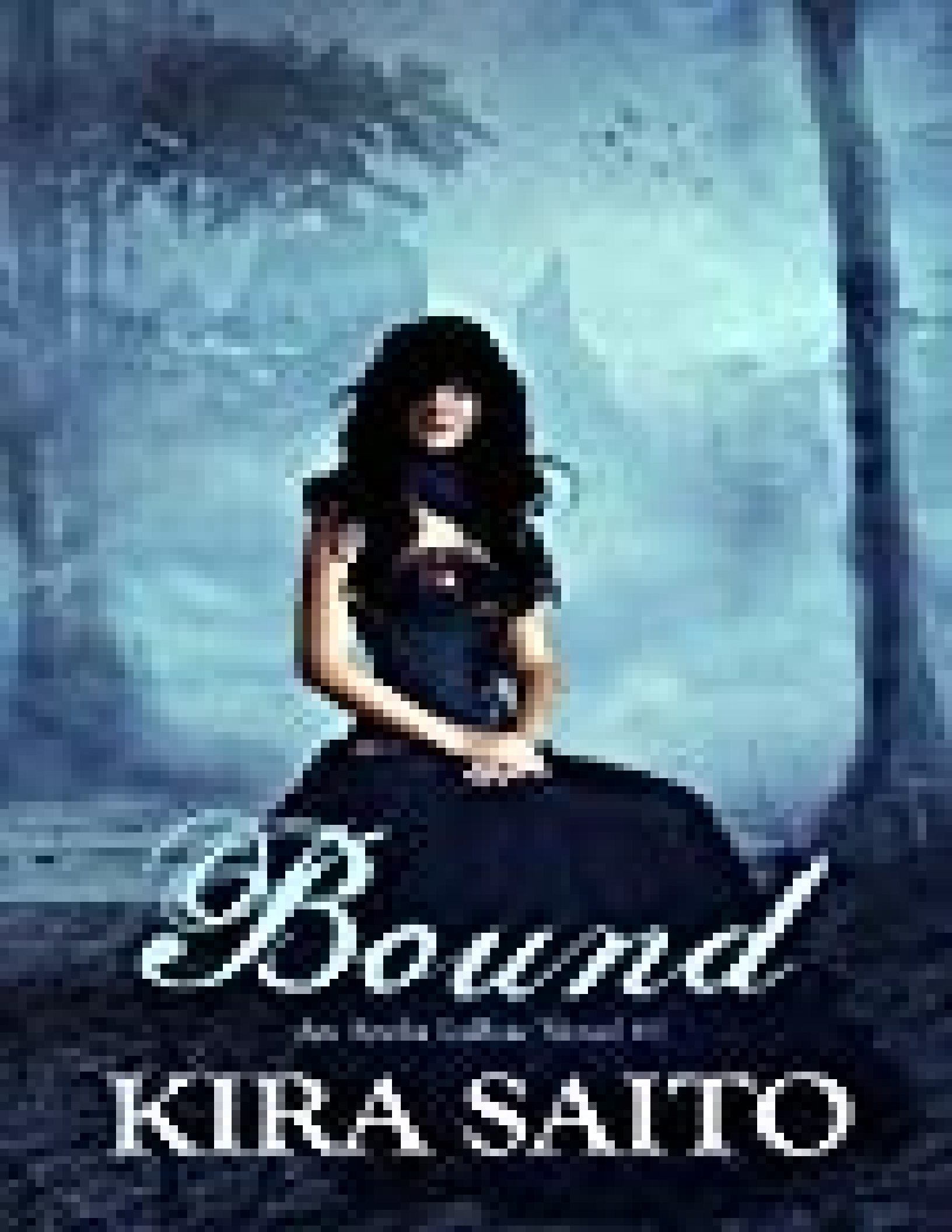




Love

KIRA SAITO

BOUND

ARELIA LARUE SERIES BOOK 1

KIRA SAITO

Bound, An Arelia LaRue Novel #1

Copyright 2011 Kira Saito

Smashwords Edition

All rights reserved: no part of this book may be reproduced without written permission from the author.

This is a work of fiction and any resemblance between the characters and persons living or dead is strictly coincidental

 Created with Vellum

CONTENTS

1. [An Opportunity](#)
2. [Welcome to Darkwood Plantation](#)
3. [Erzulie](#)
4. [Drag Me to the Ball](#)
5. [Where Are You?](#)
6. [The Night Never Ends](#)
7. [Show Me the Magic.....Chocolate?](#)
8. [Brandy Milk Punch](#)
9. [The Slave Song](#)
10. [Sweet Tea with Lucas](#)
11. [The Good Fight](#)
12. [I Need You](#)
13. [Summer School](#)
14. [The Alligators and the Ghosts](#)
15. [Dance with Me](#)
16. [Revelations](#)
17. [You Won't Tell, Will You?](#)
18. [Mud Fight](#)
19. [I Never Want to Be Like Them](#)

[The series continues...](#)

Love is the only freedom

in the world

because it so elevates the spirit

that the laws of humanity

and the phenomena

of nature

do not alter its course

-Khalil Gibran

AN OPPORTUNITY

“We’ve been over this before. I have to go. Sabrina is going to be here any second, and I’m not even packed yet.” Not that there was much to pack. I crammed my favorite jeans into an old duffel bag, threw in a few tank tops and the print sundress Grand-mere Bea had made for me last week. My bedroom was a mess. Littered with dirty laundry, open books, and half-empty coffee cups, it wasn’t exactly sanitary.

I caught a glance of myself in the mirror and decided that I didn’t look much better than my room. My olive skin had decided to take on a yellowish tinge as punishment for working overtime last night. The New Orleans summer heat transformed my wavy dark hair into a bird’s nest, and my large brown eyes were bloodshot. It wasn’t the picture I wanted to present to my new boss. I searched the room for a hairbrush and found one under a pile of socks. After a few frantic strokes through my hair, I gave up and roughly tied it into a lopsided ponytail. I knew Sabrina was going to be horrified, but at this point I didn’t care. I had a tube of lip gloss somewhere- how I was going to find it was a mystery.

“The Devil takes many forms, my child,” Grand-mere Bea’s voice was barely above a whisper. “Speak his name and he appears. I don’t understand why you have to go to Darkwood Plantation.”

I sighed. She had no idea. “We need the money. James has upped the rent again, and if I don’t start saving for college now, I won’t ever go.” James, our landlord, was getting greedier and fatter as he got older. His hunger for money

probably stemmed from the fact that his fourth wife had recently left him for a barista. Within the past year alone, our rent had gone up three times.

“Yes, I know, Arelia, but I am sure you can find something in the city, something safe.” She desperately attempted to make one last plea. This little argument had been an ongoing event since I announced I had taken a summer job at Darkwood.

“Yesterday was my last day working at Lola’s. What they’re offering me at Darkwood for the summer is a year’s pay here. The job isn’t hard, either. Sabrina said that it’s just showing tourists around, helping out in the kitchen, and stuff like that. It sounds much better than slaving over an espresso machine all summer.”

“Oh, she said that now, did she?” Her voice had a sarcastic ring to it. “The only reason Sabrina wants to go there is to get close to the LaPlante family. That girl has never lifted a finger in her life, and you’re just going to have to do twice the work to make up for it,” Grand-mere advised as she frantically fidgeted with the red beads that hung around her neck.

I couldn’t argue with her there. At first I was confused about why my best friend wanted to work, since her family is already loaded. It was only after I found out about her plan to meet one of the LaPlante men that I realized what she was actually up to. According to her, she was going to make one of them fall in love with her. Within a few years, she would be married to one of the richest men in the world. She would then become a lady of leisure, like her mother, and focus on having children. Yes, she actually said “lady of leisure” and was thinking about having children already. Besides, her parents were spending the summer visiting friends in Morocco, so she didn’t have anything better to do. It wasn’t surprising that she was obsessed with marriage and kids. Her family, who lived in the absurdly wealthy Garden District, was part of high society in New Orleans. The women who ran in those circles were programmed while they were still in the womb to seek out rich and powerful mates. While Sabrina had everything handed to her on a silver platter, I had to fight for even the littlest things. How we became friends is an enigma even to me. Grand-mere used to be her nanny, so I’ve known her forever.

“You know how important it is for me to go. I don’t understand why you think Darkwood is dangerous. Tourists are going there so they can see a ghost or two. It’s all a clever marketing trap, just like the rest of the ghosts and voodoo queens in New Orleans.” I unsuccessfully hunted for clean underwear as I tried to convince Grand-mere that going to Darkwood wouldn’t cause my demise.

Grand-mere Bea crossed herself. “You are never to joke about that, Arelia. The spirits are everywhere, and they hear everything. That plantation is cursed. Evil surrounds the LaPlante family, and all of New Orleans knows it.” Grand-mere had a somewhat hostile attitude towards the LaPlante family. She probably figured that a family loaded enough to own a massive plantation like Darkwood must have made several deals with good old Lucifer himself.

“Just because the LaPlantes are filthy rich, it doesn’t make them evil.” Besides, I knew the spirits were everywhere, and I knew they heard everything; that’s why I spent my entire life deliberately ignoring them. Ever since I was a little girl, they haunted my thoughts, and stalked me through shadows. At a very early age, I decided I would never invite them into my world, so I ignored them. Whenever they called, I wished them away, and when they followed me on the streets I looked in the other direction.

If I lived anywhere but New Orleans, I would have thought I was a lunatic. Only here was it perfectly acceptable to leave spirits rum and talk to them as if they were human. Grand-mere Bea was constantly praising the spirits, or *loa*, as they’re called in voodoo.

According to her, *Bon Dieu* or God was too busy to communicate with us mere mortals. The spirits were the ones who took care of our sticky messes. However, they were kind of picky and only helped if you appeased them with stuff like rum, cigarettes, and the occasional blood sacrifice or two. She always told me if you could hear the spirits, you could control them. If you could control them, it meant you could basically do whatever you wanted, but it was very dangerous. If you didn’t know what you were doing, you could end up dead, or worse. Well, those weren’t her exact words, but it always sounded like that to me. Thanks to her, I knew all their names, their history, and what they had power over.

However, unlike the rest of New Orleans, I didn't want to be a witch, a psychic, or a voodoo queen. I just wanted to be me. It was a strategy that was working fine so far. I didn't see how going to Darkwood was going to change anything.

"My sweet child, always trying to be so practical." Grand-mere Bea was always going on about how I was too uptight and that life didn't always have to be a full-on battle. I hated that she thought she knew me better than I knew myself. On a daily basis she gave me these little ominous speeches that ended up saying the same thing. 'Be proud', 'you're special', and all the other cliché things grownups told teenagers to make them feel better about themselves.

"I bought this protective *gris-gris* for you from *mambo* Clara. Put it on and do not take it off until you leave Darkwood." She lovingly handed me a woven bracelet with a small charm in the form of the letter X on it. Inside the charm was a blend of herbs, allegedly blessed with the power of protection. Grand-mere Bea, like many people in the city, was more than a little superstitious. However, I thought that *mambo* Clara was the biggest fraud in New Orleans. She only charged eighty bucks for *gris-gris* bags so she could support her latest boyfriend. Usually, he was some twenty-two year-old model wannabe, which is kind of gross considering she's Grand-mere's age. I wanted to yell at Grand-mere for wasting money on garbage, but stopped myself. One look at her dark, leathery skin and kind old eyes made me realize how lucky I was. She didn't have to take me in after my mother dumped me at her doorstep and ran away to join a traveling country band, but she did. If it weren't for her, I probably would have ended up homeless and bitter.

"Sure, Grand-mere, I'll wear it." I took the bracelet from her hand and gave her a soft kiss on the cheek. Hey, if wearing some bracelet would calm her down, why not?

"Arelia!" Sabrina's high-pitched voiced beckoned me from the hallway. "Are you ready?"

She walked into the room in a blaze of Harajuku Lovers perfume. Her shoulder-length blonde hair shone from her latest Brazilian blowout, and her nails were flawlessly manicured. Dressed in a new Miu Miu sundress and Kate

Spade wedges, she looked perfect, as usual. I knew all of her favorite brands because the only thing she talked more about than boys was shopping. For a split second, I felt a bit shy in my worn-out jeans and ancient tank top.

“I’m ready, let’s go.”

Sabrina greeted Grand-mere Bea with a hug and a kiss then looked around my bedroom. Her clear blue eyes were horribly confused. “But where are your bags?”

“Right here,” I said, holding up my duffel bag.

“You can’t be serious.” Her voice filled with utter disgust. I loved Sabrina like a sister, but she could be such a snob sometimes.

“What’s the big deal?” I tapped my foot impatiently.

“What’s the big deal? We’re going to spend the summer at Darkwood plantation, and you’re taking an ugly old duffel bag. How is it possible that you have enough clothes in there for two months? It just doesn’t make any sense. Let me have a look.” She attempted to snatch the bag from my hands.

“We’re going there to work, remember?” Well *I* am, I thought, as I clutched the bag to my chest.

“Seriously, Arelia, if I looked like Jessica Alba, I know I would put in more of an effort. Lucky for you, I came prepared. I brought enough clothes, makeup, and shoes for the two of us.”

She was always going on about how I could be super-hot if I put on some decent clothes and makeup once in a while. I didn’t dress like I was homeless or anything. I took showers on a daily basis, washed my hair, and used deodorant. However, her opinion of decent clothes included only those that ninety-nine percent of the population could never dream of buying without selling one of their kidneys first. Her view on what actress I most resembled also changed on a daily basis. Last week she claimed that I looked like Vanessa Hudgens. The week before, I was Odette Yustman. Today, I was Jessica Alba. Yes, she was a tad dramatic.

“We really should get going, otherwise we’re going to be late.” I attempted to deter Sabrina from whipping out her makeup case by swiftly steering her towards the door.

“Oh crap! It’s already noon,” she realized after looking at her cell. “We need to be there by one at the latest.”

“That’s why we go need to go now.” I pushed her out the front door.

“You girls promise to be careful.” Grand-mere Bea warned while mindlessly cracking the joints in her fingers as she always did when anxious. Her large frame shifted from side to side as she tried to hold back the tears that were slowly forming in the corners of her eyes.

“We promise, Grand-mere. I’ll call you every day.” I gave her one last forceful hug good-bye.

“Don’t worry, Grand-mere Bea, I’ll take care of this one,” Sabrina promised as she took out her Chanel compact and powered away sweat from her t-zone. Her statement brought a spontaneous smile to grand-mere’s face. The thought of her taking care of anything, or anyone, was ludicrous. The girl switched miniature dogs like they were underwear and tossed boys like they were dirty napkins.

We headed out to the parking lot and were greeted by a new, hot-pink convertible. “Look what Mommy and Daddy got me as a see-you-later present.” Sabrina grinned as she opened the car door. I couldn’t help feeling jealous. Who buys their kids ridiculously expensive ‘see-you-later’ presents? The last present my mother sent me was a package of beef jerky she bought at a gas station somewhere in Kentucky. It had been my tenth birthday.

I gave my obligatory compliments. “Wow, it’s beautiful. I’m so jealous.” My voice was full of blatant envy as I opened the door to the passenger’s side.

“I know, right? Hop in.” Sabrina applied a coat of Lancôme Juicy Tube gloss on her thin lips while looking in the rearview mirror. “I so hate my lips. Mom promised me that I could get fillers after she gets back from Morocco. I so wish I had your lips.” She looked at me in envy.

For an instant, I imagined what it would be like to have Sabrina’s life. She had it all, but she always wanted more. Maybe the reason we were so close was that I never competed with her. She saw other girls at school as competition. She always needed to have the best hair, clothes, makeup, and boys, and so did the other girls. I never allowed myself to play because I had more important things

to worry about; such as where the week's grocery money was going to come from.

"I so hope there is an eligible, young, hot LaPlante that I can get my hands on this summer," Sabrina theatrically fantasized as we sped down the highway.

"I bet they're all old and married," I replied as I counted all the blue cars that passed by.

"Well, old isn't a problem and neither is married. I'm sure I can convince any man to leave his wife for me," she declared with determination. To her, collecting boys was a hobby, much like fishing was to some people.

I rolled my eyes. "I wouldn't be so sure."

"What do you mean?" She sounded genuinely offended. "Are you saying that I'm not good enough to marry a LaPlante?"

"No, it's just that if he *is* married, it's going to be a costly divorce."

"Oh. Well, after one night with me, I'm sure that he would be more than willing to pay any price." She gave herself another quick glance in the rearview mirror. Sabrina's many exploits with boys were well-documented in her diary and, of course, rehashed to me in strict confidence.

"Speaking of, how was your date with Jon last night?"

"He was so awkward, and kind of geeky. He went on and on about *Avatar*. I kissed him just to get him to shut up. At one point, I thought about having sex with him so the date would end, but his parents came home and he got all nervous. I swear all the rich men in New Orleans are either mama's boys or gay. Seriously, Arelia, this summer is my last chance at meeting someone fabulous."

"Sabrina, you just turned sixteen, how is this your last chance?" I was tremendously horrified at her lack of desire to do anything besides marry some guy.

"You don't know how it is. That's how it's always been in my family, and the social circles we run in. Besides, I really want my date for the fall debutante ball to make Elise jealous. She thinks she's so hot with Tim on her arm. I made out with him after they got together," she said proudly. "That's why I love you. You never think you're better than me."

I didn't know what to make out of her statement, so I just let it slide. "So do

you know how many other people are going to be working with us?" I asked, deliberately changing the subject.

"I don't know. It's obvious that I got the invitation to work there only because Daddy is so prominently known in New Orleans. Of course, I told them the only way I would come is if I could bring you".

"I can't thank you enough, Sabrina." I turned to look at her. "The whole year is going to be so much easier because of this job."

"Areliia," she interrupted me, pointing ahead. "Look. It's gorgeous."

I looked up and saw two large, menacing iron gates with an elaborate spiral design connecting them at the top. I had to close my eyes. They were much stronger here.

"Shut up," I muttered.

"Huh?" Sabrina eyed me suspiciously.

"Nothing. It's beautiful." I prayed that I would be strong enough to survive the summer.

WELCOME TO DARKWOOD PLANTATION

“**W**hat the hell!” Sabrina shouted aggressively as she honked the car horn and looked at her cell. “They said one p.m., it’s almost two. Where is everyone?”

I got out of the car and peered through the iron gates, trying to make out any signs of life behind it. All I could see were large oak trees that seemed to stretch out for miles. In the background, there was a large ten-columned portico connected to the main house. Even from the gate, it looked massive. The summer wind crept through the oak trees and gave me a slight chill.

“Why are you here, Arelia? You know it’s cursed. Sins always must be punished. They must be trapped and bound,” whispered the wind spirit, who, thanks to Grand-mere, I knew was named Bade.

I know to most people the whole spirit talking to them thing would have been extremely creepy and all, but I was pretty much used to it.

“You guys are really irritating. You know that, don’t you? Please leave me alone and tell your friends to, too. I just want to work. I don’t have time for this,” I forcefully hissed under my breath, so Sabrina wouldn’t hear.

“Work? Work is what the Devil wants you to do,” he continued. “Work until your fingers bleed and your skin is raw. Why are you ignoring me, Arelia? You can’t ignore us forever.”

“Yes I can,” I replied.

“You should turn back now,” he insisted.

“I don’t want to.” I headed towards Sabrina and ignored him. I felt him linger a bit longer and then take off.

“Oh thank God!” Sabrina exclaimed as a thin grey-haired man walked towards us from behind the gate.

“You haven’t been waiting long, have you?” he asked in a lazy soft drawl as he opened the gate. His dark skin was slightly moist from the summer humidity.

“If you call forever not long, then no,” snapped Sabrina rudely.

His large brown eyes filled with amusement at her blatant vulgarity. “My name’s Henri, I’m the staff manager. Who might you two lovely ladies be?”

“I’m Arelia LaRue, and this is Sabrina Richards,” I replied.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He stuck out his wrinkled hand. I shook it, but Sabrina pretended not to see when it was her turn. “You can drive your car right up to the house and park it at the back.”

We got back into the car. “If he’s the manager, he could have at least picked a better outfit. He looks like Colonel Sanders,” said Sabrina.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Maybe that’s the effect he’s going for. It is the South after all.”

The road leading up to Darkwood Plantation was lined with regal oaks that extended far enough down to scratch the top of my head. As we pulled up to the front of the house and got out of the car, Sabrina was in a state of shock.

“Can you believe this? It’s amazing!” The house in front of us was extraordinarily beautiful and intimidating with its looming white pillars and lush gardens. “It has three stories. The property has a swamp and a family cemetery as well,” she rattled on. “Can you imagine how much it takes to maintain this place? The LaPlantes are loaded, and I’m here to stake my claim.”

“What do you girls think?” asked Henri as he popped out from behind a tree.

“Are you kidding me? It’s gorgeous!” Sabrina cried ecstatically.

“Amazing.” I was unable to comprehend why anyone would want to own such a massive place.

“You ladies come right on in,” invited Henri.

“Of course, but I need help with my bags, Henri can you help me?” asked Sabrina reverting to baby talk. Whenever she wanted a favor from a man she

spoke in baby talk, even if the man was pushing seventy.

Henri, being the gentleman he appeared to be, agreed. He didn't even flinch when she opened the car trunk to reveal a seven piece Louis Vuitton travel set. It didn't matter where Sabrina went; she always traveled with at least seven Louis pieces. Even that one time we tried to go camping. I hesitantly grabbed my duffel bag along with one of her suitcases and followed Henri up the five steps that led to the spacious, marble porch. Anxiety intensely gripped me for the first time in a long time. I don't know what it was about this place. I knew the spirits were stronger here. What exactly did Bade mean by his little comments? I never let what the spirits said get in the way of my existence, but for some reason his words really got under my skin.

Henri opened the front door to reveal a broad hallway with a shiny, white marble floor. At the end of the long hall, there was a spiral staircase with delicate railings.

"I've tried to convince Daddy to get a spiral staircase in our home so many times, but he prefers the elevator. This is epic." Sabrina immediately ran to the end of the hall to the staircase and started to drool over the fact that its railings were gilded in real gold.

The last room at the end of the hall was opened up to what I assumed was a ballroom. On one side of the massive room sat an antique grand piano with a harp by its side. The high ceilings were home to not two, but three crystal chandeliers.

"Ms. Mae, the summer help is here!" Henri shouted down an adjacent hallway.

"Bring them right on in here, I'm pulling the yam biscuits out of the oven," replied a loud velvety voice.

"Ms. Mae is getting some snacks prepared for the guests, they should be arriving in a few hours," explained Henri as he directed us into a spacious but surprisingly modern kitchen. Bending over the stove was a large woman who must have been around Grand-mere Bea's age. She wore a green dress printed with tiny flowers. Her grey hair was tied up in an elegant bun, and despite her age, her golden skin was unwrinkled. As she looked up to greet us, her dark

green eyes looked astonished.

“Hello girls,” she said calmly, “tell Ms. Mae your names.”

“This here is Sabrina, and this is Arelia,” offered Henri, before I had a chance to say anything. “I’ll give you girls a chance to talk. I have some preparations to do before the guests arrive. Ms. Mae will get you all set up.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both,” Ms. Mae graciously extended her hand. When I reached out to shake it, I got the sensation that I knew her. From exactly where, I wasn’t sure, but she had an odd sense of familiarity about her. Her kind eyes looked into mine, and I was sure that she could read my mind. “We’ve been waiting to meet you for a long time Arelia,” she said, “and of course, you too, Sabrina.”

“Is there anything to drink around here?” Sabrina briskly interrupted. “It was a long drive, and I’m so thirsty.”

“Of course, I made a fresh batch of sweet tea.” Ms. Mae headed over to the corner of the kitchen where a small wooden table sat. She cordially handed each of us a glass filled with tea.

“This is so good,” said Sabrina, after taking a sip.

“It tastes just like Grand-mere Bea’s tea,” I agreed after savoring it.

“Kind of.” Sabrina filled up her glass again. After inhaling her third glass of tea, she was desperate to go to the bathroom. “Is there a bathroom around here?”

“Go down that hall, take a left, then a right,” advised Ms. Mae.

After Sabrina left the kitchen, Ms. Mae focused her attention on me. “So your stubborn Grand-mere finally let you come, did she?”

“How do you know Grand-mere Bea, and how do you know she didn’t want me to come to Darkwood?” I coolly asked, unsure of what she was implying.

“She didn’t even tell you about me, did she?” Ms. Mae predicted.

“Who are you?” I squirmed in utter discomfort.

“Take a closer look; I’m sure you’ll figure it out.” She leaned in towards me. I could smell her sweet tea infused breath.

“Okay, enough with the big mystery. Please just tell me who you are.” I was a bit freaked out, and at the same time morbidly curious. It’s like when you see a dead animal at the side of the road, half of you wants to throw up your lunch, but

the other half wants to whip out your camera.

“I’m her sister,” she dramatically revealed. At that moment, it all became clear. Those eyes- they were exactly like Grand-mere Bea’s, just a different shade.

“You’re my aunt?” That was something I hadn’t expected.

“Great aunt,” she corrected. “Who do you think sent Sabrina that invitation? I knew she’d bring you along. That’s the only way your Grand-mere would let you see me.”

“How come I’ve never met you before, and why doesn’t Grand-mere Bea ever speak about you?” I asked.

“We had very big disagreement years ago and haven’t spoken since,” her eyes filled with genuine sorrow.

“Well it must have been a pretty bad fight, if you haven’t spoken for that long,” I pressed, hoping she would give me some answers.

“Well it was over you. I believe that is a pretty important reason,” she said.

“Over me- why would you guys fight over me?”

Ms. Mae hesitated for a minute and then continued. “You hear the spirits, don’t you Arelia? They talk to you directly even when you don’t call them, isn’t that right?”

“So? Everyone in New Orleans sees ghosts and talks to spirits,” I reasoned.

“No they don’t, child, most of them just pretend they do. Others have to tempt the spirits to do their bidding with bribes and offerings. Not you, you have been blessed.”

“Blessed?” I asked. “You think a bunch of spirits talking to me is blessed? What makes you think that?”

“When you were just a baby and your momma left you, your grand-mere was beside herself. She never wanted you to feel like you didn’t belong. She only wanted the best for you. I suggested that we make an offering to Erzulie, so you would be protected. In voodoo, we know her as the spirit of love. However, your grand-mere wasn’t so sure. You see, growing up, we saw many folks who messed with the spirits and got into a lot of trouble. Unlike your grand-mere, I always had a close relationship with the spirits because I never feared them. Bea,

she's always been scared as a mouse."

"Go on," I commanded, hoping she would finish before Sabrina got back.

"So one day while your grand-mere was at work and I was watching you, I decided to make an offering to Erzulie behind Bea's back. For some reason, she took an extra liking to you and made it possible for you to be a part of her world. I suppose that was her way of protecting you. We didn't find this out until you were two or so. You would talk to people who weren't there and always had a way of getting what you wanted. Once your grand-mere was sick with a terrible flu, and you were so sad. You held her hand and told her that you could make it better. Within minutes, she was completely healed. You told us it was the spirits. Bea was confused because you were so young. Eventually, I admitted what I had done. She was furious and told me that I could never see you or talk to her again. I tried to explain that what I had done was for your own good, but she didn't see it that way. She thought that I put you in danger."

"Okay, let me get this straight. Basically, Erzulie took pity on me and decided to help me by making me into some sort of witch. How exactly has she helped me? Grand-mere and I barely scrape by month after month. It hasn't exactly been easy. As for the spirits, they just mutter nonsense in my ears. They've been useless as well." It wasn't like me to get so confrontational with strangers, but Ms. Mae was really revealing a lot all at once.

"You haven't let them help you, Arelia. Your gift has unlimited potential to help people, to help yourself. Of course, you can use it for evil, but I know you, and I know your grand-mere, and that is never going to happen."

"I still don't understand why Grand-mere never told me that you work here," I hastily dug for more information.

"Your great great-great grand-mere worked for the LaPlante family, as did your great grand-mere. I continued the tradition while your grand-mere decided to move to the city," she explained.

"That's so weird that she would never tell me that." I was frightened at the prospect that maybe grand-mere did know more about me than I did.

"Arelia, you have to check out the bathroom," Sabrina rushed into the room out of breath, "and the dining room, it could seat over fifty people, the chairs are

covered in velvet and cut in gold.”

“Really?” I tried to sound excited while my mind was still processing the information it had been given.

“I wonder what our bedrooms look like.” Sabrina turned towards Ms. Mae. “Can we see them?” For good measure, she threw in a, “please.”

“Of course, dear,” Ms. Mae agreed. “I’ll take you right to them after you read over this orientation guide.” She handed each of us a thin book labeled Summer Plan.

“There is a welcome ball tonight? No way!” Sabrina was beyond excited. “Oh my God! We have to dress in period costume like from the 1850s. That is so cool!” She sounded like she was going to be a guest at the ball rather than working at the ball.

“It’s not a formal ball, just a casual welcome dance for the guests, but of course, all workers need to be dressed up. You girls will be making sure the guests feel welcome. There will be professional servers, but I want you to talk to the guests, make sure they have everything they need. Read over the rest of the guide, so you can get a feel for what types of activities you will be doing for the next two months. Your uniforms and costumes are already laid out in your bedroom. Come with me, and I’ll take you to your room.” Ms. Mae promptly led us down the hallway and up the spiral staircase.

Climbing the stairs, I got the distinct feeling that someone was keenly watching us but brushed it off as paranoia. As Ms. Mae guided us to our room, my mind was racing. I had so many questions that I wanted to fire at her in rapid succession, but I knew that I shouldn’t in front of Sabrina. How would I be able to explain this bizarre situation to her when I didn’t understand it myself?

“So, we have to share a room. I hope it’s big enough,” Sabrina predictably interrupted my thoughts.

“The other rooms are for the other help, and of course the guests.” We followed her into a spacious bedroom decorated with a canopied antique four-poster bed. Two plush satin-covered chairs sat in front of an enormous antique dressing table, complete with an oval mirror gilded in gold. In one corner, there was a satin-covered couch, and in the other corner sat antique chests that were

large enough to fit even the contents of all Sabrina's suitcases.

"The view is amazing." I was wholly mesmerized as I looked out of the four-pane window which had elaborate cream-colored lace curtains pushed to either side. The view spanned the entire property. In the distance, I could see the murky waters of Darkwood swamp as well as the silhouettes of graves in Darkwood cemetery. Despite the fact that the sun was shining, it felt as if there was a permanent gloom that lingered over the place.

"I am so jealous. This is way bigger and way more expensive than my room." Sabrina lazily stretched herself out on the bed. Great, I had to share a bed with her. That meant I had to put up with her infamous snoring all summer. Of course, she claimed that she didn't snore, but everyone says that.

"This room doesn't have a bathroom, but there is one down to the hall to the right," explained Ms. Mae. "I expect you girls to be down by eight and dressed in costume. Henri and I will meet you in the kitchen. The costumes are in that chest right there." She pointed to a chest sitting in the corner of the room. "If you have any other questions, please ask me or Henri. I have to get going and check on dinner."

ERZULIE

As Ms. Mae closed the door behind her, I wanted to beg her to stay and demand that she answer my questions. Sadly that would only cause more drama, which I didn't need right now. What I did need was a long, hot soak in what I imagined would be a very luxurious bathtub. At home, Grand-mere Bea and I only had a cramped shower that was barely big enough to stretch your arms out in. However, I knew the power of a hot bath from the times I slept over at Sabrina's house. When your long-lost aunt reveals that the voodoo spirit of love has blessed you with powers and it's confirmed that you are some kind of voodoo queen, all you really feel like doing is taking a hot bath.

"I really need to get a beauty nap in before we have to get ready." Sabrina yawned as she put on her silk sleep mask and crawled into the cream-colored duvet.

"I'm going to go take a bath," I announced loudly to an already snoring Sabrina.

As I made my way down the hall, I passed a row of white doors that all looked strikingly similar. Finally, I got to the end of the hall and took a right, where I saw a door with a bathroom sign on it. Walking into the bathroom was like walking into an entirely different world. The deep bathtub was set in marble and framed by wine-red silk drapes. Thick square candles were set out on the ledges of the tub, and a crystal chandelier hung directly above. Silk-covered chairs were placed in front of the ornately designed square mirror and a wide

array of bath soaps sat on top of the marble counter. To my right there was a shelf that held a stack of large cotton towels.

Since I was alone, I decided to call Grand-mere Bea and ask her what the hell was going on. The phone rang a few times before she picked up.

“Hello.”

“Hey Grand-mere it’s me, we made it to Darkwood.”

“What a relief, Arelia. Did you get a chance to grab some lunch?” She was making small talk, but the quiver in her voice was a dead giveaway that she knew what was coming.

“So I met Ms. Mae.” There was no point in beating around the bush. I needed some solid answers.

“Did you, now. How is she?”

“How is she? I have a long-lost great-aunt that works at Darkwood, I found out that you used to work here too, and I’m supposedly blessed by Erzulie. I’m kind of confused, that’s how I am.”

“Calm down, Arelia,” Grand-mere ordered firmly.

“How am I supposed to calm down when I have no idea what’s going on!”

“Please, let me explain,” she pleaded feebly.

“I’m listening.”

“You know that all I’ve ever wanted to do is protect you. I didn’t physically give birth to you, but I’m certain that no one can ever love you more than I do.”

“I know that you love me,” I felt myself relaxing somewhat. “I love you too, but what’s with all the secrets?”

“I didn’t approve of what Mae did. She shouldn’t have made an offering to Erzulie on your behalf. She knew that Erzulie would bless you.”

“How could she have known that?” Grand-mere sounded a bit paranoid.

“The LaRue women are powerful voodoo queens. Mae has always embraced it. I respect it, but I know that there always must be boundaries. The spirits are not to be messed with, and neither is any type of dark magic. I left Darkwood when your momma was born; I wanted her to live a normal life. I’ve raised you to respect the spirits, but to always keep a safe distance.”

“Look, I know what Ms. Mae did was wrong, but it was also wrong of you

not to tell me.”

“You’ve always known. How could you have not?”

She had a point. “I don’t know. I always thought that I was crazy, not blessed. I never wanted any of this either, but there isn’t much either of can do now is there?”

“Yes. You can come home, Arelia, and put an end to all of this right now,” she pleaded.

“I can’t. I’m here already, and the pay is too good. We need the money really badly. Besides, I’ll do what I’ve done all my life- ignore them.”

“You don’t understand, Arelia.” She sounded helplessly defeated.

“Then explain it to me,” I demanded.

“I know at Darkwood you will embrace your powers, and once you do you’ll always have certain responsibilities.”

“With all due respect, Grand-mere Bea, I’m sixteen, you don’t have to protect me anymore. I’ll be fine.”

“Promise, Arelia, that at the first sign of danger, you’ll come home.”

“From the looks of it, the only danger here is the LaPlantes having too much money, I’ll be fine.”

“Things aren’t always what they seem, and once your heart gets involved, there ain’t no way you can turn back.” She was giving me one of her ominous speeches again.

“I promise I’ll be careful, just don’t keep things from me anymore. Is there anything else you’ve been hiding from me?”

“No more secrets,” Grand-mere Bea softly responded.

I knew she was lying. I detected that she was hiding something more from me, but arguing about it over the phone wasn’t going to force her to spit it out if she didn’t really want to. I would find out the truth for myself. Right now, all I needed to do was convince grand-mere that I was safe. She was the only family that I had, and I couldn’t afford to alienate her.

After we said our good-byes, I toyed with the bathtub taps until I found the perfect water temperature. As the tub was filling up, I threw in some strawberry bubble bath and proceeded to rip off my sweat-drenched tank top. I peeled off

my jeans, which in retrospect, were an awful idea to wear considering the summer heat. I shook my hair free from the too-tight ponytail and sank into the soothing bubbles. The warm water embraced my skin and the bubbles were a welcome change from the cheap soap I was accustomed to. I felt my eyes closing and my body getting heavy.

“Feels lovely, doesn’t it?” whispered a delicate voice.

I looked frantically around the bathroom. “Who’s there?” I knew it had to be a spirit. I felt it.

“We met a long time ago, but you don’t seem to remember me, do you?” The voice sounded slightly insulted. “Let me refresh your memory.”

“Erzulie!” I gasped as a voluptuous caramel-skinned woman appeared before me. Her long dark hair was wrapped around a flowered headdress, and her pink gown was adorned with fine jewels. Around her neck there hung strands of colorful beads varying in length, and both her arms were covered in thick, gold bracelets. I know that I should have been scared, but I was rather fascinated. It’s not every day that the voodoo spirit of love interrupts your bath, so I was willing to listen to what she had to say.

“So you *do* remember me?” Her hazel eyes filled with childish delight.

“Well yeah, Grand-mere Bea has pictures of you at home.” I slid deeper into the bubbles. Despite the fact that she was a spirit and had probably already seen me naked on several occasions, I was still utterly self-conscious.

“Such a pretty girl, and yet always hiding,” she reached out to touch my cheek. “You’re always hiding from yourself and others. You haven’t been using the gifts I blessed you with, have you?” Her soft voice questioned with authority.

“I’m too afraid,” I admitted. “I’m afraid of a lot of things.” I never opened up to people I just met, especially when I was naked, but spirits technically didn’t count as people, did they?

“I know you are.” Erzulie’s voice took on a sympathetic tone, “but you are needed here. You are the only one who can help. You are the only one who is strong enough. There must always be balance in nature, but it seems that sadness has reigned here for far too longer. I blessed you because you are so strong yet so fragile; you have the balance needed to be a great voodoo queen. But you

need to start using what I have given you. Don't worry, it will come naturally. The spirits will guide you. I will always guide you. Whenever you are in trouble, call upon me, and I will always be willing to help. Remember, you always have my blessing. Every part of you is blessed."

I unexpectedly opened my eyes. Had I been asleep? What did Erzulie expect me to do with her advice? I wasn't sure who I was supposed to help when I was struggling just to keep my own head above water.

How long had I been out? The clock on the wall told me that I had been in the bathroom for over an hour. I needed to start getting ready for the ball because being late on my first day wasn't an option. I leapt out of the deep bathtub, grabbed a towel and wrapped it tightly around me. After gathering my jeans and tank top, I opened the door and looked both ways. Thankfully, the coast was clear. I sprinted down the hall and rushed into my room. "Sabrina, why didn't you come get me!" I demanded as I slammed the door behind me.

"Maybe because I'm not Sabrina," a shirtless guy who appeared to be around my age politely informed me. His intense, dark eyes looked at me in amusement, as I glanced over his slender yet muscular build. It looked as if Sabrina had found her summer toy.

"Okay, so where's Sabrina?" I confusedly questioned. "And why are you in our room?"

"*Your* room?" His full lips broke out in a seductive smile as he ran his fingers through his shiny, dark hair. "The last time I checked this was *my* room," he coolly advised me.

I scanned the area and realized that it was completely different from my room. For one thing, it was much more elaborate and was filled with books and antiques. I felt myself blushing as it became painfully obvious that I was standing in a stranger's room in a towel, accusing him of invading my bedroom. "I'm sorry," I stuttered as I backed up towards the door.

"It's okay." He swiftly came up behind me and opened the door. "I wish you luck in finding Sabrina." His eyes danced, obviously taking delight in my discomfort.

"Yeah, okay," I muttered. By the time I found my room; my face was

burning from embarrassment.

“Looks like someone spent too much time in a steamy tub,” Sabrina joked when she saw me. “You look like a lobster. What happened?”

I looked at myself in the mirror and ran my hands over my fiery face. “Nothing, I kept getting the hot and cold taps on the tub mixed up. My bath ended up being too hot,” I lied. I didn’t want to tell her what had really happened because that would prompt her to go in search of the shirtless guy, and we really had to start getting ready.

“You have to check out these costumes!” Sabina exclaimed as she dramatically swirled around the room with a nineteenth century ball gown. Yes, she really did swirl like Mary Poppins would have, or Eliza Doolittle from that play Grand-mere loved so much.

I had to admit the costumes were gorgeous. There had to be at least twenty gowns in total. Although each one varied in color, they were all intricately decorated, cut off the shoulder, and had plunging necklines.

“I’ve always wanted to wear a corset,” Sabrina dreamily gushed. “My future husband doesn’t have a chance tonight.”

I rolled my eyes yet again. I didn’t want to interrupt her fairytale, but we had a job to do. “You remember that we are *working* at this thing, don’t you?” I reminded her.

“Oh, don’t be so silly, Arelia, of course I remember. So which one are you going to wear- and what are you going to do with that hair?” She pointed to my wet hair which was already settling into a pattern of frizzy waves.

I examined the dresses and finally settled on a red and black silk one that was trimmed in lace and embroidered with pearls.

“That’s cute,” Sabrina decided as she eyed the dress I had chosen. “What do you think about this one?” She held up a puffy pink dress that looked like it weighed more than she did.

“It is so you.” I had to agree that the dress did have her name written all over it.

“Thought so,” Sabrina looked pleased. She held it against her body and started swirling again. “You’re going to let me do your hair and makeup, right?”

she asked.

“Sure, go for it.” I might as well let her do the hard work.

After a lot of fussing and complications, we finally managed to help each other lace up our corsets and get into our dresses. How women had managed to do this every day was beyond me. I never thought I would ever wear something called a petticoat. I felt ridiculous and a bit self-conscious as we stood in front of the mirror. The corset had slimmed my waist down even further and gave the illusion that I actually had some sort of chest.

“I look so hot.” Sabrina boosted up her large boobs even further. “I wish I was as skinny as you though,” she added as she eyed my waist enviously. Sabrina was always on some sort of diet that she could never stick to. She was by no means large, but she wasn’t the mythical size zero she strived to be either. I was probably skinny because there was never enough food around the house.

“Sit,” Sabrina commanded aggressively. She whipped open her Louis Vuitton makeup case and started working her magic. What felt like an eternity later, my hair and makeup were complete. “Look.” She directed me to the mirror.

As I peered into the mirror, even I had to reluctantly admit that I looked pretty. Sabrina had worked my olive skin to its fullest advantage so that it looked radiant. All its imperfections were masked with concealer and foundation. She had highlighted my cheekbones in a soft peach blush and played up my large eyes with layers of mascara and strategically placed eyeliner. My lipstick matched the color of my ball gown and my wild waves had been tamed and styled into an elaborate updo. The only complaint I had was the hideously razor-sharp butterfly hairpin Sabrina had thrust into my hair.

“I know. I know. I’m good.” Sabrina took delight in her magical makeup skills as she watched my reaction.

“You’re more than good. I don’t think I’ve ever looked better. Thank you so much.” I gave her a tight hug.

“No problem, I’ll be ready in a few minutes,” she lied. I knew that few minutes translated into a few hours and we would be late.

“I’m going to head down and meet with Ms. Mae and Henri, so I can figure out what we are supposed to be doing.” I silently prayed that she wouldn’t make

me wait until she was done getting ready.

“Good idea, I’ll meet you down there,” Sabrina happily agreed as she coated herself with foundation.

“Please, don’t take forever, it’s our first day.”

“You worry way too much, Arelia.” Sabrina easily shrugged off my warning and started playing connect-the-dots with her concealer. She was prone to breaking out when it was humid outside and usually spent forty minutes meticulously camouflaging any offending spots.

I ignored her as I shut the door behind me. I did not worry too much. One of us had to be responsible. To Sabrina, this whole thing may have been a vacation, but to me it was a fine line between eating Spam all year and actually being able to afford the occasional pizza. When you count pennies and pray that your stinky landlord won’t kick you out of your crappy apartment, ordering a pizza is like eating caviar. Of course, Sabrina constantly insisted on helping out, but I never accepted her help. She was my best friend, not my sugar mama.

I made my way to the kitchen in hopes of catching Ms. Mae alone. I wanted to grill her for more answers about the whole voodoo business. All the chandeliers on the bottom floor were brightly lit, making the house look ethereal. The kitchen was buzzing with servers and cooks while the smell of seafood gumbo filled the air. Everyone was so busy that it gave me the perfect opportunity to approach Ms. Mae.

“Oh my,” gasped Ms. Mae as she took a look at me. “You look exactly like your momma did the last time I saw her.”

“Except I’m not pregnant,” I pointed out.

“Yes, well there is that one difference,” she laughed as she iced a large red velvet cake. “Where is Sabrina?”

“She’ll be down in a minute,” I replied, knowing that it would be a few hours before she made her grand entrance.

“I suppose you want to ask me more questions, don’t you?”

“Well, I’m not totally surprised by the news. I mean, I knew all along that there had to be something up with me. Do you hear them too?”

“Yes,” she firmly replied. “But in order for me to make contact it requires a

great deal of effort. I am not as nearly as powerful as you.”

“Why didn’t Grand-mere Bea tell me that her whole family used to work here?”

Ms. Mae examined me in silence for a few seconds before finally deciding to respond. “Not everyone thinks the same or chooses the same path in life. Your grand-mere did what she thought was best by starting her own life. She’s never been one for secrets or the LaPlante family.”

“She told me that they’re cursed and evil,” I whispered.

Ms. Mae let out a hearty laugh. “One can argue what they want about the LaPlante family, but everyone deserves a chance. Don’t you agree, Arelia?”

“What do you mean?” I was confused by her question.

“No one deserves to suffer for eternity.”

“I guess not,” I said still a bit unsure of what she was implying.

“Arelia, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes,” gasped Henri in exaggeration.

“Thanks,” I shrugged, as I tried to brush off the compliment. Getting praise always embarrassed me.

He went over to Ms. Mae and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “The guests are starting to arrive.”

“Well, then you better take Arelia over, so she can greet them and show them some hospitality.” She gave him a loving glance.

“Wait. Are you two...?” I asked.

“Arelia, Henri is your great-uncle. Henri, your lovely niece is all grown-up, isn’t she?”

Henri bowed, “I suppose you don’t remember me, do you?”

“No, not really,” I reluctantly admitted.

“Well, this summer will give us a perfect opportunity to get reacquainted,” predicted Henri. He stretched out his arm for me to take. “Now, come with me, so we can greet the guests. I’ve written their names all down here for you and Sabrina. That should make things a bit easier.”

“But what should I say to them?” I wasn’t great at making small talk with strangers.

“I’m sure you’ll figure it all out.” Henri gave me a quick wink as he guided

me to the front of the house.

DRAG ME TO THE BALL

Henri left me to wait for the guests on the lit front porch, with its shiny marble and elegant steps. I looked over the clipboard and read through the names. Mr. and Mrs. Dumpty, from New York; the Smiths, from Boston; the Gopals from California. The list went on. Guests were coming in from all over the country to get a glimpse of Darkwood. I was getting restless waiting alone, and there was still no sign of Sabrina.

In the distance I saw several cars pull up and people get out. The plantation had hired valets so the guests wouldn't have to worry about parking their own cars. I wondered where the LaPlante family was, and if they would be making an appearance anytime soon. As the guests made their way down the oak tree lined path leading up to the house, it was clear they were mesmerized by the sheer beauty of both the property and the house.

A bulky couple with a chubby child in tow was the first to make their way up to the house. Their faces were sunburnt from the New Orleans heat. Their coordinated Hawaiian shirts and khaki shorts made it obvious that they didn't care if they were going to a ball.

"Hi, I'm Arelia!" I said enthusiastically as they approached me. "Welcome to Darkwood Plantation. What are your names?"

"Well, aren't you a pretty little thing," observed the man. His beady eyes scanned over me as he extended his sweaty palm. "I always tell the Mrs. that if she put in an effort, she wouldn't be half as bad. We're the Dumptys."

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” I faked interest.

“It sure smells good. I wonder what kind of Southern food they’re going to surprise us with,” squealed Mrs. Dumpty with excitement in her beady, blue eyes.

“I’m sure whatever it is will be delicious,” I predicted. “And what is your name?” I asked the chubby blond boy who appeared to be no older than ten.

“I’m Ben. I’m here to see the alligators and ghosts,” he responded in a matter of fact tone.

“Sure son, but you have to let us get a few Hurricanes in us, before we take you to see any swamps,” Mr. Dumpty reminded him.

“Please, make yourselves at home and head inside, a staff member will take you to the ballroom,” I advised them.

“Sounds excellent!” Mr. Dumpty boldly brushed by me and gave my butt a slight squeeze.

I clenched my fists and took a deep breath. “Have fun in there,” I shouted after him.

Next to arrive was an elderly couple from Maine. They were well-dressed and introduced themselves as the Scotts. They were in New Orleans visiting their son, who was a doctor, and thought that it might be fun to spend some time at Darkwood Plantation. After them, the Gopals arrived. They were a young couple from California and were in New Orleans for their honeymoon.

“Am I late?” Sabrina rushed to the porch surrounded by a cloud of Chanel 5.

“Finally! Where have you been? All of the guests are already inside.”

“Thanks for covering for me. I got so sweaty in this dress that I decided to take a quick bath which took way longer than expected. I mean the bathroom is to die for. Of course, then I had to re-do my makeup.” She went on to explain how two minutes had turned into almost three hours.

“Okay, I get it. You look beautiful, by the way,” I added.

“Do you think?” she asked, fishing for a compliment.

“Yes, you’re gorgeous, and you’re my best friend, but if you don’t help me tonight, I swear I will kill you,” I joked. “Some creepy guy from New York grabbed my butt.” I vividly rehashed what Mr. Dumpty had done as I guided her

into the house and towards the kitchen.

“Is he hot?” Sabrina asked as exhilaration filled her blue eyes.

“Eww, no. Not even a bit.”

The kitchen was buzzing with waiters, cooks and bartenders. Pots sizzled and bubbled with red beans, creole jambalaya, seafood gumbo, and gravy. Counters were covered with brisket, grilled shrimp, flutes of champagne and colorful cocktail glasses. It smelled heavenly and gave me the urge to stuff my face with every dish until my corset exploded. The amount of food seemed endless and almost excessive, considering that it was enough for a large army rather than just a group of tourists. It was the epitome of extravagance. If this was an informal ball, I wondered what a *formal* ball at Darkwood would be like.

“Hurricanes are my favorite!” Sabrina eagerly eyed her surroundings to see if the coast was clear. Seeing that Ms. Mae and Henri were nowhere to be seen, she grabbed a cocktail and chugged it down.

“Sabrina!” I furiously hissed. “What are you doing?”

“Relax Arelia, we’re on vacation.” She casually grabbed another cocktail and drank it. “You don’t mind, do you?” She winked at a muscular blond waiter who was around our age.

“No, I sure don’t,” replied the waiter. “My name’s Ivan, in case you’re interested in meeting me for a drink later.” He purposely loosened his tie and undid a second button on his shirt. It was an obvious attempt to attract Sabrina’s attention.

“You are very cute, but I don’t date the help,” Sabrina snarled.

“I’ll make sure it’s worth your while.” Ivan casually threw her another wink.

“Really, maybe I will take you up on the offer.” Sabrina placed her hands on his arm and gave it a squeeze.

“Okay, that’s enough,” I said as I steered her away from the counter. “If Ms. Mae or Henri see you...”

“I don’t think your friend here likes me very much,” Ivan openly challenged me with his grey eyes. His gruff voice was filled with contempt.

“I don’t know you, why wouldn’t I like you?” I snapped back. “I’m just trying to do my job.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t worry so much and should mind your own business.” Ivan clearly was hungry for a fight, or at least an argument. For whatever reason, he had his sights set on me.

“What the hell! What’s your problem?” I didn’t do anything to this guy, and he was being a mega-jerk. Obviously, he had issues.

“Is everything alright in here, girls?” Ms. Mae interrupted our little scene.

“Everything is fine.” I quickly gave Sabrina a nudge prompting her to stand up straight.

“Yes, just fabulous,” Sabrina giggled in a sugary voice.

“Good to hear.” Ms. Mae eyed Sabrina with suspicion. I knew that she knew what Sabrina had done, but luckily she let it go.

“The food has been laid out in the serving room, so the guests have the option of eating. There is no formal dinner tonight. Some of them are already in the ballroom dancing and having drinks. I need you girls to go there and make sure that everyone is happy and to answer any questions they may have. If you read the guides I gave you, you should now know Darkwood’s basic history. If you don’t know the answer to a question, find me or Henri. Some of the guests have children, so please keep an eye on them in case they decide to wander the property. It can be awfully frightening in the dark,” explained Ms. Mae. I tried to take mental notes of everything she was saying.

“Got it,” I affirmed.

“Not a problem.” Sabrina’s doubt-filled voice was a clear giveaway that she hadn’t heard a word Ms. Mae had said.

“I know you girls will do great.” Ms. Mae looked upon us approvingly before she left the kitchen.

After she left, Sabrina turned her attention back to Ivan. “If you want any chance with me, stop being a jerk to my friend.” She took another drink from the tray he was holding and carelessly tossed it back.

Ivan didn’t say anything, but I knew from his expression that he was doing everything in his power not to make another snarky remark. “Sure, I’ll catch you later then,” he directed his comment at Sabrina and refused to acknowledge me.

“Yeah, for sure,” Sabrina giggled and pulled me away. “He is so hot, isn’t

he? Did you see the size of his chest and that cleft in his chin? I usually hate bum chins, but it makes him even hotter.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “You can’t be serious, he’s such a…”

“Please, you think all guys are jerks.”

How could I explain to her that I got an appalling vibe from Ivan? It wasn’t your typical jerk radar. It was something more than that. It was something threatening and dangerous.

As we walked into the ballroom, the sound of classical piano music greeted us. The room looked spectacular with its chandeliers lit and floors polished. The guests seemed to be having a good time mingling amongst themselves, making small talk about where they were from and why they decided to spend time at Darkwood. I watched as Mr. and Mrs. Dumpty slammed down cocktail after cocktail. Mr. Dumpty caught me staring and came up to us.

“So, we meet again,” he slurred as he stared at Sabrina.

“Gross,” Sabrina muttered.

“You’ve got to be the prettiest thing I’ve seen in the state of Louisiana,” he continued to speak stupidly, while his eyes stayed glued to Sabrina’s pushed-up chest.

“You’re so sweet,” said Sabrina. No matter how repulsive a guy was if he gave Sabrina a compliment, she melted like ice cream. Besides, the three cocktails she gulped down earlier were probably taking effect right about now.

“Would you do a fat guy from New York a favor and dance with him?” asked Mr. Dumpty, as he bowed in an exaggerated manner.

“Why I would be delighted,” responded Sabrina channeling Scarlett O’Hara. “I only hope your wife won’t mind.”

“Nah, she’ll be fine with it.” Mr. Dumpty turned around to make sure his wife was busy flirting with a cocktail waiter.

Mr. Dumpty clumsily escorted Sabrina to the floor where he proceeded to hold her close to him and blatantly stare at her chest. Well at least one guest was taken care of, I thought. I started to relax and sway to the music when I realized someone was missing. Wait, where was the Dumpty’s son? Amidst the cocktails and dancing, the Dumptys seemed to have forgotten about him. He was nowhere

in sight, so I decided to interrupt Mrs. Dumpty's flirt session.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Dumpty," I tapped her on the shoulder.

"Wait a minute," she slurred without turning around. "You really can balance a spoon on your nose? Nah, I don't believe you," she challenged the waiter.

"Mrs. Dumpty," I tried again. "Where's Ben?"

"Ben? Who's Ben? His name is Andy, isn't it?" She pinched the waiter's cheek and licked her thin dry lips.

I was horrified. How could she not even remember her own son? "Ben, your son," I reminded her.

"Oh, right. He must be sitting in some corner somewhere," she offered. "He loves corners."

"Thanks," I halfheartedly muttered as I went to search for Ben. If anything happened to him, I knew that the Dumptys would blame Darkwood, and I would be the one held responsible. That would mean *sayonara* summer job and hello homelessness. I searched all corners of the ballroom but couldn't find Ben. The Gopals were engaged in lively conversation with Ms. Mae who seemed to be enjoying herself. There was no point getting her involved.

"Ben, Ben, are you here?" I gently whispered while desperately scanning the dance floor. I headed towards the spiral staircase where I thought I heard a whimper.

"At least you care about me," breathlessly pouted a sad little voice.

I knelt down and found Ben cleverly hidden under the spiral staircase. His chubby cheeks were red, and his beady eyes were full of tears. When he saw me, he pulled down his Yankees baseball cap over his eyes as an attempt to hide his weeping. "Hey Ben." I crawled under the staircase and sat beside him. "What's wrong?"

"I came here to see the alligators and the ghosts, but all Mom and Dad want to do is see the hurricane," he complained. "Here's the swamp," he showed me a map of Darkwood with its swamp circled in red.

I had to laugh. "I think you mean drink a Hurricane."

"Whatever, they never pay attention to me anyways."

"I'm sure they do," I offered. "After they're done drinking their Hurricanes,

I'm sure they'll take you to see the alligators and ghosts. There's still plenty of time to see them."

"Tonight?" His eyes brightened. "Look, it's not even a ten minute walk. I can read maps, and this map tells me that we can be there in no time."

"Well, maybe not tonight, but maybe we can do something else."

"I would really like a Coke," he requested.

"If that is what you would like, that is what I will get you. Wait here, I'll be right back."

I went to the kitchen in search of Ben's Coke. It was still full of staff shouting at one another, arguing over whether or not the dessert should be put out now or later. "Hey," I said to Ivan, even though I didn't ever want to talk to him. "Is there any Coke around here?"

"It depends what variety you're looking for, liquid or powder?"

"You know what I'm talking about, where is the Coke?" I sharply demanded.

"Over there, queen," he pointed to the counter where cans of soda were laid out. I grabbed one without thanking him and hurried off to deliver it to Ben. I sensed that someone had an agenda to make my time at Darkwood a living nightmare.

Back in the ballroom, the party was in full swing. The music had gotten louder, and the guests livelier. I skimmed the room for Sabrina since I could see Mr. Dumpty arguing with the cocktail waiter Mrs. Dumpty had been flirting with. When I finally spotted Sabrina, her head was thrown back like someone had told her an infinitely hilarious joke and her right hand was on the shoulder of the guy beside her. I bet she was flirting with another guest.

I started to walk towards her, but stopped dead in my tracks when I saw the profile of the guest. It was *him*. It was the shirtless guy who had seen me in my towel, only now he was wearing a shirt and a black tuxedo jacket. I felt my face getting hot, and my mouth parched, thinking back to what had happened. The black jacket outlined the broadness of his shoulders and his toned waist. His dark, shaggy hair glistened as it fell below his ears and flipped out slightly at the ends. What was wrong with me? It was just a guy, and besides, he was obviously interested in Sabrina.

I stood there frozen like an absolute idiot. Not because I thought he would recognize me, but because I didn't want to interrupt Sabrina. I knew she would pout if I got in the middle of her flirt fest with formerly-shirtless guy. Besides, I had to get back to Ben. Unfortunately, Mr. Dumpty interrupted my thoughts. "Hey there pretty lady, do a fat guy from New York a favor and dance with him?"

"I really can't," I replied quicker than I should have.

"Please," he was starting to brazenly beg, "have some pity on me. My wife is flirting with a cocktail waiter."

"I can't dance," I attempted to get out of his offer. It wasn't a complete fabrication. I was the worst dancer ever. I had absolutely no rhythm and was prone to tripping over my feet. Given the fact that I was in a massive ball gown, it would only make matters worse.

"It's not so tough, I'm sure you'll catch on." Mr. Dumpty's drunken voice was so loud that the entire room was starting to stare.

"Fine," I mumbled. I placed the can of Coke on a nearby table. Mr. Dumpty put his arm around my waist and practically dragged me onto the dance floor. I held my breath praying that I wouldn't have to smell the gumbo/Hurricane fumes that were radiating from him.

"See, it's not so hard now is it?" Mr. Dumpty was trying to encourage me as he dragged me from one end of the dance floor to the other. I felt like a helpless rag doll in his arms as he swung me from side to side. He started humming along with the music and brought his hand dangerously close to my butt. Repulsion filled me as he tried to peer seductively into my eyes and puckered his lips. I heard some of the guests starting to snicker as I struggled not to get bounced back and forth by his enormous belly. I was mortified as he picked up the pace and I almost tripped over my gown. My face started to flame with embarrassment. I prayed that somehow I would become invisible.

"Would you allow me to cut in?" Formerly-shirtless guy swiftly tapped Mr. Dumpty on the shoulder.

"I don't know. I'm having a great time." Mr. Dumpty was determined to keep torturing me, as he gave me another dramatic twirl. I felt the room

spinning, as the faces around me took delight in my humiliation.

“I’m sure there are plenty of other guests that would love to dance with a fine dancer such as yourself.” Flattery obviously worked on Mr. Dumpty as he stopped swooshing me around and let formerly-shirtless guy cut in.

I immediately pulled away. “I don’t feel like dancing anymore!” I snapped at formerly-shirtless guy and hurried away. I know I was being childish and should have at least thanked him for stepping in and rescuing me from Mr. Dumpty, but I was mortified over what just happened. I felt like an utter fool. I took a few minutes to compose myself before I searched for Sabrina.

“That was so tragic!” Sabrina shouted as she waved me over. Somehow, she had managed to drag formerly-shirtless guy back to her side.

Formerly-shirtless guy looked me straight in the eyes and smiled. He looked entertained as I ignored him. “I have to go help out a guest!” I yelled at her from across the room. “I have to go give him a Coke.”

“Come back when you’re done.” Sabrina had already turned her attention back to the guy.

“Sure.” I grabbed the Coke from the table where I had left it. It was a lie because there was no way I was going to talk to formerly-shirtless guy after he had seen me in a bath towel and attempted to save me from Mr. Dumpty. Walking towards the staircase where I had left Ben, I could feel someone watching me. Maybe I was being paranoid, but I could just sense formerly-shirtless guy’s probing eyes watching me as I walked away. What was it about him? There was something different, but I just couldn’t put my finger on what it was. I had to snap out of it; otherwise I was going to start sounding like Sabrina.

“Ben, I got your Coke,” I announced as I kneeled down and peered under the staircase. “Ben?” There was silence. “Where are you?” When I saw that Ben wasn’t under the staircase, I went into panic mode. He must have gone upstairs. I ran up the stairs and went inside every open bedroom. I searched under the beds, and behind the antique chests, but there was no sign of Ben. “Ben, Ben!” I continued to shout.

It was useless. He obviously wasn’t there. I needed to think. Where could he have gone to this time of night? Fear gripped me, as I thought about Ben’s

obsession to see the alligators and ghosts. Could he have actually headed towards the swamp alone? I ran into my bedroom and pulled out the Summer Plan. I flipped through the pages until I found a map. Ben had been right, the swamp wasn't that far away from the house, but it was dark and what lived out there was dangerous.

Map in hand, I flew down the stairs, almost tripping on my gown. When I reached the bottom, Ben was still nowhere in sight. Sabrina was holding a champagne glass and slow dancing with formerly-shirtless guy. I decided not to interrupt her because explaining what had happened would waste time. I headed out the front door and made my way to the swamp.

WHERE ARE YOU?

I was lucky enough to have a bright full moon on my side as I ran down the oak-lined path that was supposed to lead me to Darkwood swamp. The night was humid and hot. Wearing what felt like a fourteen-pound gown with a corset and layers of petticoats was not helping me any either.

“Ben, Ben!” I shouted, hoping that he had gotten scared and had decided to head back or at least sit under a tree until someone came to look for him. When I signed up for this job, I hadn’t thought it would turn out to be a babysitting gig. While Sabrina was having the time of her life with formerly-shirtless guy, I was running around in the woods. I told myself to suck it up and go on, no one was forcing me to stay here.

After running around in circles, I decided to stop and read the map. I wasn’t very good with directions and something told me that I was on the wrong path since I couldn’t see any of the cypress trees that were typical of swampy areas. All I could see were more oak trees. The path had long disappeared behind me, and now I was deep into a fully wooded area. The trees covered the moonlight, cloaking me in darkness. It seemed as if the oaks were alive and vigilantly paying attention to my every move. The chirps of exotic birds hummed in my ears as I reached under my gown and took out my cell so that I could actually read the map. I was fortunate to have squeezed it between my stomach and a petticoat, so it hadn’t fallen out while I had been running. The hoot of an owl interrupted my thoughts, and I knew that I had company.

“Hello, Arelia,” whispered a deep voice that I knew wasn’t human. “Are you lost?” It asked.

“Yes, I am,” I replied, knowing that it was a spirit. If Ms. Mae and Erzulie were right, maybe it could help me find Ben.

“Where are you going to at this time of night?” it asked. I skimmed the area and realized that the voice was coming from a large, grey owl. I know to most people, a talking owl would sound crazy, but growing up where I did, it was pretty much normal.

“Brise?” I cautiously asked. Brise was the spirit of the woods and hills. Grand-mere had told stories of how his physical appearance was so terrifying that he liked to take the shape of an owl instead. I also knew that he was essentially a gentle spirit. I would have to take my chances and ask him for help.

“Yes, you know my name?” Brise sounded extremely pleased.

“Of course, I know your name. I need your help.”

“Why would I want to help Arelia LaRue?”

“You know my name too, that means you’ve heard about me. It may also mean that you care and want to help.” I knew that I was being too hopeful.

“Erzulie says many great things about you. She’s so beautiful,” Brise’s voice was wistful. “Do you think she would ever be interested in an ugly spirit like me?” He prodded as he tilted his head in anticipation. He was obviously waiting for some kind of affirmation.

Go figure, even spirits had self-esteem and dating issues. “Of course,” I replied carefully. The last thing I wanted to do was offend a spirit. “Why wouldn’t she be interested in you?”

“Well, there are so many other handsome spirits around; I don’t think that she would be attracted to me.” He went on lamenting how difficult it was being one of the ugliest spirits around.

I thought back to all the times Sabrina had forced me to watch America’s Next Top Model and pulled out a line that Tyra would have probably used if a model was having a breakdown. “Well, I personally think you’re very handsome. You have a unique look that no other spirit has, I’m sure Erzulie would love to date someone so distinctive. It’s true. I’ve seen pictures of you. I’ll tell you what,

if you help me, I'll put in a good word for you. I'll make sure that Erzulie gives you a chance," I offered humbly.

"Really?" He let out a loud hoot.

"Yes, really," I said. "So can you help me?"

"Yes," he replied. "What is it that you are searching for?"

"I have to find the swamp. I'm looking for a child, I think he's there. I know that he's scared and lost," I spat out before he could change his mind and decide not to help me.

Brise laughed a deep, throaty laugh that shook all the trees surrounding us. "That's such an easy request, Arelia. Just look beneath you."

"Beneath me?" I asked terrified that I would see Ben's chubby, limp body there. I looked down and was relieved to find his baseball cap. "He was here?"

"Yes," replied Brise. He was so nonchalant about the whole thing, like he dealt with situations such as these on a daily basis.

"Where is he now?" I demanded.

"Pick up the hat. It will show you the way," he advised.

"I don't understand." I was puzzled as I picked up the hat. I felt silence fill the air. "Brise!" I shouted, but he was gone. I was alone again. I forced myself to calm down and think about what Brise had said. The hat would show me the way. I ran my fingers over the cap and closed my eyes and concentrated on Ben's face. With my eyes still closed I made my way through the woods, until I could smell Spanish moss.

I opened my eyes and saw that the moonlight was back, only to reveal the eerie outline of Spanish moss as it dangled from rows of cypress trees. All around me the trees breathed and silently spoke a secret language that I had no hope of ever understanding. This had to mean that the swamp was near. I ran towards the trees and felt the ground turn to mush as I crossed it. I can't explain how but I felt that Ben was near. "Ben!" I shouted.

"Hello," whispered a scared little voice.

"Ben, it's Arelia. We met at the party, remember? I went to get you a Coke, but you disappeared. Where are you?"

"I wanted to see the alligators and ghosts, but I got lost," he pouted.

“Well, you came awfully close to finding the swamp, a few more feet and you would have been right there. Where are you?” I repeated the question.

“I’m right here,” he said. “Look to your right.”

I rapidly turned to my right and saw Ben’s chubby frame slumped against a cypress tree.

“Oh, thank God!” I shouted as I started to run towards him. As I got closer, I stopped dead in my tracks. Dangling from the tree Ben sat under; lurking above his head, there was a cottonmouth snake. In Louisiana everyone knows that cottonmouths are deadly. Its ugly body must have been at least sixty inches in length and was patterned in a yellow and khaki design. I didn’t want to freak Ben out so I decided to remain composed.

“Ben, don’t move,” I commanded in a cool manner. I walked towards him being extra cautious of each step I took.

“Why what’s wrong?” he asked innocently. He started to rise.

“Don’t move!” I nervously screeched, a little louder than I had hoped.

“You’re scaring me.” He ignored my advice and took a step backwards and glanced above to see what I was staring at. “A snake!” he hollered. His beady eyes started to bulge, “I don’t like snakes. I like alligators!”

“Ben, it’s okay.” I tried to remain collected even though my heart was racing a hundred miles per minute.

Ben ignored me and continued to move backwards. It was clear that the snake did not appreciate the commotion, so it started to inch closer to him.

“Areliia, what’s happening?” he demanded. “The ground is moving.”

It took me a moment to realize that Ben had stepped into a pocket of the quicksand that was common in most swampy areas. The earth below him was sucking him down at a rapid pace. I had to do something now. As I ran towards him, I could see the cottonmouth was getting even more irritated- so much, in fact, that it had coiled itself around Ben’s arm.

“Areliia, help me!” At this point, Ben was in utter terror, as the snake inched his way up to his neck, and the ground pulled him in even further.

When I finally got to him, I made sure not to step in the quicksand. I stretched out my arm for Ben to hold on to. He gripped my arm, as I tried to pull

him out. I tried with every fiber in my body, but it was useless. Ben was a chubby kid and probably weighed more than I did, which prompted my body to land with a giant thud backwards.

“Areliia, ouch it bit me!” Ben yelled in pain. The snake, having gotten its revenge, uncoiled itself from Ben.

“Hold on. I’m going to get you out,” I assured him. I needed some kind of rope. Not quite sure what I was doing, I took off my gown and started to twist it into a makeshift rope.

“Ben, grab the gown,” I commanded as I threw it to him. He gripped the gown and I started to pull again. I pulled with all my strength, but it was futile. I just wasn’t strong enough. I tried harder, and then if by some miracle, Ben started to move from out of the quicksand, someone was helping me pull him out. I turned around to confirm my suspicion and saw that it was formerly-shirtless guy. His eyes were fixed intently on Ben and his smooth skin gleamed under the moonlight. Together we managed to drag Ben out of the hole and onto solid land.

“Thanks,” I mouthed to formerly-shirtless guy, not wanting to get into why he had followed me. Ben was starting to foam at the mouth from the snake bite, and I needed to help him. Formerly-shirtless guy nodded in acknowledgement as he dragged Ben to a clearing.

“Areliia,” Ben gasped. “What’s happening?”

“Nothing, Ben,” I tried to sooth him. I got on my knees and inspected the bloated area where the bite mark was. I closed my eyes and concentrated. I asked Erzulie to help me close the wound and stop the poison. “You’re going to be fine,” I assured him. I continued to concentrate. He had to get better, he just had to. If what everyone was telling me was true and I was a voodoo queen who could talk to spirits, surely they could help me save a scared little boy.

I opened my eyes a few minutes later, but the wound was still there, and Ben’s temperature was rapidly rising. I could see formerly-shirtless guy eyeing me with intrigue. I felt silly all of a sudden thinking that he probably thought I was crazy. Oh well, it didn’t matter. I had to help Ben. I closed my eyes again and focused harder. Using every inch of my being, I was determined to heal Ben.

I remembered the healing song grand-mere used to sing to me when high fevers got a hold of me:

Wash away the pain

Wash away the ugliness

I free you from the pain

Sweep way the pain

Make an offering in blood and tears

Wash away the pain

Set you free from the hurt

My child I wash away the pain

Crap, I had to make an offering, but with what? At home, Grand-mere Bea used to light candles and mix herbs whenever I got sick. Where the hell was I supposed to find candles and herbs out here? Remembering that offerings could vary, I anxiously ripped the stupid butterfly pin out of my hair, and used it to prick my finger. The slight pain gave me an adrenaline rush as a spot of blood sprung from my finger. I brought my finger to Ben's bite and passed my blood over it. Afterwards, I wrapped my hands around his neck and closed my eyes. Once again, I repeated the chant:

Wash away the pain

Wash away the ugliness

I free you from the pain

Sweep way the pain

Make an offering in blood and tears

Wash away the pain

Set you free from the hurt

My child I wash away the pain

A few minutes later, I opened my eyes, but nothing had changed. "It's not working!" I yelled to formerly-shirtless guy. Where had I gone wrong?

"What can I do?" His eyebrows furrowed together, as if he were trying to come up with a solution. "Maybe we should take him back to the house. We have a doctor on call for the summer. He'll know what to do."

"No!" I screamed. "I'm supposed to help him. They told me it would work."

They told me I had powers.” I felt so defeated, so stupid for believing in what Ms. Mae and Grand-mere Bea had told me.

“Try harder, then,” he commanded. “If you want it to work, it will. You can’t just give up after a few feeble attempts.”

There was something in his tone that was so certain, so determined. It was like he believed in me more than I had ever believed in myself. I wanted to argue and accuse him of not knowing anything about me, but there are times when a girl just has to bite her tongue and focus on the bigger picture. I pricked my other finger and drew more blood. Afterwards, I closed my eyes again and concentrated on the words within the chant:

Wash away the pain

Wash away the ugliness

I free you from the pain

Sweep way the pain

Make an offering in blood and tears

Wash away the pain

Set you free from the hurt

My child I wash away the pain

It had to work. It just had to. After repeating the chant at least six times, it still didn’t work. “Fine, you greedy spirits!” I yelled. It was clear that they wanted more blood. In a rage, I drew more blood, this time slashing my palm. I brought my dripping palm up to Ben’s neck and repeated the chant. After a few minutes, I felt a distinct energy. It was a force within me so incredibly strong that I was convinced that I was able to move a mountain if I wanted to, or even get Sabrina to stop talking about boys.

“Areliia, what are you doing?” Ben’s voice forced me to open my eyes. “You’re strangling me.”

I realized my hands were gripped a bit too tightly around his neck. I unwrapped them to find that his wound had completely healed, and his fever was gone.

“Ben, you’re okay!” I exclaimed. I gave him an enormous hug.

“Of course I’m okay,” he said. “I’m just sleepy; it was a long night. Tell the

alligators and ghosts that I'll see them tomorrow." He closed his eyes and fell into a deep sleep.

In my excitement I leapt up, and by sheer impulse gave formerly-shirtless guy a hug. As my body touched his, I could smell him and felt my skin tingle. Delicious chills overtook my body. He wasn't wearing any cologne, but he smelt lovely. Warm and familiar mingled with a dash of sadness and danger. I caught myself clinging to him and took a step back in embarrassment. My moment of conquest had quickly passed, and I realized that I was standing next to a swamp, in front of a stranger in a corset and petticoat which basically translated to a bra and underwear. I was horrified.

Formerly-shirtless guy looked at me like the existence of Santa Claus had just been proven before taking off his jacket and wrapping it around me. "You must be cold," he observed. "Your hand is bleeding." He ripped a sleeve off of his shirt and covered my palm.

In my state of absolute exhilaration, I had failed to acknowledge the fact that the night had gotten a bit chilly. My entire body was covered in goose bumps, and my hand was leaking blood everywhere. "Why did you follow me?" I wrapped his jacket around me realizing that I was standing in the middle of nowhere with someone who could be a psychopathic serial killer.

His lips broke out in an amused smile. "Do you think I'm stalking you?" he asked, hovering over me. It really sucked being short sometimes. Standing at a measly five foot three inches made me feel as if I lived in a world full of giants. At this moment, formerly-shirtless guy looked like a giant, even though he wasn't freakishly tall or anything, maybe slightly over six feet.

"Well, how else can you explain being here?" I stated what I thought was the obvious. I tried to stand on my toes, hoping to make myself appear taller.

"I saw you leave and thought that you may have gotten lost. The property is rather large," he explained in a rational manner.

"How did you know I left?" I pressed. "You were too busy dancing."

His laugh cut the momentary silence the swamp had succumbed to. "I guess I'm not the only lurker around here."

"What?" I asked confused.

“If you saw me dancing that means you must have been watching me.” He raised an eyebrow as if he was expecting me to confess that I had in fact been watching him.

“I wasn’t, Sabrina was supposed to be helping me.” I adamantly defended myself, as I stood even higher on my toes. “I only noticed you dancing because you were with her.”

“Let’s start over,” he held out his hand. “I’m Lucas.”

I thrust out my hand. So he had a name. “I’m Arelia.” I expected him to shake my hand, but instead, he brought it up to his lips and gave it a tender kiss. I was mortified, but I had to admit, a little flattered as well. It wasn’t sloppy or rushed, but it wasn’t creepy-slow either. It was the kind of kiss I assumed a gentleman would give a lady. I only presumed that because Grand-mere was always going on about how real Southern gentlemen took their time and made a lady feel special.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Arelia. You look absolutely stunning this evening.”

He had to be kidding, right? I was covered in mud and dressed in only a tuxedo jacket.

“We better get Ben back before anyone starts to worry,” I snapped, waking up from whatever just happened here. “Promise you won’t tell anyone what you saw here tonight,” I begged him.

“Your secret is safe with me,” he vowed melodramatically in an exaggerated, solemn tone while placing his right hand over his heart.

I took one look into his eyes and wanted to believe him, but I’ve never been the type to trust so easily. “Thanks,” I muttered.

Lucas scooped up Ben from the ground like he was a feather and we started to head back to the house.

“Are you sure you know where you’re going?” I glanced over at Lucas.

“I’m pretty sure that I know the way,” he replied as he looked over at me and gave me a carefree smile.

“If you say so, but I don’t remember this path.” I was certain that we would probably get lost, and I would get attacked by some creepy animal who would

chew off half of my face. Grand-mere Bea would be horrified. Sabrina would book me an appointment with her mom's plastic surgeon. The whole thing would be dramatic and traumatizing. I guess chasing chubby boys into deadly swamps wasn't exactly my most brilliant idea.

"We're taking a shortcut," he advised me. "There is a much easier way to get back to the house."

"Sure." How could he possibly know where he was going?

To my surprise, Lucas actually knew what he was talking about and managed to deliver us safely to Darkwood house. When we got to the front porch, Sabrina came flying down the steps.

"Arelia! Where did you go? I was looking all over the house for you!" For some strange reason, she had developed a weird twangy accent in the short while I had been gone.

"And you," she turned to Lucas, "Mr. LaPlante, it's not nice keeping a lady waiting, is it now?"

I felt my stomach turn. Did she really just say LaPlante? Oh, great. The boss's son had seen me in my towel and my underwear within the span of less than eight hours.

"Please, do accept my apologies, Sabrina." Lucas gave her a dramatic bow. "I was just helping a guest who seemed to have lost her way."

He sounded so humble, so noble; it made me want to gag. Who actually spoke like that anymore? I knew that he was just putting on a show for Sabrina, and that was fine with me. She deserved Prince Charming.

"Who is that kid?" Sabrina took her eyes off Lucas for a split second.

"That's Ben, the guest I was helping. He got lost," I reminded her.

"You went off and found him." She continued to ignore me and looked at Lucas like he had just single-handedly saved the Earth from an alien invasion.

"Actually, Arelia is the one who got the poor boy out of trouble," Lucas corrected.

"Well, put him down so we can dance." Sabrina grazed Lucas's arm, as she twirled her hair with her other hand. "Arelia, what happened to your gown and your hair?" She finally noticed that I was wearing only a tuxedo jacket and my

hair was matted and covered in mud.

“Long story,” I sighed.

“Well you have to tell me all about it after the dance.” She turned her focus back on Lucas.

“Arelia, what in God’s name happened to you?” Ms. Mae rushed towards us.

“Ben, he got lost, and I helped bring him back.” I really didn’t feel like getting into the details at the moment.

“Where are the boy’s parents?” Ms. Mae asked, clearly horrified.

“Probably still slamming down Hurricanes in the ballroom,” I predicted while wrapping Lucas’s jacket around me even tighter. Despite the fact that it was warm inside, the swamp air had seeped into my bones and had given me what seemed like a permanent chill.

“I don’t mind taking him up to his room.” Lucas eyed Ben’s neck making sure that the mark had really disappeared.

“Thank you, dear,” Ms. Mae looked utterly relieved at Lucas’s offer. “Arelia, you go right on up there too and get all of that mud out of your hair. Take the rest of the night off- just keep an eye on Ben,” she instructed.

“Can I have the rest of the night off, too?” blurted Sabrina, in a hurry to follow Lucas upstairs. Her foot was already on one step, tapping impatiently.

“Sorry dear, you need to be down here with the guests.” Ms. Mae dashed any hopes Sabrina had of sneaking upstairs.

“Lucas, will you be back?” pouted Sabrina.

“I’ll be down shortly,” promised Lucas.

“Don’t take too long.” Sabrina was already starting to boss him around.

As we got to the top of the stairs, I followed Lucas to the Dumpty’s room. When we got there Lucas placed Ben, who was still sound asleep, on his bed and took off his shoes.

“I wonder if he’ll remember anything in the morning,” I said.

“Of course he will, what kid would forget an adventure like that?” Lucas replied as he turned to face me. As he made eye contact, I felt myself starting to unwillingly blush. It wasn’t so much that his eyes were spectacular in terms of color. It was their defined almond shape and what was behind their gaze that

made me nervous. It was as if they could see all of my secrets and had a few of their own. They were old and young while being wise and mischievous.

“I’ll make sure that your jacket gets cleaned and back to you as soon as possible.” I started to back out of the room as he came closer. Maybe the reason I was nervous was due to the fact that I still didn’t know if he was a serial murderer or not.

“Please, don’t worry about it. I’m tremendously grateful that you helped out a Darkwood guest. Losing a jacket is a small price to pay.” He took the jacket from my hand.

“Sure, it’s a small price when you probably have a million of them,” I said under my breath.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing,” I rushed to cover up what I had just said, but I knew he had heard even though he pretended he hadn’t. “I’m going to get this mud out of my hair.”

I attempted to run my fingers through my hair. If this were a shampoo commercial, it would have been a perfect “before” shot.

“I should head back downstairs, I guess,” Lucus fiddled with the buttons on his jacket.

“Yeah, Sabrina doesn’t like to be kept waiting,” I warned him.

“Who says I’m going downstairs because of her?” he questioned in an all so innocent tone.

“Well, aren’t you?” I harmlessly asked.

“Would that make you envious?” he teased, apparently in no hurry to leave.

“Yeah, whatever, thanks for your help. Have a good night.” I ended the conversation abruptly and walked into my room, shutting the door behind me. What a long night. All I wanted to do was crawl into bed and sleep. I had so many questions, and I was determined to get answers first thing in the morning from Ms. Mae. Not everyone could say they spoke to the spirit of love, helped the spirit of the hills with his self-esteem issues, healed a chubby ten year old with a snake bite and was stalked by Lucus LaPlante, all in the span of eight hours.

THE NIGHT NEVER ENDS

“Hey, hey, Arelia, are you sleeping?”
“What?” I rubbed my eyes and then snapped them open, remembering where I was. A figure hovered over me, and it took a few seconds for my brain to register that it was Sabrina, still in her ballgown. I realized that I had fallen asleep in my towel after taking a quick bath. Immediately, my attention was drawn to my hand. To my shock, there was nothing there. No mark. No scar. No pain.

“Sabrina, what time is it?”

“It’s two.”

“Is the ball over?”

“Some of the guests are still down there. I need to tell you something!” She sounded really excited and more than a little drunk.

“What is it?” I sat up.

“I’m in love, love, love!” She gushed as she swirled around the room. Ever since, we had gotten here, Sabrina had turned into Mary Poppins and Scarlett O’Hara’s sweet tea/Hurricane-addicted love-child.

“With Mr. Dumpty? He’s married, you know.”

“Don’t be gross,” she laughed drunkenly as she gave me a slight nudge on the shoulder. I’m sure from her drunken perspective it was a mere tap, but it hurt. “With Lucus. Lucus LaPlante. He looks exactly like Thomas McDonell, doesn’t he? Or Johnny Depp when he was much younger and a thousand times hotter.

Sabrina LaPlante. Doesn't Sabrina LaPlante have such a nice ring to it? Mommy is going to be so proud of me when I tell her. He is so hot and such a good dancer. Our children will be so gorgeous. Of course, you're going to be their godmother." For the next ten minutes, Sabrina proceeded to map out her future.

"He does look a little like Thomas McDonell, but more of a younger version of Johnny Depp. I'm really happy for you, but don't you think you should actually get to know the guy?" I asked.

"Don't be so silly Arelia, it's true love. In fact, I'm headed over to his room right now to seal the deal. After tonight, he will be officially mine." She opened one of her Louis Vuitton suitcases and out popped a slew of lingerie. "Hmm, La Perla, Bordelle, no I think Kiki De Montparnasse will be just perfect." She selected a black lace corset bra with a matching thong. She ripped off her gown and got into the underwear and slapped on a silk kimono.

I leapt out of bed and firmly grabbed her wrist before she could open the door. "What the hell Sabrina, it's a bad idea, you don't know him, and it's late. What if something happens?" I hissed.

"You're so lame sometimes. Of course something will happen," she laughed hysterically.

"I don't mean that, I mean what if he's not perfect as you think?"

"He is. Don't be jealous. Let go of me." She shook her wrist free. "Don't worry," she winked. "Don't wait up. Help yourself to a LaPerla night gown."

"Fine!" I was furious that she slammed the door in my face. I picked out a comfortable black silk nightgown and crawled into bed. Why should I worry if Sabrina didn't? How dare she accuse me of being jealous? The world didn't revolve around her like she thought it did, and not everyone wanted to be Sabrina Richards. Still, as I tried to fall asleep again, I couldn't. I could hear piano music along with the chatter of guests and felt a warm breeze waft into the room. After half an hour of tossing and turning, I decided to go check up on Ben since I heard the Dumpty's obnoxious laughter; I knew they were still downstairs.

When I got to Ben's room, he was snoring softly. I touched his neck to see if the snake bite had left any marks, it hadn't.

“You did such a wonderful job,” whispered a familiar voice.

“Erzulie? You can’t keep showing up anytime you want. Some kind of warning would be nice. A little wind, lights flickering, isn’t that what spirits are supposed to do anyways?” You see, the whole spirit talking to you bit gets a little complicated sometimes. Some of them like to take human form while others just love to get inside your head. Apparently, Erzulie liked to switch it up a bit.

“You showed no fear.” Erzulie obviously wasn’t interested in my suggestions.

“I don’t know how I did it, and I don’t think I’ll ever be able to do it again,” I moaned.

“Of course you will, Arelia. You just have to learn.”

“And why would I want to learn?” She was confident, wasn’t she?

“Think of all the good you can do, the people you could help.”

“I thought about it, and I think it’s more trouble than it’s worth.”

She laughed elegantly. “You’re so young and scared of who you are. Trust me, you are meant to do great things.”

“You really believe that?” I was curious.

“I don’t get things wrong,” she assured me. “Promise you will at least attempt to develop your powers.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“You’ve got one of the best teachers in New Orleans right under this roof.”

“Ms. Mae?” I wasn’t surprised.

“Yes, your Aunt Mae. Trust her.”

“But.” I realized that she had left, and I was alone again. “Sure,” I said to myself.

“Who are you talking to?” A voice inquired.

“No one,” I quickly replied. I realized it was Ivan. “What are you doing here? Don’t you have guests to serve?”

“You’re not the only one who can slack off,” he stated as he crossed his arms and slumped against the doorway. The moonlight pouring through the lace curtains bounced off his hair making it seem more sun-kissed than it really was. His grey eyes looked almost unearthly as they peered at me. For whatever

reason, I couldn't help but notice that Sabrina was right about his chin, the cleft did make him more appealing.

"I'm not slacking off," I argued.

"That's what it looks like you're doing. Why are you in this fat kid's room anyways? You have some sort of crush on him or something?" Ivan strolled into the room and made himself at home on the window ledge.

"Gross, no. He's ten. I was just making sure that he's okay, not that it's any of your business." Why did I have to explain myself to him anyways?

"Yeah, that's right, you have the hots for Lucus, don't you?" he asked rather bluntly. "You're one of those girls who likes that whole tall, dark, and tortured thing, aren't you?"

"Look, I don't know who you are or why you insist on constantly being a jerk, but leave me alone."

"Is that what you really want?" He lit up a cigarette while taking off his tie. "Why can't we just be friends?" He pulled out a small bottle of vodka from his pants. He had clearly stolen it from the kitchen. "Here, loosen up, take a shot." He held out the bottle and waved it in the air.

"No thanks." I flung my hands in front of my face, refusing his ever-so-kind offer.

"Oh, come on, voodoo queen, you think that one little drink will take your powers away?" Ivan continued to insist. His eyes beamed as he waited to see my reaction to being called a voodoo queen.

"What did you call me?" How the hell did he know?

"I heard you talking mumbo to some spirit before I walked in, so I figured that you must be a voodoo queen." He took another drag from his cigarette and another shot of vodka.

"I don't know what you heard, but whatever it was, I'm not a voodoo queen."

"Sweet denial feels good, doesn't it?"

"I don't know why I'm even wasting my time standing here talking to you." All of a sudden I realized that I was throwing away precious sleep time arguing with some random guy who insisted on continually making me feel like crap. I

left Ivan and walked down the hall. As I approached my room, I heard a loud thump come from down the hall, and then the sound of someone dragging something, afterwards silence. It sounded as if it had come from Lucas's room. I sprinted down the hall and pounded on his door. What the hell were they doing in there? I half expected no one to open the door, and was a little surprised when Lucas actually did answer. However, I wasn't surprised at the fact that he was shirtless again and clad only in black pajama bottoms.

"Areliia," he smiled. His eyes vividly danced, as if he were genuinely happy to see me. "Would you like some cognac?" He held out a crystal glass with brown liquid inside.

"I'm fine," I made my tone as icy as possible. I wanted him to know that I meant business. "What did you do to Sabrina?"

"Why don't you come in and take a look for yourself?" Graciously, he moved to the side so I could enter the room.

Immediately, the sound of Sabrina's epic snores greeted me. I walked over to the bed where a kimono-clad Sabrina was drooling on a silk duvet. Relief flooded over me. She was okay, not murdered or anything.

"She walked in and promptly passed out. She also rolled off the bed a minute ago, so I apologize if you were disturbed by any strange noises," Lucas explained. He intently examined the expression on my face trying his best to read it.

"Oh, thank God. I thought..."

"You thought what?" His eyes focused on me daring me to say what I really thought.

"I thought..."

"You thought we were making loud, passionate love?" he joked.

"What? No! Well maybe, or I thought you had killed her, and what guy says 'loud, passionate love', anyways?" I did need a shot of whatever he was drinking after all. I grabbed the glass out of his hand and chugged down the rest of its contents. An action that I immediately regretted as it slid down and burned my insides. "Gross! What is that?"

He looked fascinated as he took the glass out of my hand. "Henri IV

Dudognon Heritage cognac, meant to be sipped.”

“Okay, whatever that means. I don’t drink. Anyways, aren’t you supposed to be drinking beer like the rest of the guys your age?”

“Is that what guys my age are supposed to be drinking?” he asked in what sounded like sincere surprise.

“A Bud Light twelve pack and a parking lot, that’s how guys at school do it.”

“Really?” He walked over to the corner of the room where an intricately carved table held bottles of exotic spirits, and poured himself a small shot. “Tell me more.”

“You’re not interested,” I said, as I examined the bottles. They looked ancient. They weren’t the kind that you found at Bed Bath and Beyond. Some were decorated with diamonds, others with rubies and jade. They were definitely real.

“I’m not?” He pretended he was wounded by my words, as he placed his hand on his chest and took a step back. “Why is that?”

“I know your type. Spoiled, rich, thinking the world revolves around them. You use girls like Sabrina because it makes you feel good and entitled. They hang on your every word and make you feel smart and successful. You’re not interested in what I have to say because it’s too much of a challenge to stop thinking about your hair. Sure, one day you’ll marry a girl like her because it’s easy. You’ll have a couple of kids, a few mistresses on the side and live out the rest of your days in denial. Don’t get me wrong, I love my friend, but I know her all too well, and I have a feeling that you two will make a perfect couple.”

“You think so highly of me, don’t you?” He wasn’t angry, which made me feel a little bad for saying the things I did.

“Why should I think highly of you? We just met, and my best friend is half-naked in your bed. What have you done to make me think that you’re so awesome?” Sometimes I had a bad habit of saying exactly what I thought.

“Your friend chose to be here, I didn’t invite her and had no intention of doing anything with her,” Lucus explained like it was the most normal thing to have Sabrina there.

“Sure, you’re just Mr. Perfect, aren’t you?” What the hell was wrong with

me? I had a slight buzz from the cognac. Was I an angry drunk? “I’m sorry. I think it’s the cognac.”

“No need to apologize.” Lucus sounded like he actually enjoyed being yelled at by an irrational girl in a nightgown who had barged into his room in the middle of the night.

“So *do* you like her?” I asked. “For some reason, she’s crazy about you. You better be nice to her.” Why had I just asked him that question? It was really none of my business.

“Why is it so hard to believe that someone could be crazy about me? Do I smell terrible?” He sniffed his armpit.

“No.”

“Well in that case, would you be offended if I *were* crazy about her?”

“Why do you think I would be offended?” I asked.

“If you didn’t care, you wouldn’t keep asking me what I thought,” he said in what sounded like a rather smug tone.

“I was only asking because of Sabrina.” I felt myself getting defensive again.

“It was really amazing what you did tonight, helping Ben like that and healing his snake bite.” He changed the subject.

“I told you not to talk about it,” I hissed, in case Sabrina woke up and overheard us talking.

“Don’t worry, I won’t, but your friend clearly isn’t waking up anytime soon, so I think we’re safe talking about it.”

“Did it freak you out?” I asked. “Seeing something like that?”

“No, I’ve seen it many times before.” He stated it like it was an everyday occurrence.

“Like where?” I was beginning to find this new world grotesquely fascinating.

“Right here in Darkwood. In New Orleans, the spirits are alive and well.”

“How did you know that I would be able to heal Ben? Do you hear them too?” I was excited at the possibility that maybe he was just like me.

“Sadly, I’m not as gifted as you. I figured that because your Aunt Mae is a powerful voodoo queen that would make you one too.”

“Oh.” I tried to hide my disappointment. “Hey, wait. How do you know that Ms. Mae and I are related?”

“She speaks of you often.”

“So she knew I would be coming here. She knew that Sabrina would accept the invitation all along.”

“I suppose she did. How does it feel to have so much power?” He asked keenly.

“Power? I don’t have any power. It’s a curse, really. It sucks being constantly targeted by things that you can’t talk about with your friends. It’s like being trapped in some kind of bubble. You don’t want to let anyone else in because you’re afraid of spreading whatever disease you have.”

“A disease? What makes it so terrible?”

“You wouldn’t understand.” I wanted to tell him everything. I had a feeling that somehow he would understand, but I’ve never been the type to pour my heart out to strangers.

“You never know, people can surprise you if you let them in. Maybe I will understand.” He seemed genuinely eager to listen.

“Yeah right, I’m sure that’s exactly what you want right now. You really want to listen to some girl you just met ramble on about how she’s supposedly a voodoo queen.”

“It would be much more interesting than a majority of the conversations I’ve suffered through.”

I noticed a book lying open on the table and picked it up. “You’re actually reading this? *The Count of Monte Cristo*.” I held up the book, conveniently changing the subject.

“It’s my favorite book.” His eyes brightened with enthusiasm.

“Why?”

“You’re not interested,” he shrugged as he used my line.

“Okay fine, don’t tell me.”

“Have you read the story?” he asked gently as he came closer and took the book from me. His hand brushed against mine. It was smooth to the touch.

“No.” I replied in a voice that sounded too weak to be mine.

“It’s the story of Edmond Dantes, wrongly accused of a crime and imprisoned in Chateau d’If for fourteen years.”

“Doesn’t sound that complex to me,” I mumbled.

“It’s not the fact that it’s complex, it’s Edmond’s character; he never stops believing that he will get out of prison, and one day be free. Even though he faces countless challenges along the way,” he stared at me in anticipation, hoping I would understand. If I were Sabrina, I would have gone on about how smart he was and made goopy eyes at him, but I was me.

“So, you can relate to it because you’re rich and have everything in the world and to you that’s like prison? I’m sorry I don’t get it.” I expected him to get angry like most guys did when they were challenged. Maybe say that I was stupid and kick me out of the room.

Instead, he said, “I guess everyone has their own perspective of the world. What’s your favorite book?”

“If I tell you will you laugh?”

His arched eyebrows wrinkled in confusion. “Why would I laugh?”

“It’s Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,” I blurted.

“Why is that?”

“I guess I like the fact that Charlie is the underdog but still comes out on top at the end. I can relate to being an underdog. Plus, he gets an unlimited supply of chocolate, and I live on chocolate. Although I can’t really afford any luxurious brand like Godiva or anything,” I caught myself rambling. I was interrupted by an embarrassing growl that came from the pit of my stomach.

“I don’t think I’ve heard anyone’s stomach growl so loudly.” Lucas was clearly impressed by the fact that my stomach probably woke up the entire house.

I looked away in embarrassment. “I haven’t eaten anything since this morning,” I confessed.

“Well, we can’t have you walking around like that, now can we? How about I fix you something?”

“Um, you can cook?” I was skeptical that he even knew where the kitchen was.

“Yes, I can cook, does that surprise you?” He acted offended that I had questioned his supposed culinary skills.

“I’m sorry. I won’t believe it until I see it.” I challenged him.

“Come with me,” Lucas ordered. He grabbed a plain, white t-shirt from his closet and opened the bedroom door.

“But we can’t leave Sabrina.” I eyed the bed.

“Judging by her snores, she’ll be okay for a little bit. Just a quick snack and we’ll be back. I’ll make anything you want.” His eyes gleamed as he tried to tempt me.

“Fine.” I reluctantly gave in and followed him to the kitchen.

The kitchen was dark and silent when we got there. Lucas flicked on the lights and opened the refrigerator door. “You name the dish, and I’ll make it for you,” he offered regally.

I glanced inside the refrigerator and for some inexplicable reason had a craving for chocolate chip pancakes. “Chocolate chip pancakes,” I demanded with authority.

Lucas examined me. Speculation crossed his face. For the first time, I noticed how his high cheekbones were in stark contrast to his generous lips. It was an odd but enticing combination. “I can do that, but are you sure that’s what you really want?”

“No, how about fried Oreos?” It wasn’t the healthiest option, but hey, he said anything.

“I can honestly say, I have no idea what that is.”

“You said anything,” I reminded him.

Lucas rapidly tapped his fingers on the counter. “I did say anything. If you instruct me, I’m sure I can whip up some fried Oreos for you.”

“Great!” I clapped my hands in anticipation of the scene that was going to play out in front of me.

“What do we need?” Lucas asked as he headed towards the pantry beside kitchen.

“Well, Oreos of course. We need some Bisquick, powdered sugar, an egg and oil,” I rattled off the list.

Lucus gathered the ingredients and placed them on the counter. He scratched his head, as he examined them. "What next?" he asked cautiously.

"Mix the Bisquick and egg, dip in the Oreos, and fry them," I instructed.

Lucus hesitated before starting the procedure. Watching him was entertaining. His eyes were focused on the batter, as he made sure that each Oreo was coated perfectly. "No good can come out of this," he warned. The oil sizzled and he started expertly frying.

I grabbed one as soon as it came out of the pan and shoved it in my mouth. "So good!" I ecstatically cried through mouthfuls. "You have to try one."

"No thanks," Lucas kindly refused my offer. He observed me gobble one down after another.

"Come on, it won't kill you, I promise," I pestered. I dangled an Oreo in front of his face.

"Fine, one bite." Lucas took an Oreo from the batch. As he chewed, repulsion filled his eyes.

"So?" I asked. I was eager to know what he thought.

"That is one of the vilest things I've ever tasted," he spat out.

I clutched my stomach and let out a laugh. "You're so dramatic! How can you think these are bad?"

"Vile, just vile," he repeated as he handed me a glass of milk.

I took the milk from him, and our eyes locked momentarily.

"How's your hand?" he asked gently.

"All better," I announced. I raised my palm in the air demonstrating that it was all better.

"Amazing," he looked absolutely fascinated.

"Yeah, I guess." I stared at my feet and suddenly remembered Sabrina. "We should get back to Sabrina."

"I guess we should," Lucas agreed although he didn't make any attempt to move. I took the first step out of the kitchen and headed back to the room.

"She's still sleeping," Lucas observed.

He was right, Sabrina was in the exact same position we had left her in.

"Why are you best friends with her?" Lucas questioned. "Does it make you

feel like less of an underdog?” he asked, referencing my love for Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.

“What? No!” I felt my face turn red. “Why would you assume that? You think I’m friends with Sabrina because of her money? Typical.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I’m just trying to understand why you think you’re an underdog,” he appealed.

“Well, don’t. You have everything handed to you on a silver platter, so I wouldn’t expect you to understand!” I ran over to the door and opened it. “When Sabrina wakes up I hope you have fun, just make sure she gets back to our room safely.” I slammed the door shut before he had a chance to say anything. What was wrong with me? Why was I acting like a raving lunatic paying so much attention to what Lucas thought? He was just some spoiled rich kid who knew nothing about me.

I was angry at Sabrina for being so irresponsible and even angrier at Lucas for being so smug and thinking that he knew it all. I had been friends with Sabrina my entire life not because we had everything in common, but we had enough in common. Despite her seemingly lavish lifestyle, I knew from the years that Grand-mere Bea worked as her nanny that her parents were never around. Given that mine were out of the picture as well, we clung together under the protection of Grand-mere Bea. Sure, there were times when I was envious, but I knew that Sabrina felt the same way about me at times too. So, for Lucas to assume that I was friends with Sabrina because of her money was ridiculous. Although he hadn’t said those exact words, it sure felt like that is what he meant.

Anyways, they deserved each other. Together they could obsess over brands that I never heard about and do other things people with way too much money did. Besides, I didn’t have time for this. The plan was to come here and earn money, not get caught up in whatever this was. Still, I had promised Erzulie that I would talk to Ms. Mae, and I intended to only to figure out what was going on with me, and how I could get out of this mess. Maybe she could undo the so-called blessing, and I could be blissfully ignorant. It sure seemed like a welcome change from what I was going through now.

SHOW ME THE MAGIC.....CHOCOLATE?

I woke up just as the sun started to slip under the lace curtains. My body felt as if it had been in an extensive boxing match, and sitting upright proved to be quite a challenge. The first thing that greeted me was the sound of Sabrina snoring; which indicated that either she had found her way back to our room, or Lucus had brought her there sometime during the night. I couldn't help but shudder at the thought that Lucus had been here while I was sleeping. What if I had been snoring? There I went again. Why did I care?

After taking a quick shower, I blow-dried my hair to relieve some of the inevitable frizz and let it fall free in loose waves that were almost down to my waist. After last night's elaborate updo, my hair was hurting. Yes, not my head but my hair, a rather strange phenomenon that happened every time I wore it too tightly. Looking into the bedroom mirror, I saw a very tired version of myself. The least I could do was slap on some tinted moisturizer and concealer to spare the guests any possible trauma. After doing so, I found our day-to-day Darkwood uniforms in the closet. As far as uniforms went they were what I had expected. A navy blue skirt that was slightly above the knees and a white cotton shirt with the name Darkwood embroidered on the right-hand side.

Even though we didn't need to go until nine, and it was only seven, I hoped to catch Ms. Mae before the guests started coming down for breakfast and the day got going. When I got downstairs, I could hear my stomach growl. I was craving a blended, iced chocolate coffee and a chocolate chunk scone from

Lola's. It was my usual breakfast whenever I had to work the morning shift, one of the only perks of the job.

"Ms. Mae," I called. I entered the already buzzing kitchen, which was filled with the delicious smell of Creole *calas*, corn fritters, cinnamon rolls and *pain perdu*. My stomach growled louder as my nostrils were filled with the tantalizing aroma. Seeing that Ms. Mae was nowhere in sight, I decided to help myself to a cinnamon roll, an action that annoyed the baker who was arranging the batch in a woven basket. I didn't care. As the roll made its way to my stomach, the only thing I could think about was how fantastic it tasted.

"Someone is hungry this morning, what did you do last night?" Ivan asked in his usual condescending tone. His eyes were bloodshot, and his hair looked like he had jumped straight out of bed and rushed downstairs. He was clearly not used to getting up early.

"Nothing, not that it's any of your business."

"Did Lucus keep you up all night with his incessant rambling?"

"Okay, what exactly is your problem with Lucus, do you guys have some sort of history or something? Are you secretly in love with him?"

"Hardly." Ivan took a piece of *pain perdu* from the counter and started to nibble on it.

"Areliia, I thought you'd be up early," Ms. Mae entered the room, wearing a flowing green dress and layers of beaded necklaces. She interrupted my attempt at stealing another piece of *pain perdu*. "Ivan, you are supposed to look presentable for the guests. No one is going to be willing to take any food from you if you run around looking like that. Child, go on upstairs and wash that handsome face of yours. Put on your uniform and take off that ghastly black t-shirt. I can see three holes in it from here."

"Sure," Ivan grumbled as he exited the kitchen, leaving Ms. Mae to focus her attention on me.

"Good morning." I quickly moved my hand away from the *pain perdu*, but Ms. Mae had already caught on.

"We're hungry this morning, aren't we?" she laughed. "I figured as much. Come with me." She led me through the kitchen's back door and to a small

garden filled with red chrysanthemums. “Sit,” she ordered pointing at a white, square table where breakfast was laid out.

“What are these?” I asked, noticing a stack of boxes in the middle of the table.

“Those are for you,” replied Ms. Mae with a smile on her face. “Go on, have a look.”

Curiosity got the best of me as I grabbed the first, brown box tied with a pink ribbon. “Chocopologie?” I ripped off the bow and opened the box. Inside, there were rows of dark, chocolate truffles laid on a white silk cloth.

“But who?” I asked, already reaching for the next box, which was identical on the outside but filled with white-chocolate truffles in the inside. In less than two minutes, I opened the remaining boxes and found myself surrounded by every sort of chocolate I could imagine, ranging from caramel-shaped hearts to strawberry-truffle seashells. Without even thinking about how they had appeared, I grabbed a fist full and hungrily shoved them in my mouth. I closed my eyes and let the delightful flavors slide down my throat. After I had eaten almost an entire box, I opened my eyes to find Ms. Mae staring at me in amusement.

“I take it that you really have a passion for chocolate?”

“I’ve never tasted any this good before, who sent them? Did you make them? Can I learn how to make them too or maybe you can teach me so that they magically appear?” I stopped talking when I realized what I had said.

“So, you are interested in learning more about your powers, are you now?” Ms. Mae was getting way too excited over something that slipped out.

“After what happened last night, I guess they can come in handy.” I went on to describe what had occurred with Ben and how I had cured the snake bite. Ms. Mae listened in silence while nodding her head occasionally and widening her green eyes as I revealed the details.

“I know what voodoo queen means, but I don’t know what any of this means,” I said as I finished the story.

“It means that you are a very powerful voodoo queen, that’s what it means,” she explained. “For some, it takes extensive offerings and rituals to heal, but you

did it so easily.”

“I guess that’s what happened,” I shrugged.

“Are you willing to learn how to develop your powers?” she asked me directly.

“I am if you tell me where these chocolates came from.” I popped another chocolate into my mouth.

“Here, this came with them.” She handed me a small, white envelope which I tore open in a split second. Inside the envelope was a hand written letter that read:

I know it’s not Wonka’s chocolate factory, but I truly apologize if I offended you in any way. That was not my intention. I hope we can start over since you will be spending the summer at Darkwood.

Lucus.

“Typical, a rich kid trying to buy an apology,” I groaned as I threw aside the card, but that didn’t stop me from eating another piece of chocolate.

“Why all of this hostility towards Lucas?” Ms. Mae interrogated.

“It’s nothing.” I didn’t want to get into the disagreement we had last night.

“Well, it must be something to get you all worked up like this.” She had picked up on my angst. “Lucas is a good man with a good heart. He has been through a lot over the years.”

I snorted. “Sure, it must be difficult being Lucas LaPlante.”

“Not everything is as simple as it appears.” Her velvety voice took on a menacing tone which made what she said sound even more cryptic. “Promise me that you will at least attempt to get along with him. He may just surprise you.”

“Okay, sure. I guess. I do work here after all.” What was with all of the mystery around this place?

“So, I take it that I can now trust you with this.” She handed me a thick book with a brown leather cover and the words *LaRue* written on it.

“What is it?” I eyed it suspiciously as she handed it to me.

“All of the spells and potions that us LaRue women have used over the years. I want you to read through it. I expect you to be down here every day at seven sharp, so we can start your training.” She was joking right?

“Training? This isn’t Hogwarts, is it?”

“Very funny, Arelia. By the way, a school like Hogwarts does exist in Scotland. One of my best friends attended it.”

“Are you kidding?”

“I assure you, I am not.” Her smile vanished, and her normally soft expression turned severe.

“Okay. I’ll take your word on that and see what this training thing is all about.” Her pretty face broke out in a smile and in an instant she looked years younger.

“Fantastic. I will put this book in your room for you, so you don’t have to carry it around.”

“Grand-mere Bea isn’t going to be happy about this though.”

“Your grand-mere will understand. She can’t protect you forever; you are strong enough to protect yourself, anyways,” counseled Ms. Mae.

“I guess.” I couldn’t help feel like I was somehow betraying her, though. If she hadn’t spoken to Ms. Mae for years, she must have had a pretty good reason. Although, your sister secretly asking the voodoo spirit of love to bless your grand-daughter and your grand-daughter ending up with weird powers are pretty solid reasons.

“You go on and finish your breakfast, have some fruit and drink some freshly squeezed orange juice to balance out all of that chocolate you just ate,” Ms. Mae advised as she rose from the delicate wired chair. “Guests will be down any minute for breakfast, and I need you girls to keep an eye on things and accompany them on the plantation tour. Where is Sabrina this morning?”

“Probably still sleeping,” I answered, remembering her Hurricane and lingerie-fueled attempt at seducing Lucus last night, which may have worked.

“No, I’m not, I’m right here,” chirped Sabrina walking into the garden. It wasn’t even nine, and the girl had on four layers of makeup complete with fake eyelashes and cherry red lipstick. She had cut our uniform skirt so it was at least four inches shorter and accessorized it with her favorite cheetah print booties even though it was already oppressively hot and humid.

“Child, where are you off to?” Ms. Mae was not aware of Sabrina’s quest to

conquer Lucas.

“Oh, you know, just trying to look my best for the guests,” Sabrina replied as she grabbed a cinnamon roll from the table.

“Are you sure you’re going to be comfortable walking around in those all day on these grounds?” Ms. Mae was skeptical because she didn’t know the distance Sabrina would go to get what she wanted.

“Please, I do it all the time. In fact, these were the booties that accompanied me to Japan, when I went up Mount Fuji.” What she meant was when she took a helicopter tour around part of Mount Fuji.

“You girls have ten minutes before you need to greet the guests for breakfast. Henri will meet you on the front lawn. Since it’s such a hot day, we decided to host breakfast outside.” Ms. Mae left us and went back into the kitchen.

“Last night was amazing,” Sabrina’s voice was muffled as she gobbled down her roll.

“What happened?” I asked, even though I knew the answer.

“We just talked all night, and then,” she giggled, “let’s just say that my plan worked, and I know he feels the same way about me.”

“Really?” It was clear that she was lying. I had been there, and when I left she had been passed out. “What did you talk about?”

“You know: the places we’ve traveled to, our favorite brands. Things you find boring.”

“Must have been an intense conversation,” I ignored her comment. I didn’t think traveling was boring; I just never had the money to go anywhere.

“Oh my God, where did these come from,” she noticed the boxes of chocolates on the table. “I love Chocopologie.”

“I don’t know, they were there this morning,” I lied.

“Lucas must have sent them for me. Was there a letter?” Her eyes frantically searched the table.

“No letter.”

“Awww, he wanted to surprise me,” she opened a box and ate a handful of my chocolates. “You can have some too, Arelia.”

“Thanks.” Why was I keeping the fact that I had been there last night a

secret? I guess I didn't want to embarrass Sabrina and call her out on passing out in Lucas's bed. That was all I rationalized. Besides, Sabrina deserved happiness, and if Lucas was the one to bring it to her why should I interfere.

"We have to go," I advised as I gulped down the rest of my orange juice and coffee, a strange but satisfying combination.

"But I'm not done eating," she whined. I gave her an annoyed glance. "Fine." She gobbled down the rest of the *pain perdu*, and we made our way to the front lawn.

BRANDY MILK PUNCH

The early morning sun shone down on the sprawling green lawn, making it look impeccable along with the rows of white tables that sat on it. The guests were busy sampling the wide array of breakfast treats that had been laid out for them.

“Good morning ladies.” Henri tipped his white hat as he came up to greet us. “I trust that you are well-rested and ready to enjoy another beautiful day at Darkwood.”

“We don’t have to do a lot of work, do we?” Sabrina ignored his polite question.

“Well, that depends what you think is a lot of work,” responded Henri laughing at Sabrina’s obvious lack of interest.

“I heard you had quite an adventure last night,” Henri turned towards me. The look on his wrinkled, old face screamed that he knew everything that had happened in the swamp. Given the size of this place you would think it would be easy to hide things, but it was turning out to be just the opposite.

“I’m a bit sore,” I admitted, suddenly much more aware of how much pain I was in.

“You’ll just have to take it easy then,” Henri patted me on the back. “Go on now, let’s greet those guests,” he ordered as he walked towards the Gopals.

“This is absolutely sinful,” Mrs. Scott’s euphoric voice boomed as she tried the corn fritters.

“Hey, Mrs. Scott,” I approached her. “Have you tried the *calas*? They are just as sinful.”

She placed her hand on her tiny waist and said, “I couldn’t. I’ve already gained five pounds since yesterday.”

“Don’t be silly, you look fantastic.”

“Such a sweet girl, and a pretty one at that.” She was clearly flattered by my compliment.

“Here, try this.” I grabbed a pitcher and a glass from the table and filled it up with brandy milk punch. At Lola’s, it was a weekend breakfast favorite.

“What is it?” asked Mrs. Scott eyeing the glass in suspicion before taking a sip. “I’m drinking before noon, and it feels glorious,” she took another sip. “I taste brandy and vanilla in this, am I right?”

“Yes, great sense of taste.”

“Lucus!” Sabrina screeched annoyingly as she limped across the lawn to where Lucus was standing. He was dressed in a plain white t-shirt which highlighted his toned torso and contrasted rather nicely against his glossy dark hair. “You’re here!” Sabrina gave him a big hug, not embarrassed at all by the guests who were staring at her.

“Good day Sabrina, how are you this morning?” he asked.

“I’m awesome,” she shamelessly squeezed his bicep.

Lucus caught me staring. Our eyes locked and my heart beat just a tad bit faster. He gave me a small smile indicating that he was unaware whether I was still angry or not. I nodded, hoping that he would take it as a sign that I had gotten over what had happened. He brushed his hand against his brow in exaggerated relief which, despite my best attempt not to, made me smile. Sabrina, oblivious to our little exchange, continued to ramble on and move closer to Lucus.

“Arelia!” Ben ran over to me. “I had a weird dream, and you were in it.” His chubby cheeks were flushed, and his eyes shone.

“Really?” I asked cautiously, hoping he would remember last night’s events as only a dream.

“Yeah, you saved me. You were a superhero with magical powers and you

pulled me out of quicksand and then healed my snakebite.”

“I did all that?” I feigned surprise.

“You did. There weren’t any alligators or ghosts in the dream though. Maybe we can see them for real today.”

“I hope so.” I gave him big smile. I was relieved, that for him, it had only been a dream. “Where are your parents?” I asked slowly, reluctant to bring up what was probably a sore subject.

“They’re with Mary,” he replied.

“Who’s Mary?”

“Their friend, Mary,” he pointed to a table where the Dumptys sat indulging in breakfast Bloody Marys.

“I see.” I smiled in order to hide my concern. “Will you be coming on the tour today?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Yeah! Are we going to the swamp?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ll find out for you.” I skimmed the yard for Henri, who was nowhere in sight. He hadn’t told us where we were going or who was going with us. “I’ll be right back,” I said to Ben. I decided to interrupt Sabrina’s little love-fest with Lucus, so she could help me find Henri and figure out our schedule.

“You’re so funny, Lucus. Oh my God, that’s hilarious!” I heard Sabrina brazenly gush as I approached them.

“Don’t they make a cute couple?” Ivan quietly came up behind me. “Doesn’t it make your blood burn knowing that Sabrina is moving in on your man?” Ivan was obviously taking an unnatural and ghastly delight watching the scene that was unfolding before us.

“What’s with you?”

“Don’t fret, queen, you know as well as I do that Prince Charming always ends up with Barbie. Why are you wasting your time lusting over him, when you could be wasting your time lusting over me?”

I groaned. “You really think so highly of yourself, don’t you?”

“What’s wrong with me?” he asked. “Don’t girls love muscles and blond hair or are you all obsessed with dark, brooding ego-maniacs?”

“Whatever.” I walked and over to Sabrina and Lucas. “Hey, guys.” I felt a bit awkward in front of Lucas suddenly recalling all the embarrassing moments that had occurred between the two of us since I’d gotten here.

“Good morning, Arelia.” Lucas grinned shooting me one of his sharp glances. I bet he spent hours practicing them in front of the mirror, like Zoolander.

“Hi,” I responded nervously while trying to avoid eye contact. “Do you know what’s going on this morning?” I asked, hoping he would know since it was his family’s property and all.

“We get to spend the whole day together!” Sabrina interrupted, not allowing Lucas a chance to respond.

“What do you mean?”

“Lucas is going to be our tour guide, and we’re his assistants.” She filled me in on what was going on. “We’re going to slave cabins and then having a picnic- isn’t that like totally creepy.” Her blue eyes sparkled with sheer joy at the thought of being able to spend time with Lucas, even if it meant staying outside in the horrible heat all day and getting bitten by misquotes.

“The slave cabins, why there?”

“The guests requested it. I guess they’re hoping to catch a ghost or two,” Lucas responded. “Sabrina, will you please excuse us, there is a personal matter that I would like to discuss with Arelia.”

“A personal matter?” Sabrina shot me an evil glance to which I responded to with a shrug.

“It will just be a minute,” assured Lucas.

“Fine.” Sabrina reluctantly agreed. “I’ll wait over by that table, the brandy milk punch sure looks delightful.” Her inner Scarlett O’Hara came out again.

“Arelia, I really want to apologize to you again in person,” he began once Sabrina had made her exit.

I rolled my eyes. “We’re good, I get it. You’re sorry.”

He looked anxious as our eyes unwillingly found one another. “Underdog is the last thing I think when I look at you.”

“Really, then what do you think?” I openly challenged him.

“From what I’ve seen, I know you’re powerful, smart, loyal and...”

“You didn’t win me over with the chocolates, but I appreciate your apology,” I cut him off rather abruptly.

He looked dumbfounded. “I thought you adored chocolate.”

“I do, but I enjoy hearing guys like you beg much more.”

“There you go again with the ‘guys like me’ thing. I should be the one who is offended,” he teased taking a step closer to me.

I let out a nervous giggle. When had I started giggling like a tragic little school girl? “I know you aren’t.”

“Now how is that?” He lightly placed his hand on my shoulder. I felt my mouth get dry and neck muscles tighten as my heart fluttered for a minuscule second.

“You’re a gentleman- or at least pretend to be one, because let’s be honest that whole Southern gentlemen thing is an epic myth. If they ever existed, they sure don’t anymore.”

“You must have a lot of experience with Southern gentlemen, I take it,” he asked, taking an interest in my theory.

“No, not really. I’m just calling it like I see it.” It was true. I’d never had a real boyfriend like everyone told me I was supposed to have. The type that brought me flowers and chocolates while professing his undying love in poetry. To me, that kind of love was a sham created by some delusional person who lived in the forest or on the top of a hill. In reality, it didn’t exist. Life was difficult. Shit happened, and guys usually didn’t stick around. My dad never did. I doubt he even knew that I existed. We stood in silence for a few seconds, both of us unaware what to say next until I realized that his hand was still on my shoulder. “Is there a reason why your hand is on my shoulder?”

“I didn’t realize.” He pulled away. “So all is forgiven?”

“Why do you talk like that?” I blurted suddenly keen to know why he spoke like a hundred year old man.

“Like what? Please do enlighten me,” he tilted his head to the right, trying to make sense of what I had asked him.

“All polite and formal. You sound older than Henri, and he’s ancient. You

don't have to put on an act, you know." I didn't mean to be rude, I really didn't, but people who pretended to be something they weren't drove me crazy.

"It seems that you've already made up your mind about me." For the first time, I saw Lucus look a little insecure. I'd always assumed that guys like him and girls like Sabrina were only superficially insecure. If someone said something bad about them it stung, but they got over it in a few seconds. Why should they feel like the rest of us when they had it all? I knew I was being argumentative and a bit harsh, but for some reason, I couldn't stop.

"I'm sorry, you just confuse me," I confessed.

"I confuse you?" My little revelation was clearly not what he had expected.

"Are you guys done yet?" Sabrina called from the table. How she had managed to keep quiet for so long was beyond me.

"Yeah, just a sec," I barked. "Look, I don't mean to be rude, I'm sorry. Thank you for the chocolate and apology. By the way, Sabrina thinks the chocolates were meant for her."

"You're fine with that?"

"With letting her think you sent them for her? Sure, no harm right?" Sabrina couldn't resist any longer and came running up to us.

"What's the big secret?" She was annoyed that Lucus had been talking to someone besides her for more than two seconds.

"I was just asking Arelia if you liked the chocolates I sent you." Lucus shot me a devious glance.

"They're delish," Sabrina cooed. Yes, she cooed like people do when they talk to babies or puppies. "You're spoiling me already."

"What time are we heading to the cabins?" I snappishly changed the subject, hoping Sabrina would stop fawning over Lucus for just a split second.

"I don't see any reason why we can't do that now. It appears the guests have had enough brandy milk punch for the morning," Lucus observed. He was right. The Dumptys had already finished off a pitcher of Bloody Marys and were starting on a pitcher of brandy milk, so I decided it was time to round up the guests

THE SLAVE SONG

As we walked towards the slave cabins, we passed numerous lush gardens and hedges on the property. However, the guests weren't interested in analyzing plants, they wanted to see ghosts. The sun mercilessly beat down on us, and the water bottles that I had distributed were emptying at a rapid pace. Up ahead I could see the Dumptys sweating profusely as they tried to keep up with the other guests. Lucas led the way while Sabrina, despite wearing six inch heels, was determined to walk beside him.

"Are we there yet?" Ben asked half-heartedly for the fourth time within a ten-minute timespan.

"Just a few more minutes," Lucas assured him.

"What kind of crops did the plantation produce?" asked Mr. Gopal as he eagerly flipped through the plantation brochure.

"It produced mainly cotton, at times sugar cane as well," informed Lucas.

"So, who are you exactly?" Mr. Dumpty rudely interrupted. "Are you the owner's kid or something? If we're paying you, our hard earned money to show us around this place, you better know what you're talking about."

"I assure you, Mr. Dumpty, I am very familiar with the property and will make the tour worth your time. My parents currently own the plantation," he replied with ease, not at all offended by Mr. Dumpty's boorishness.

"Where are they dear?" asked Mrs. Scott. "I would love to meet them."

"Unfortunately, they're living in Europe at the moment and won't be able to

make it for the summer.”

“Mine too!” Sabrina enthusiastically squealed. “Well they’re spending the summer in Morocco, then heading to Europe for a few weeks in the fall. I could call them; maybe they can meet up with your parents.” She sounded so thrilled by that possibility.

“They are rather booked for the summer,” Lucas replied. “I don’t think it will be possible for them to change their schedule.”

“Oh.” Sabrina sounded crushed. Her dreams of having her parents meet her future in-laws were dashed.

“Look!” Ben pointed ahead. “It’s a river, can we go swimming?”

“That’s Darkwood River, I’m sure swimming would be a great idea after the cabin tour,” Lucas agreed.

“Cool!” The burning sun had robbed Ben of his desire to see any ghosts.

“Swimming would be awesome. Luckily, I brought my swimsuit.” Of course she had. Sabrina carried her entire universe in her oversized Chanel handbag.

“Are those the cabins up there?” asked Mr. Scott.

“Yes, those would be them.” Lucas pointed to rows of log shacks that were lined up neatly a short distance from the river bank.

“Creepy. Do the ghosts live there?” Ben’s desire to see the ghosts were back.

“I believe they do.” Lucas answered rather cryptically as we approached a cabin.

As the group entered the cabin, I was horrified by its dirt floor and makeshift chimney consisting of mud and sticks.

“These are typical slave quarters as they were exactly in 1830 when the plantation was built,” Lucas informed the group. “At that time, slaves were thought to be second-class citizens, so many plantation owners refused to provide them with proper accommodations. A part of my family’s unsavory history that I am not proud of. Although my great-great great-great grandfather, the founder of Darkwood, did his best to make sure that the slaves were treated as humanely as possible, many of the workers he hired to watch over the slaves often made their own rules.”

“Tell us about the ghosts,” demanded Ben.

“Yes, please do,” Mr. Gopal urged Lucas.

“I read about the curse of Mad Marie,” Mrs. Scott piped in.

“I could use a good ghost story to go with this caramel popcorn,” said Mr. Dumpty as he proceeded to munch on popcorn that Mrs. Dumpty had pulled out of her handbag.

Lucas looked hesitant to tell the group the supposed curse of Mad Marie, but caved in under the pressure. “Marie Beau was a slave here at Darkwood. She was also a powerful voodoo queen. Whenever one of the other slaves got sick or anyone in the LaPlante family needed help, she was the first one they called upon,” he paused. “Although many other plantation owners immensely feared slaves who practiced voodoo, at Darkwood the philosophy was that you never messed with a powerful queen. You see, at that time many other plantation owners had lost numerous fortunes and came across vast amounts of bad luck if they crossed a powerful witch or queen.” Lucas glanced around the cabin to monitor the reaction of the guests.

“Go on, why’d you stop?” Mr. Dumpty shouted as he continued to indulge in caramel corn.

“Marie’s life hadn’t been easy. She had lost her husband and two of her children before she was bought to work at Darkwood. Her other masters had been exceedingly cruel, and her family was forced to survive under unbearable circumstances- hence the death of her husband and two little girls.” He ran his fingers through his hair. I noticed that he was prone to doing that when he was nervous or caught in an awkward situation.

“How did her husband and girls die?” asked Mrs. Gopal.

“They died due to the same reasons most slaves died, starvation and disease.” Lucas paused for dramatic effect.

“If she was such a powerful voodoo queen, then why didn’t she save them?” Mrs. Dumpty gruffly inquired between mouthfuls of caramel corn.

“The stories I’ve heard say that they died while they weren’t at her side. By the time she got to them, there was nothing that she could have done. Despite her struggle and hardship she never once gave up hope that one day she would be a free woman of color. When she got to Darkwood, she managed to get pregnant

and gave birth to a baby boy. Her life was hard, but she was optimistic that one day her son would be free and acquire a better life for himself. At Darkwood, she was treated humanely, and there was a time when she was reasonably happy. However, everything changed the day her son died right here in this cabin.” With those words, the room went dead silent, and the Dumptys managed to stop munching on their popcorn.

“Right here? Cool!” Ben’s voice broke the eerie silence.

“How did he die?” asked Mrs. Scott, her voice barely above a whisper.

“The stories say that he was beaten to death by one of the LaPlante’s workers responsible for supervising the slaves. They apparently had an argument and Louis Beau tried to stand up for himself which didn’t go over well.”

“Why didn’t she save him?” Mr. Dumpty questioned.

“She wasn’t here. She was called into the main house upon the request of my great-great great-great grandmother Eleanor LaPlante. Her son, my great great-great grandfather, had the yellow fever and was on the verge of death. Marie, she saved him.”

“So, she didn’t save her own son but saved her boss’s son?” Mrs. Gopal was confused.

Lucus hesitated for a moment before continuing. “It drove her mad. I suppose it was the final straw.”

“What happened next?” probed Mr. Dumpty. “Go on, tell us.”

“She tried to bring her son back to life.” Lucus furiously cracked his knuckles, as he dug his shoe into the dirt floor.

“Cool, like a zombie?” Ben was excited at the prospect that there might be a zombie running around.

“Not exactly like a zombie. Queens like Marie, who are powerful enough, are able to bring back the dead if they have the blessing of the spirits. However, within the voodoo tradition all types of magic including bringing back the dead requires some sort of sacrifice.”

“Like killing babies?” Mrs. Gopal was horrified.

“I’m not quite sure what was used in this case,” Lucus admitted. “The legend says that although she tried to bring back her son from the dead, the spirits

wouldn't permit him to pass from the land of the dead and back into the land of living. Mad Marie was able to contact her son's soul which was still bound to Darkwood. Horrified by the fact that he would be trapped at Darkwood forever, she made a pact with one of the spirits."

"You mean the Devil?" whispered Ben.

"Not the Devil, but Papa Legba, the spirit who stands at the crossroads between the living and the dead."

"What was the pact?" I curiously asked.

"A soul for a soul. Papa Legba would only allow Louis Beau's soul to leave Darkwood if another soul would stay trapped here forever. However, the trade had to be equal and the chosen soul had to be the same age as Louis Beau at the time of his death. The only person the same age as him was my great great-great grandfather, so Mad Marie offered his soul to Papa Legba."

"So your great great-great grandfather is going to haunt us? That's awesome!" Ben jumped up and down when he should have been horrified.

"Have you seen him around? Have you seen the ghost?" Mr. Dumpty was every bit as fascinated as his son in seeing a ghost or two.

"I have," admitted Lucas. "You can see him all around Darkwood if you're lucky enough to notice."

"That is like so creepy." Sabrina was probably worried that a ghost would see her naked.

"What happened to Mad Marie?" I questioned, eager to know if she had escaped, if somehow she had freed herself from her horrendous existence.

"No one knows. Everyone believes that she managed to escape safely and made it to the center of New Orleans, where she established herself as a free woman."

As Lucas continued to answer questions about Mad Marie, I heard what sounded like voices singing in the distance. I left the cabin to see where they was coming from, but could see nothing. The singing was getting louder as I approached Darkwood River, and I was able to make out the words which mesmerized me even if I had no idea what they signified.

Wade in the water

*Wade in the water
Wade in the water
God's gonna trouble the water
If you don't believe I've been redeemed
God's gonna trouble the water
I want you to follow him on down to Jordan stream
(I said) My God's gonna trouble the water
You know chilly water is dark and cold
(I know my) God's gonna trouble the water
You know it chills my body but not my soul
(I said my) God's gonna trouble the water
(Come on let's) wade in the water
Wade in the water
Wade in the water
God's gonna trouble the water
Now if you should get there before I do
(I know) God's gonna trouble the water
Tell all my friends that I'm comin' too
(I know) God's gonna trouble the water
Sometimes I'm up lord and sometimes I'm down
(You know my) God's gonna trouble the water
Sometimes I'm level to the ground
God's gonna trouble the water
(I Know) God's gonna trouble the water
Wade in the water
Wade out in the water
God's gonna trouble the water*

THE VOICES HAUNTED me as they sung their tale. Soon, I found myself soulfully singing along with them. “Wade in the water. Wade out in the water.”

“Arelia!” Sabrina shrieked. “What are you doing in the water with your

shoes on? You're lucky they're cheap."

I hadn't realized that I had followed the voices into the water. I could hear them and feel them all around me. I knew they were the ghosts of all the slaves that had died at Darkwood. The song was mournful and full of despair. They didn't speak to me directly, though. I didn't know how to make them nor did I want to, but the song was beautiful.

"Areliia, are you alright?" Lucus came up from behind me. Little beads of sweat were dripping from his forehead, tempting me to wipe them away. I immediately felt embarrassed and regretted touching him at all. I looked behind me and could see Sabrina scowling at us in the distance. I knew she wouldn't come into the water for fear of ruining her booties, and there was no way that she would walk on grass in her bare feet.

"Wade in the water, wade out. Do you hear them?" I asked eagerly. I figured since he had seen me heal Ben, there wasn't any reason why he shouldn't know that I could hear a bunch of ghosts singing. As well, for some reason, I wanted him to hear the slave song as clearly as I could.

"You can, can't you?" he asked, not at all surprised.

"Can you?" I asked again.

"No. Your Aunt Mae can. She's told me about the songs."

"What do they mean?" I was dying to figure it out.

He gave me a devious grin. "You're just dying to figure it out, aren't you?" He took the thoughts right out of my head.

"No." I lied. "Come on. Tell me." I gave him a small nudge.

"I'll tell you, if you agree to share a glass of sweet tea with me during the picnic." He looked at me with his eyes full of hope.

"That's blackmail." I acted like I was tremendously offended when in reality I was secretly flattered.

"Well, if you're not interested in decoding the song, I understand." He smiled, and I felt my stomach fill with the strangest sensation. It was both exciting and inexplicably disturbing.

"Guys, come on!" shouted Sabrina.

I turned around again and saw the entire group staring at us from the edge of

the river.

“I guess we better get going.” I alerted him to the mob that was watching us.

“I’m perfectly fine standing here until you give me an answer,” Lucas was dead serious. The man must really love sweet tea.

“Why are you so interested in spending time with me, anyways?” I questioned.

Lucas lowered his head a bit. “I find you fascinating,” he admitted biting his lower lip. “You’re quite the character, Arelia LaRue.”

“Okay. Whatever, let’s go.” I just wanted to get out of the water and away from the questioning eyes of the group. Although, I have to admit that no one had ever called me fascinating before. It felt rather good

SWEET TEA WITH LUCUS

After the cabin tour was over, waiters from Darkwood house brought lunch over to the river. I helped them meticulously set up the picnic blankets, setting them with china plates and cloth napkins. One of those waiters happened to be Ivan, who once again wasn't wearing his uniform and opted to wear a black t-shirt instead.

"Hey queen, are you going to give us a hand or are you expecting me to serve you?"

"Again with the queen crap, why do you keep calling me that?"

"You're right. I should be calling you supreme queen instead." Ivan happily continued his torment.

As I was doing this, I could see Sabrina seductively flirting with Lucus from the corner of my eye. They were deep in conversation, clearly enjoying one another's company.

"What's in those baskets?" Mr. Dumpty asked Ivan.

"Humm, let me see." Ivan opened the basket and pulled out a list, "seafood cakes with marinated creole tomatoes, char-grilled pork tenderloin, red beans and rice and for dessert Creole cream cheesecake," he answered, making Mr. Dumpty slobber.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Fill up my plate," demanded a very hungry Mr. Dumpty. "I assume that you brought some liquid refreshments as well?" he queried.

“Yes, we do have a selection of afternoon cocktails you can choose from, sir.” Ivan was being overtly polite, which meant he was actually mocking Mr. Dumpty.

“I’ll go get the cocktails,” I offered instantly knowing that Mr. Dumpty was going to demand a Hurricane. I managed to find the cocktail waiter and pointed him to where Mr. and Mrs. Dumpty were busy shoveling food into their mouths.

“That fat pig, there isn’t enough food in New Orleans to fill up that belly of his.” Ivan was obviously annoyed by the fact that he had to serve Mr. Dumpty, so basically he was irritated that he had to work to get paid.

“Areliia, doesn’t it feel gross running around in bare feet? I have a pair of Chanel wedges in my bag you can use.” Sabrina had finally managed to tear herself away from Lucas and set her sights on me. “Hey, Ivan.”

“Hey.” Ivan barely looked at Sabrina. All of his attention was on Mr. Dumpty who was so absorbed in his food that he didn’t even notice Ivan’s evil eye. “I’ll catch you later,” he angrily mumbled.

“He’s so hot, but so poor. If only he were as rich as Lucas, maybe I would consider hooking up with him.” Sabrina stared after Ivan.

“Sure.” I was desperate to avoid talking about Ivan. “Back to the shoes. I’m cool. Your wedges are six inches high. I don’t think I’ll be able to walk in them.” The last time I had tried I had sprained my ankle. It was a painful experience I had no desire to repeat. “You know, it would be nice if you could help me out with the guests.” I knew my plea would fall on deaf ears.

“You worry way too much, I can’t say that enough. Look around you, everything is fine, everyone’s having a good time. I’m going to sneak in a cocktail and then go swimming.”

“Aren’t you starving?” I asked considering that we had been out in the sun for hours and had been walking the entire morning.

“Of course, I am,” she snapped. “I don’t want to look bloated in my bikini in front of Lucas.”

“What do you have to hide?”

“It’s broad daylight, and besides not everyone can be as thin as you, so excuse me if I want to look just a bit thinner,” she huffed as she tied her blonde

hair up into a ponytail.

“Okay, I just asked. You don’t have to freak out.”

“I’m sorry, I think the heat is getting to me, and the fact that Lucas is so hot doesn’t help my craziness either,” she was incredibly flushed.

“You really like him, don’t you?” For the first time, I realized that I hadn’t ever seen Sabrina this crazy over a guy. Sure, she had her stalker moments, but she never felt self-conscious or worried about not being pretty enough when it came to getting a guy. The fact that she was agonizing over the way she would look in a bikini, in front of Lucas, indicated that maybe she was falling for him.

“He’s the man I’m going to marry. I’ll bet you my collection of Prada handbags. I’m going to ask the boss if it’s okay for us to take a swim.” She meant Lucas, and the only reason she was asking was so she could announce that she was going to be changing into her bikini.

Some of the guests were still enjoying their lunches while others were taking naps under the shade of giant oak trees that were littered across the property. In the distance, I could make out Ben and the Gopals splashing around the river. I took a giant breath and for a moment enjoyed the fresh air around me. Despite all the craziness that had gone on at Darkwood, I had to admit that the place did have its unique charm.

“So, what do you think?” Sabrina came up behind me flaunting her lunchless physique in a string bikini, which pushed her large boobs up, making them appear even bigger than they were. “Pilates has done miracles for my butt. Touch it. It’s hard as a rock.” She bent over inviting me to give her round bum a squeeze. I was surprised that she didn’t fall right over since she still had her six inch booties on.

“Sabrina, there are kids here. That isn’t exactly a bikini you should be wearing at work.” There was no way I was grabbing her ass to confirm if it was firm or not, I would just have to take her word for it.

“Oh please, it’s Burberry. Ben is the only kid, and I really don’t think the guests mind.” She pointed at Mr. Dumpty who had taken off his hideous Hawaiian print shirt, leaving his gigantic, hairy chest and belly exposed. He took one look at Sabrina, grabbed his Hurricane and started making his way over to

us.

“Oh, great,” I muttered.

“He’s gross, but he’s not a bad dancer.” Sabrina was getting ready to accept the sleazy leers and compliments that Mr. Dumpty was going to shower her with. It was a classic Sabrina trick to flirt with any guy in front of the guy she did like in order to make him jealous. She was hoping Lucus would see Mr. Dumpty flirting with her and fly into a rage of passion. Yes. Sabrina used the words ‘rage of passion’. I looked behind to see if Mrs. Dumpty was at all jealous that Mr. Dumpty was checking Sabrina out, but saw that she had fallen asleep under an oak tree and was blissfully snoring up a storm. As for Lucus, I could hear him discussing the age of the oak trees with the Scotts when he should have been salivating over Sabrina in her bikini like most guys would have done.

“Good afternoon, girls.” Mr. Dumpty’s squinty blue eyes immediately focused on Sabrina’s chest. “That’s quite a bikini you have on, Sabrina. Let me say you fill it out very well.” His sunburnt red skin made him look like one of those pigs born to have an apple shoved in its mouth and slow roasted during a Hawaiian barbeque.

“You really think that it fits me well? I was afraid that I would look fat in it.” Sabrina was clearly fishing for a compliment, as she seductively circled her collarbone.

Mr. Dumpty looked as if he had died and gone to heaven. “Let me tell you if the Mrs. looked half as good as you do in a bikini, we’d go swimming more often.”

“You really are too kind.” Scarlett O’Hara was back.

“A fine Southern Belle like you should be reminded how beautiful she is every day. Would you do an ugly New Yorker a favor and take a swim with him?” He extended his arm.

“I’d be delighted, just give me a moment.” She walked towards Lucus.

“Your friend sure is pretty, and so are you.” Mr. Dumpty turned his unwanted attention to me.

I smiled and politely said, “Thank you.” I really wanted to tell him that he was a disgusting pig who obviously didn’t care what his wife or son thought, but

I was an employee, so I had to keep my cool and act dignified. Thankfully, Sabrina was back after two seconds. I could sense that she was a little disappointed.

“Lucus says he’ll join us later.” Sabrina tried to sound causal to hide her frustration.

“That’s fine with me.” Mr. Dumpty held out his arm and Sabrina reluctantly took it while shooting daggers in Lucas’s direction. I was amused watching Mr. Dumpty’s hefty frame prancing around in the water, as Ben came running towards him, leaping on top of him. Mr. Dumpty fell over, and the crowd laughed, but he brushed it off, got up and splashed Ben with some water. I guess that maybe he wasn’t such a horrible dad after all, even if he was kind of a pervert.

I never really thought about my own parents much. Over the years, I had come to realize that there was no point in obsessing over things that you couldn’t change. I was lucky to have Grand-mere Bea; still, I had the odd moment when I did think about what it would be like having a mother and father around. Maybe I would have turned out differently, a little less paranoid, a bit more confident. I could never parade around in a bikini like Sabrina or openly flirt with a fat man from New York.

“Some sweet tea to cool you down?” Lucas’s voice interrupted my contemplation. “You look like you’re cooking in that uniform.” He handed me a glass of iced sweet tea and gave me a shy smile. His lips were slightly stained from the blueberries he had been eating earlier. Not that I had been paying attention or anything.

“Well, you’re probably the one who picked it, so thanks for that.” He was right. The heat was killing me, and the skirt and blouse were made out of heavy material. I had no idea what it was called, but I knew that it wasn’t suitable for the weather.

“Wait here,” he commanded.

“Sure, you’re the boss,” I said in a sarcastic tone while sipping the sweet tea that he had given me. I had to admit that it tasted amazing. Cool and refreshing with the right amount of sugar.

“Over here.” Lucas motioned me to an oak tree. Hated being ordered around, I hesitated. “Why?”

“You’ll see.” He was so sure of himself, so confident that I would flock to him like Sabrina. “I promise it’s worth your while.”

“Fine.” I gave in and walked towards the tree.

“Sit here.” He pointed to a spot under the tree where he had placed a blanket and a pitcher of sweet tea accompanied by slices of Creole cream cheesecake.

“Why there?” I questioned as I sat down. “Okay, I get it,” I said within a minute of positioning myself against the tree. The spot was absolutely perfect. The ancient oak tree shielded us from the burning afternoon rays and a cool wind breezed through my hair, lifting it off my neck.

“Here, I thought you might need this.” Lucas handed me a white towel which I grabbed and used to wipe off the sweat that had transformed my face in to an oil slick. My tinted moisturizer slid off as I patted myself staining the towel beige. “Gross.” I examined the ruined towel. “I hope it isn’t expensive.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He bent down and took the towel from my hand and tossed it aside. As he did, I couldn’t help but notice that his thin white t-shirt had started to cling to his chest because of how much he was sweating. It provided a clear outline of his muscular torso. Catching myself staring, I looked away in embarrassment.

“So, are you going to tell me what the song means?” I asked, tugging my hair before putting it up into a ponytail. I was a little anxious that Sabrina would see us. Luckily, the way we were positioned blocked us from the view of anyone in the river.

“What do you think it means?” Lucas took a seat beside me. We were side by side, our bodies resting against the tree trunk. Far enough from one another so that we weren’t exactly touching, but close enough to make me nervous for God knows what reason.

“If I knew I wouldn’t ask,” I retorted.

Lucas laughed and turned his head, so he had a clear view of the side of my face. This made me feel self-conscious and awkward. I always suspected that I had a large nose and hated when people stared directly at my profile, so I faced

him.

“Tell me, I don’t have all day. Some of us have to work, you know.” I was being rude only because I was anxious. Unlike Sabrina, I didn’t have much experience with guys. I wasn’t the type of girl that batted her eyelashes and twirled her hair. I was a bit impaired, not exactly a smooth operator.

“It’s code,” Lucus began. “When the slaves tried to escape, the song was sung in order to advise them on how to remain undetected by the bloodhounds that were tracking them. The exact specifics of it are a mystery though. I suppose only the slaves themselves can answer that question. For the most part, the song advises the slaves to stay in the water at certain times and on land at others. I do believe it aided some of them in their attempt to escape to Canada. This is only one of many songs they sang to help and protect one another. The slave master was the enemy, so the less he understood, the better it was for the slaves.”

“I get it. They didn’t want every detail of their lives dissected and analyzed. They felt like they needed to have some control and through coded songs they had that. Or I could be completely wrong, and they thought the songs were just catchy or something.”

Lucus smiled timidly. “Your first theory is probably a bit more accurate.”

“It’s kind of like voodoo. Everyone thinks it’s such a big mystery and full of darkness because it’s so secretive,” I reasoned. “The slaves were only trying to protect what was left of their former lives.” When I thought about the powers I had in that light, I felt honored to be the voice of so many people who were kept in silence for so many centuries.

He carefully reflected on what I said before responding. “Exactly.”

“Why can I hear them? Does that mean that their souls are trapped at Darkwood?”

“Ms. Mae told me that their souls are free and have passed on safely to the other side, but they occasionally come back to Darkwood when they have a purpose.”

“What purpose?”

“I don’t exactly know,” he eventually admitted. “I think that they want to communicate with you, make you understand how things were. Open your eyes

to possibilities that you never thought about before.”

“Were they given a proper burial?” I whispered, terrified of the answer I would get. “Were the slaves that died here given proper graves?”

“Yes,” Lucus looked pained as he answered me. “There is the LaPlante family cemetery, but also the old slave cemetery close to the swamp. Although I don’t agree with my family’s history, every slave was given a proper burial.”

“But, did it really get that bad here? I mean, did the plantation really use bloodhounds to chase after the slaves?” I was horrified at the prospect of one of my distant relatives ever having to go through an ordeal like that. “How did Louis Beau really die? What argument did he have with the slave manager?”

Lucus’s voice was hauntingly solemn as he answered. “I don’t know; no one does. I heard that bloodhounds were used when it was necessary. However, it was very rare that a slave actually ran away. They knew if they did get caught by another plantation owner their lives would be much worse.”

“Don’t you ever feel guilty?” I asked. “I mean, knowing that you have all this because of what your family did to others.” I felt myself get angry, as I thought about the injustice that the poor slaves faced on the land where we were now lounging and drinking sweet tea on.

“I do. I suppose there is a certain stigma attached to belonging to the LaPlante family.” His eyes were deeply troubled, as if he were reflecting on something that had taken place years ago. “For the most part, I’ve learnt how to bury the shame and move on with my life. I’ve realized that if you let it, remorse can consume you entirely. Before you know it, you’re nothing more than a ghost lurking in the shadows.”

“That could have been me, you know,” I blurted out.

“What?” He was confused by my comment.

“Yeah, I’m part African-American. Obviously, it comes from my grand-mere’s side of the family, so that probably means that someone, somewhere in my past was a slave on this property right here. Besides, Ms. Mae says that the LaRues have been working for your family for years, whatever that’s about.”

He looked at me like I had just escaped from a mental hospital. “I do believe the sweet tea and sunshine is getting to your head.”

“No, it’s not.” I hated when guys told me that I was crazy when I was being perfectly rational.

“Listen to me, Arelia.” His forceful gaze unsettled me. “I don’t think you’d ever be a slave to anyone regardless of where you lived or what time period you were born. I bet you would have fought tooth and nail to claim your freedom and rights. You’re not like the rest of us. You have a fire inside you that can’t be put out so easily. If I had an ounce of your courage, my life would have turned out a lot different than it is now.”

“What’s so bad about the way your life turned out?” Didn’t he realize he had it all?

He paused and tugged on his t-shirt. “It’s sweltering out here.” He clearly didn’t want to talk about why his life was so horrible.

“Fine, if you don’t want to talk about yourself, tell me why the LaRues have been working for your family for so long?”

He let go of his t-shirt. “The LaRues have been working for the LaPlante family for years because they are the only family the LaPlantes trust.”

“Trust, how?” He had me intrigued.

“Your grand-mere’s family was employed after the Mad Marie incident in hopes of freeing my great-great-great grandfather from the deal Marie had entwined him in. They were all free women of color who chose to work with the family, not by any sort of force.”

“Why were they chosen and trusted?” I pressed him for more details.

“They were, excuse me,” he corrected himself, “*are* powerful voodoo queens, some even rumored to be stronger than Marie herself.”

“So, were they able to do it? Was your great-great-great grandfather freed from the curse?”

“I don’t believe he was. Most folks can still see him around Darkwood.” His voice sounded defeated. “I know you must think it’s silly of me to be worried that some ghost is running around here, but you see it’s the principle I suppose. I can’t stand the thought of him being bound to this land forever, running around in circles with no end in sight.”

“I don’t think you’re silly at all. I know how important it is for souls to pass

on safely to the other side, wherever that is. My grand-mere held an elaborate ritual when my grand-pere passed. I mean, if you really love someone and care for them, you need to make sure they're safe for eternity right?"

Lucus looked relieved. "So you don't think I'm crazy?"

I laughed.

"I come from crazy," I assured him. "I don't get it, if all of this happened so long ago, why is Ms. Mae still working for your family and why did Grand-mere Bea leave?" I was flooding him with questions, but all of it was just starting to make sense to me.

"I suppose it's tradition and Southern loyalty which prompted your aunt to stay. Besides, do you really despise me that much that you've automatically branded my entire family as monsters?" His gloom evaporated, and I could see a small smile forming at the corner of his lovely lips. Wait. Did I really just describe his lips as lovely? Maybe the sweet tea and sunshine was getting to my head.

"I never said that," I defended myself. "I never said you guys were monsters. How do you know so much about Darkwood anyways?"

"Why shouldn't I? I am a LaPlante after all."

"Yeah, I know that, but guys your age care about cars and football, not history."

He let out a small laugh. "There you go again. You really do think you know it all, don't you?"

"Like I said, I'm just calling it like I see it." It was true all the guys I did know only cared about cars and football.

"There was a time when all I cared about were women and wealth. I felt entitled and showed little respect to others who were less fortunate than myself."

"What changed?"

"Understanding that power and greed could have ugly consequences that are irreparable."

"I see." Lucus sounded a bit dramatic, but hey, I wasn't one to judge. I had my own fair share of drama over the past few days.

"It really sucks that all those people back then couldn't enjoy the land like it

is today. I mean, I doubt there were many picnics back then.”

“From what I heard there weren’t many. The slaves at Darkwood were only allowed gatherings a few times a year in which they were given extra food from the main house. I’m sure the few parties they were allowed to have were far greater than this.”

“No way. How could they have enjoyed a party with some nasty slave master standing over them?”

“Just picture it. Close your eyes,” Lucus ordered as he placed the tips of his fingers on my forehead. They felt light as cotton candy as he lowered them to my eyes and closed my lids. I felt them linger on the ends of my eyelashes and then move downwards as if they were recording all the shadows and contours of my face. My heart raced with anticipation at where they would move to next. I should have opened my eyes at that very second and left, but it felt as if I were glued to the earth below. All the noise around me vanished, and at that moment, there was only me and Lucus.

“Imagine a full moon on a dark night,” Lucus rested his hand on my shoulder and began describing his version of what a party held by the slaves might have looked like centuries ago. “The river lit by the flames of a bonfire and brought to life by the beating of African drums. The aroma of black-eyed pea soup and jambalaya fills the air while children play and dance. For just one moment, every slave forgets their miserable existence and gives thanks for the little that they do have. Sometimes there is sheer beauty in simplicity.”

As he continued to describe the scene, I felt myself get transported back in time. My nostrils filled with the scent of jambalaya and my body moved to the rhythm of the drums.

“Now that doesn’t seem too terrible, does it?” he asked. “It’s no justification for the cruelties they endured, but if they were happy for just one moment, it means that they suffered a little less.”

“I guess. I mean, under the circumstances, but that still doesn’t make it right and will never make it right.” I opened my eyes as Lucus dropped his hand from my shoulders. In some weird way, he had made me feel less guilty about lazing around on the grounds. He made me feel comfortable, but at the same time

inexplicably terrified and vulnerable. “So why did your family decide to open Darkwood to guests this summer?”

“It was my idea. I thought it was about time to share some of its magic with the public. Let them see how beautiful it really is. The past can never be altered, but that doesn’t mean the future has to be bleak as well.”

“It is gorgeous,” I admitted. “Where does your family get the money to keep it in such good condition? I mean the property is still in great shape, considering it’s so old.”

“The LaPlante family fortune runs deep. It’s vast and is centuries old.”

“Must be tough,” I sighed at the thought of having a vast fortune.

“Areliia, trust me when I say that money is not everything. The gift that you have is far more valuable and can never be bought or sold.” His voice was full of passion and conviction, as he tried to persuade me how hard it was being rich. I wasn’t exactly buying it.

“Of course it can. People try to sell their soul to the Devil all the time,” I joked.

“And look how that always turns out,” Lucus darkly replied.

We sat in silence for a few moments enjoying the breeze and the shade the oak tree provided. It wasn’t an awkward pause. It actually felt so comfortable that I sensed my eyes starting to get heavy. Being out in the sun all day wasn’t something that I was used to and I never realized how much energy it could take out of someone. Plus, yesterday I had spent the night babysitting Ben and then Sabrina. I estimated that I got barely an hour’s sleep between all the craziness. From where I was sitting, I could smell Lucus. Given the fact that he was sweaty, he should have smelled pretty gross, but he didn’t. He smelled rather inviting.

“Areliia!” Sabrina’s shriek snapped me out of my nap. “What are you doing?”

“Huh?” I opened my eyes and realized that I had crashed from my sweet tea fuelled high and had fallen asleep with my head resting on Lucus’s shoulder. Great, first Sabrina had passed out, and now it was me. He must have thought we were the most inadequate employees to ever have worked at Darkwood.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled in embarrassment as I got up. “I didn’t realize. I

must have fallen asleep.” I was mortified, but tried to keep calm.

“It’s really not a problem.” Lucas didn’t make a big deal out of me slobbering on his shoulder.

“Can I talk you for a minute?” Sabrina grabbed my arm and pulled me away from where I was standing. “Just give us a minute, please,” she said to Lucas, her voice turning from bitter to sweet.

“Take your time,” Lucas replied.

THE GOOD FIGHT

Sabrina was on a mission as she dragged me away from Lucas and the guests. I knew she was furious, the grip she had on my wrists was going to leave a mark of some sort. When satisfied that we were far away from the crowd, she stopped in front of a slave cabin and pulled me inside.

“How could you!” she instantly exploded. “You know that I like Lucas and you’re throwing yourself at him.” I tried to take her seriously, but since she was still in her bikini, it made it just a bit more difficult.

“What are you talking about? I’m throwing myself at him, how exactly am I doing that?” There was no way I was going to let her get away with her accusations.

“I wanted to spend time with him today. I brought this stupid bikini, so he would notice me, but instead he’s sitting under a tree with you, stroking your hair,” she huffed.

“Stroking my hair, what the hell are you talking about? I fell asleep. That’s it,” I spat back. Had Lucas been stroking my hair while I had been asleep? I wasn’t sure if that was sweet or just plain creepy. Maybe he was a serial murderer after all. Whatever the case, I hadn’t felt him stroking my hair. I suspected that Sabrina was exaggerating a tiny bit.

“How convenient, that you just happened to fall asleep on his shoulder!”

“Maybe the reason I fell asleep is because I’ve been doing double the work I’m supposed to be doing, while you’re off chasing some guy.”

“Some guy, Lucus is not some guy.” Sabrina’s fair skin was getting blotchy like it usually did when she was angry.

“What is he then? You’ve known him for what two days and you seriously think you’re going to marry him. Get real. You don’t even know if he has a girlfriend, or who knows, he might be gay.”

Sabrina looked as if I just had slapped her across the face with a French baguette. From my experience at Lola’s, I knew those loaves of bread could be utilized as deadly weapons.

“Who cares if he does,” she shrugged. “I know he’s falling in love with me and you’re just ruining it by sneaking off with him whenever you can.”

“I haven’t been sneaking off with him. He’s the one who wanted to talk to me.” I justified my behavior even though I didn’t have to.

“Sure, blame him. I know you want his attention; you even blow-dried your hair and wore tinted moisturizer and mascara today. Why else would you do that?”

“I can’t look decent? Only you can load on globs of crap on your face. I don’t get you. You always tell me that I need to put in a little bit of an effort, and when I finally do, you think I’m competing against you.” I felt my blood starting to boil and my fingers starting to clutch, as a means of controlling my rage. “You’re such a hypocrite!”

“Oh, please, Arelia. I’m sick of you always playing the victim card. Poor me, I don’t have any parents, I’m not pretty when you know you have it all.”

“Really?” I crossed my arms. “Tell me Sabrina, how exactly do I have it all? Go ahead, please enlighten me. I’m dying to know.”

“Just like you to be sarcastic,” she mumbled bitterly.

I ignored her comment. “I’m waiting, please do enlighten me.”

“You always claim that you don’t care about boys or the way you look, but you know you’re gorgeous. Your skin doesn’t get blotchy, and your eyelashes are way longer than mine even when I have fake ones on with clumps of mascara. You know that any guy at school would go out with you in a heartbeat.”

“I don’t care. You know all I want to do is get out of my shitty apartment and

go to college, not become some kind of Stepford wife like you.” I knew that statement was below the bikini line, but at this point I just couldn’t help myself. My words were spewing out like venom, and it felt exhilarating.

“Have you ever thought that maybe some of us aren’t as smart as you and that the only hope of happiness we have is becoming a so-called Stepford wife? Not all of us have to work, my mother never had to, so why should I? I’m not guilty about being privileged. Besides, from what I can see, you’re treading in Stepford-land given the attention you’re giving Lucas.”

“You’re insane, do you hear yourself? How am I giving any attention to Lucas? You’re the one who stayed up all night talking to him, and dancing with him.”

“Shut up Arelia, you know I was lying about that.”

“What are you talking about?” I pretended I was clueless.

“I passed out, but woke up when you came in the room.”

“Why didn’t you say anything? I was so worried about you and you were awake all along eavesdropping into our conversation?”

“I didn’t want to spoil your little flirtation. I heard it all. I see the way you look at him. I may be stupid, but I’m not blind.”

“You’re not stupid.” I felt bad for her, staying awake there listening to us talk. Shit. Had she heard the part about the snake bite and the swamp too, if she had she hadn’t mentioned it yet. “You are delusional though.” I hid my fear by continuing the argument. “We’ve known him for two days.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she replied with confidence. “After you left last night, Lucas and I had sex.”

“Good for you.” At this point, I really didn’t care.

“It was magnificent,” she wickedly taunted. “He told me how beautiful I am and swore that he was falling in love with me. He was rather insatiable. We did it three times- or was it four?” She tapped her finger against her forehead making it seem like she was trying to remember. “He may have given you chocolates, but he gave me something much better. Yeah, I know the chocolates weren’t for me, I read the card. You left it on the table.”

“I couldn’t care less,” I maintained.

“Sure you do,” she continued. “You shouldn’t be surprised though, men do prefer these,” she pointed to her boobs, “over those,” she pointed to mine trying to demonstrate the considerable difference in their size.

“That’s so mature. I thought we were past junior high school.”

“We may be, but boys will never be.”

“If you’ve already had sex with him and know that he prefers you over me, why the hell are you telling me to stay away from him? We’ve been best friends all of our lives. When have we ever let a stupid boy come between us?” It was the truth, this was the first time we had an argument over a guy, and it was getting very ugly.

“Because this is the first time I know you like the same guy as I do, so I’m just warning you if you compete against me, you will lose. That’s a promise. Besides, guys don’t like freaks, they like nice, normal girls who won’t complicate their lives.”

“What do you mean by that? Are you implying that I’m some kind of freak?”

“Cut the crap, Arelia. Like you said, we’ve known each other our whole lives. You really think that I’m so self-absorbed that I never noticed the spirits that you’re always mumbling to? Now Lucus knows it too, given your little show in the swamp last night and all.”

“You knew. You knew,” I repeated trying to come to grips with what I had just heard. “All of these years you knew about that and you never said one word. Not a single peep came out of your thin, little lips.” I knew she hated the fact that her lips were so thin. Hey, if she took a jab at my boobs, I had a right to take one at her lips.

“Why should I have? I don’t want to get involved in that freaky crap and neither do you, apparently.”

Now she had hit a soft spot, and I could feel tears starting to form. I rarely cried, but knowing that Sabrina had never lent me any sort of support knowing how hard it had been for me all of these years pretending to be normal was too much.

“Then don’t.” I fought my tears. “Don’t be involved, I don’t need you.”

“I have no intention of being pulled into your world,” she screamed cruelly.

She left me standing alone in the cabin.

Upon her exit, I fell to the ground and started sobbing. I let the tears stream down my face freely and didn't care if anyone overheard me. This whole situation was so confusing to me. I couldn't believe that my best friend had just classified me as a freak. Sure, I knew I was different, but up until this point no one had called me a freak. I knew that I wasn't supposed to care what others thought, Grand-mere Bea had taught me to be proud of myself, but it was Sabrina, she was family. I thought we were sisters. Despite our differences and fights over the years, it had never gotten this dirty before.

Why was she so threatened by me and what she perceived as my relationship with Lucas? I had never done anything to betray her trust, but all of a sudden she was acting like I was the enemy.

I sat on the dirt floor for what seemed like hours, when in reality it was probably only a couple of minutes. Around me, I could hear what sounded like the beating of drums and chanting. It was savage, rhythmic, and at the same time absolutely tantalizing. The drumming put me in a trance, and for a few minutes, I was able to connect with the ghosts of the slaves visiting the cabin. They whispered in my ears stories of tragedy, death and betrayal. Their wails were woeful and full of turmoil. They cried about their plight as slaves and the cruelties they endured to attain freedom. I could feel them giving me strength and trying to comfort me with the knowledge that if they had the power to go on, then so did I. They told me, they sometimes chose to come back to Darkwood because the oak trees were so peaceful. They were happy and at last finally free from oppression. They spoke of destiny and how sometimes we were chosen to do things that others were too weak to do. Despite the hardships they had faced and the wounds that had left them scarred, not all of them were bitter. They told me that everything would be alright, but I did need to be careful, because after this summer, life would never be the same for me. Eventually, the drumming stopped and I was left alone. I felt silly, sitting there and crying my eyes out over an argument when life could be so much crueler than it was, but I was hurt, so I allowed myself to cry.

I thought about Mad Marie, and for the first time, I could see why she had

done what she did. All the people that she ever loved were taken from her and she was left alone. Was I capable of turning into a Mad Marie? Was that the reason I was so afraid of what I really was? I must have been there for an hour reflecting and trying to stop bawling like a baby when I heard someone approaching the cabin door. It was Ben.

“Arelia.”

“Ben, what are you doing here?” I quickly adjusted my voice to make it sound like I hadn’t been crying and wiped the tears from my eyes.

“I wanted to see if I could catch a glimpse of the ghost.” His voice was excited until he saw my tear stained face. His squinty eyes looked at me in confusion as he walked towards me. “Why are you crying?” He sat beside me on the dirt floor and put his chubby arm around me.

“I’m not crying,” I lied.

“Yes you are,” he accused. “Your face is all puffy. It looks weird, and your eyes are all red.”

“It’s the air, I have contacts on,” I continued the act.

“It’s okay to cry if you’re sad. Are you sad because there’s no more cheesecake?”

I had to laugh at his comment. “No, that’s not it,” I admitted. “I’m sad because I had a fight with Sabrina. She’s my best friend.”

“It’s okay, Arelia. I get sad with my mom and dad too.”

“Like when?”

“When they spend too much time with Mary or watching hurricanes and forget that I am there.”

Hearing Ben talk about his problems made me forget my own. “I know they love you very much Ben; sometimes people make mistakes, though.”

“Like your friend Sabrina,” he reasoned.

“Yes, like my friend Sabrina. I guess.”

“I bet she’s just jealous because you’re prettier than her.”

“Thanks, Ben.” I gave him a little nudge. “You’re going to be quite the heartbreaker one day. Why don’t you go and see if there is some cheesecake still hidden somewhere. I’ll be there in a minute.” I really needed that minute to

compose myself and get over the nasty scene that had just played out.

“Sounds awesome!” He leapt up from the floor.

As soon as Ben left, Ivan rushed in. “Peace at last.” He was unaware that I was in the room. When he did notice me, he looked surprised. “Don’t tell me you’re crying over Prince Charming and Barbie. I really need a break. I’ll pass on the pity party.” He lit up a cigarette and sat down next to me.

“Leave me alone. It’s none of your business anyways.”

“Do you want a drag?” He held out his cigarette.

“No, I want to be left alone.”

“What do you see in that guy?”

“Seriously! Again? How many times have you asked me that question and how many times have I said *nothing*. Don’t you have anything better to do? I’m sure that you can find another hobby besides annoying me all summer.”

“Trust me, if it were only that simple,” he muttered under his breath, but it was still loud enough for me to hear.

“I don’t have to put up with this.” I got up to leave.

“It looks like someone’s annoyed,” he mocked. I felt like punching him, I really did. How could one human be so annoying? I was beginning to think that his sole purpose in life was to make me want to kill him. I was about to leave when I heard Ivan start to sing:

When the sun comes up and the first quail calls, follow the drinking gourd.

For the old man is a-waiting to carry you to freedom,

If you follow the drinking gourd

The riverbank makes a very good road.

The dead trees show you the way,

Left foot, peg foot, travelling on

Follow the drinking gourd

THE WORDS SENT a shiver down my spine, his voice was oppressively gloomy. His eyes were full of torment as he sang. I couldn’t help but be mesmerized. “Where is that from?” I was curious.

“What do you care?”

“Never mind.” I was an idiot for even trying to ask him a serious question.

“It’s a slave song,” he informed me while taking a deep drag.

“Why do you have a slave song memorized?”

Ivan threw his head back and laughed. “Do you have some sort of monopoly over the slave songs in the area? Is there some sort of law that makes it illegal for me to sing one?”

“No, I just think it’s weird.” Well it was.

“I’m in a band.” He was obviously lying. “Since our songwriter died last month, and I’m tired of doing shitty covers I’m trying to explore some fresh material. You know, trying to think outside the box.”

“You’re lying,” I accused.

“What if I am? Are you the moral police?” His voice had a ruthless ring to it.

“It’s pointless trying to have a conversation with you,” I stated.

“I’m sorry I don’t captivate you and make your heart pound, I’ll try harder to be much cuter. Would you share some sweet tea with me, Arelia? I would be honored if you did,” he imitated Lucus.

“You’re an idiot.” I turned my back on him and left him sitting on the cabin floor.

Back at the picnic area, everyone was still lounging around enjoying the afternoon sun. Ben went to get himself some Coke, and I promised to find us some cheesecake. Sabrina and Lucus were sitting under the same tree that I had fallen asleep under. They weren’t kissing. Sabrina appeared to be rambling on about something, while Lucus listened intently. When Lucus saw me, he excused himself and made his way towards me. Of course, Sabrina was pissed.

“You disappeared.” His smile vanished once he saw my tear stained puffy face. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” I replied in a cold voice that I hoped would discourage him from talking to me.

“Where did you go?” He continued cautiously.

“Look, it doesn’t matter where I went. Why do you care, anyways?”

“I just...”

“Please, leave me alone. I want to be left alone” I cut him off. He looked a little shocked and unsure of what to say next.

“Of course, I understand.” He didn’t press or demand that I tell him what was wrong which made me feel relieved that I didn’t have to explain myself, and the fight that Sabrina and I had. I walked away, fully aware that he was watching me, but I didn’t care; or so I told myself.

I NEED YOU

That night, I sat in our room and took a look at the book that Ms. Mae had given me. Dinner was over, and we had been relieved from our duties, or I had anyways. I hadn't seen Sabrina since we had been in the dining room where she had proceeded to give me evil glances if Lucus even looked in my general direction. She hadn't come to our room afterwards, so I assumed that she was off somewhere with Lucus having the time of her life. I tried to forget about what she had said about me being a freak and was determined to concentrate on what was written on the pages in front of me.

I flipped through the LaRue spell book and saw that it dated back to the 1700s. No wonder it looked like it could fall apart at any minute. I was overwhelmed by the amount of information it contained; covering spells, ingredients, voodoo dolls, candle reading, card reading and surprisingly even black magic. I decided to start by reading the basic principles of being a voodoo queen. Even though living with Grand-mere Bea had given me a rough idea, I wasn't entirely sure if voodoo was anything more than a marketing idea invented by the tourism board of New Orleans. Still, putting my skepticism aside I read on:

Proceed with caution my child, this book and the knowledge within it is not for the weak or foolish. This knowledge only belongs in the hands of the powerful and respectful. When a voodoo queen intentionally or unintentionally offends a loa, she will have to pay for her betrayal in the worst possible way. You

see, the loa do not exist to be the puppets of the queen. Instead, they exist to be served and respected. One cannot call upon the loa to do ones beck and call without showing them respect. A queen must take caution when contacting the spirits, for there are many who disguise themselves as loa, but are really evil demon spirits who mean harm rather than good. Pay careful attention to the following list:

- 1. Voodoo is based on communication with spirits known as loa.*
- 2. The loa are responsible for all events that take place on earth.*
- 3. Spirits can be controlled through rituals and offerings. However, one must be cautious in dealing with the spirits. Not all have any intention of helping.*
- 4. In voodoo, there is no distinct difference between good and evil. There is only balance.*
- 5. In order to be truly powerful, a voodoo queen must have complete control over natural and supernatural elements that can be used to communicate with the loa. Once mastery is complete, she can utilize all elements in order to heal, curse, reverse hexes, contact the dead, and even bring back the dead.*
- 6. Some queens are blessed by the spirits, and thus are automatically more powerful than others.*
- 7. Voodoo queens have the capability of being more powerful than any other supernatural creature.*
- 8. A truly powerful queen will be able to heal, communicate with the spirits, predict the future, cast spells and create potions.*
- 9. It is critical to remember that the loa are not gods, and they should never be treated as such. A voodoo queen must have a two way relationship with the loa which is based on the principles of giving and taking. Once you start treating the loa as gods, you will be put in a very vulnerable position. You must treat them with respect, but at the same time not give in to their every demand.*

As I read through the list, I felt my eyes closing. There was no way that I would be able to remember all of this stuff, and why did I have to anyways? What was I getting myself into? I wanted to put an end to all of this nonsense and tell Ms. Mae that I had no desire to be a part of this world, but then where would that leave me? Would I always be running and hiding from who I was?

Sure, I had been in denial my whole life, not the most effective plan, but enough to keep me sane.

A soft knock at the door interrupted my thoughts. Dressed in ratty shorts and a prehistoric blue tank top, I was hesitant to open it, but I decided to anyways thinking that it may be Ms. Mae or Henri.

“Lucus.” I was surprised to see that it was him. “Sabrina’s not here.” I swiftly attempted to shut the door in his face. It was a move that was blocked by his foot.

“I’m not here to see Sabrina. I am here to see you.” His voice was eerily serious, and his expression was anxious.

“What is your problem?” I asked a little louder than I had hoped to. “I had a horrible fight with my best friend over you because she is under the impression there is something going on between us. Now, if you are the gentleman that you claim to be, which I know you’re not, considering that you had sex with Sabrina three times last night and now are here with me, you would get out of here.”

Okay, I had no idea why I was actually speaking like Lucus and I didn’t know why I was so angry at him for having sex with Sabrina. He was a guy, and that is what they did. I had been a fool for thinking that there was something different about Lucus. An idiot for thinking that despite his good looks, and wealth, he was...

“Where was I when all of this happened?”

“You mean, you never?” For some inexplicable reason, I was getting way too excited over this little revelation. “But, she said.”

“You were there. You saw her passed out like a log. I merely guided her back to your room once she had woken up. Do I sense a hint of jealousy?”

“I’m sick and tired of everyone assuming that I’m some kind of jealous psychopath.”

“I don’t think you’re a psychopath, I do apologize for my role in the fight. I had no intention of causing a rift in your friendship.”

“It’s not technically your fault. I just don’t get why you insist on hanging around me when you clearly know how Sabrina feels about you.”

“Is there some sort of law that forbids me to enjoy your company? I’m

simply getting to know you better. You're here for the summer. I'm just trying to be cordial. However, there are certain things that I know only you will be able to understand. Things that I need you to understand."

"Why are you here?"

Lucus inched towards me, and I stepped back. There was no way I was going to get caught in any awkward touching situation with him. I knew the moment I did, Sabrina would come flying through the door. Despite me taking a step back, Lucas continued to come closer. I couldn't help but notice how his black dinner jacket fit so perfectly over his shoulders. He looked so composed and comfortable in it, even though it was boiling. The summer heat had continued to rage long after the sun had gone down. His commanding eyes focused on me as if he were gathering the courage to say something important. They begged me to listen to him. I felt my walls starting to gradually chip away, but I couldn't allow it. I couldn't allow myself to be next to him, if I wanted to save my friendship with Sabrina.

"You shouldn't be here." My voice hadn't come out as strong as it had sounded in my head. Physically, I'd never been attracted to someone as much as I was to him, but I had to get a grip on it and focus on why I was here. I had to make money, not spend the summer drooling over some guy.

Before I could take another step backwards, he grabbed me and pulled me towards his hard chest. I could feel his heart beating almost as fast as mine. I wanted to yell at him, but a part of me felt exhilarated to be so close to him.

"Let go of me," I demanded, even though a larger part of me didn't want him to.

"Areliia, please listen to me." His eyes were full of fire and sorrow.

"Maybe if you let go of me, I will." I struggled to regain my composure.

Slowly, he set me free, and I sat down on the bed making, sure that I maintained a considerable distance from him.

"Go on," I ordered. I was curious as to what was making him so anxious.

"I don't know how to start or what words I can use without scaring you," he began. "Since the first time I ever laid eyes on you, I knew that you could help me." He paused and took a deep breath. "I need you," he spat out.

That was unexpected. “You need me for what, exactly?”

“Lucus, there you are!” Sabrina stood in the doorway, dressed in a black and white floral Prada evening dress. I had been with her when she had bought it.

Knowing that Sabrina was already angry at me, Lucus lied. “I’ve been looking all over for you. I figured you must have come in here.”

“I was just in the bathroom freshening up, sugar.” She gave him a little wink. Had she really just called him sugar? Seriously. Sugar?

Not wasting an opportunity to make a snide remark to me in front of Lucus, she said, “Arelia, feel free to borrow some of my pajamas. Those shorts look like they could turn to dust any second. Now, Lucus, you promised me a tour of the garden.”

“It’s quite late,” Lucus halfheartedly replied. “Perhaps it would be better if I showed you the gardens with all of the other guests?”

“Don’t be silly, I love the smell of flowers in the evening,” she twisted the truth. The only flowers she liked to smell were the ones crushed and made into expensive perfume.

“Yeah, she really does.” I hoped that Lucus would pick up on my cue and take Sabrina to the garden. If he didn’t, she would get even angrier at me and at this point I had enough drama for the day.

“Alright then, I’ll be happy to show you the garden. Good evening to you, Arelia,” Lucus warily gave me a small nod. He understood that I wanted to keep the peace and the only way that it was possible at this point was him giving Sabrina a stupid tour of the garden.

Once they left, I couldn’t stop thinking about what Lucus had said to me. How the hell did he need me? Was he some kind of player, pitting Sabrina and I against one another by making each of us like him? Not that I did like him or anything, even though he was attractive. It was all so strange, but I wanted to find out more. I kind of had to. If he was dangerous, I needed to warn Sabrina. Even though we were fighting, I understood that we would be okay eventually, we always were. I hoped we would be, anyways. I glanced out of the window, and in the distance, I could see Lucus and Sabrina as they made their way to the main garden. Sabrina had her arm linked with Lucus’s, and for just a split

second, I imagined what it would feel like to be in her place.

I had been staring out the window for a few minutes when I heard another knock at the door. “Hey queen, are you up? Open the door.”

“Go away, I’m sleeping.”

“If you were sleeping, you wouldn’t be talking. Open the door. I’ll make an embarrassing scene if you don’t.” Ivan started pounding on the door loud enough that the guests who were sleeping probably were wide awake by now.

“What do you want?” I was furious as I flung the door open.

“Hello to you too.” He let himself in and sprawled out on my bed.

“Gross, you smell like a mini-bar, get off of my bed.”

“What are you reading?” He ignored me and picked up the LaRue spellbook that I had left open on my bed.

“It’s none of your business.” I tried to grab the book from his hand, but he was holding on to it too tightly and I was afraid it might rip.

“Black cats and graveyard dirt, I was right, you are a voodoo queen.” He looked awfully pleased with himself.

“Even if I were, it’s none of your business.” I sat down on the bed next to him as he proceeded to flip through the book. It would be my only chance to grab it from him.

“So what kind of tricks can you do?” He took off his black t-shirt and tossed it on the floor.

“This isn’t your house, and I’m not your maid.” I picked up the shirt and tossed it back at him.

“Hey, it’s a hot night, and I thought you’d appreciate the view.” He demonstrated his perfectly cut abs. “Now tell me, what kind of stuff can you do?”

“Nothing,” I replied wearily, not quite telling the truth. I didn’t trust Ivan, he was too interested, always lurking around and showing up at odd times.

“You can’t be serious, you say you’re a voodoo queen, but you can’t do any magic?” His laughter filled the silent room. “You’ve got to be kidding me, that is hilarious.”

“I never said I was a voodoo queen, you did.” I pointed out.

“Hey, it’s okay, if you want to talk about it.” His voice took on a thoughtful tone for once.

“With you? Thanks, but I’ll pass.”

“Hey, I’m a pretty trustworthy guy.”

“Any guy that says he’s trustworthy probably isn’t. Now, give me back the book.”

“You know the LaPlantes are scum, don’t you?” he said out of nowhere. Darkness filled his grey eyes. For an instant, I saw much more than a jerk. I saw a guy who was deeply troubled and tormented over something that he had not gotten over.

“Why? You don’t even know them.”

“I’ve heard rumors, plus any family that builds their wealth off the back of slaves is pretty much scum in my books,” he proclaimed adamantly.

“Why should you care how the family got their money? Plus, by the looks of it, your family probably did the same thing.”

“Don’t be so quick to judge, queen,” he snarled.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” he replied. “So why are you at Darkwood, anyways?”

“A vacation. What does it look like I’m doing here? I’m just trying to pay the bills.”

“I guess we do have something in common after all. Just two working class people trying to scrape by, watching the rich kids play.”

“I’m not watching anyone play.” I knew he was referring to Sabrina.

“Oh please, you wish you were Sabrina, don’t you? You would just love hanging off Lucas’s arm.” He stretched out further and put his hands under his head.

“And you would love to be Lucas and have Sabrina hang on to your every word,” I fired back.

“Yeah sure,” he laughed. “Trust me, that’s one guy I wouldn’t want to be, and that’s one girl that I could easily have. So have you lived in New Orleans your whole life? When did you find out you were a queen?”

“Oh lord, how many times do I have to tell you that I’m not a queen,” I

threw my hands up in the air in frustration. “Yes, born and raised in New Orleans.” Why was I even bothering answering his questions?

“There’s no need to snap, I’m just trying to make small talk. I guess I better let you get your beauty rest, it looks like you really need it.” He glanced over my shabby shorts and smirked. “Once you learn a few tricks I’d be so happy to see them.” He finally got off of the bed and let himself out of the room. What a weirdo.

SUMMER SCHOOL

Keeping good on my promise to Ms. Mae and Erzulie, I hauled myself out of bed early the next morning in order to attend my first lesson in voodoo. The weather was an accurate reflection of my mood, dark and gloomy, a sure indication that it was going to start pouring any second. Sabrina's snores filled the entire room as usual. I was surprised to see that she actually managed to sleep in the same room as me and hadn't crashed in Lucas's room again.

Downstairs the kitchen smelled inviting as always, and since I was too mad to eat dinner last night, my stomach was begging for something made out of chocolate.

"Areliia, you made it." Ms. Mae greeted me, looking radiant as usual in an aquamarine blue dress with a matching headscarf. The colors made her green eyes appear even brighter.

"You're not looking too well," Henri noted as he sipped what smelt like French coffee.

Ms. Mae came over to me and put her hand on my forehead. "Temperature's alright, you haven't been eating well, that's the problem. You've been running around and neglecting to put anything in that tiny stomach of yours."

I rolled my eyes. Did I really look like crap? It was early, and my eyes were puffy in the morning, they didn't have to make me feel bad about it. Plus, it was way too hot to eat. "It's too hot to eat full meals," I complained. "I can really go

for iced coffee and chocolate though.”

“Pierre, make my niece some iced coffee and some Creole Pancakes,” Ms. Mae ordered the plump chef who was standing over the stove. “Ivan, please bring them to my office when they’re done.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ivan responded. Oh great, I was never going to hear the end of this. Ivan smirked at me from the corner of the kitchen. He was fully aware that I was embarrassed by Ms. Mae bossing him around and asking him to bring me breakfast.

“Arelia, come with me,” she commanded. Henri gave her a kiss and excused himself to attend some chores.

“I’ll be right there,” I replied lingering back, so I could tell Ivan that I could get my own breakfast.

“Don’t worry, queen, your breakfast is coming right up.” Ivan gave me a curtsy like people probably gave Will and Kate.

“I don’t need you to do me any favors. I’m waiting here so I can get it myself.”

“Sure, I hear you. Pierre, don’t keep the queen waiting.”

“Pierre, don’t listen to him; take all the time you want.” When Pierre was done with breakfast, I helped myself and headed towards Ms. Mae’s office. “What is all this?” I asked as I examined the various substances that filled the jars on the shelves.

“Have a seat,” Ms. Mae directed pointing to a wooden chair and managing to ignore my question. “I assume that you’ve started reading the book I gave you.”

“Yes.” I started last night. I had brought it downstairs with me, but it was so heavy, I was relieved to have a place to put it down.

“So what have you learnt so far?” she sternly asked.

“You know the usual. Black cats, voodoo dolls,” I retorted, still not taking the whole thing seriously.

“Please be serious, Arelia,” her voice filled with irritation. I had to admit I was being a little immature, but my iced coffee hadn’t kicked in yet. “What is the difference between hoodoo and voodoo?”

“They start with different letters,” I shrugged.

Ms. Mae repressed a laugh and tried to maintain her somber expression. “Yes, but there are more differences than just a letter. Hoodoo is pure magic, without the help of the spirits while voodoo is magic with the aid of the spirits. The LaRue family tradition uses both voodoo and hoodoo. We ask the spirits for help and guidance but also rely on the earth’s natural properties to conjure and carry out other magical rituals.”

“Okay, what does that mean exactly? I don’t really know if I truly believe in all of this or anything like that.”

After examining me for a moment, Ms. Mae eventually spoke. “You can choose to believe or not to believe; in the end what you are meant to do eventually will find you. You can spend your life running and living in denial or be brave and accept the reality of your destiny. This isn’t something you choose. It selects you.”

“Why should I accept it? Why me? What makes me different? I don’t get it.” I could feel myself getting frustrated. “Why do I have to be a voodoo queen?”

“You have to accept that not all souls are equal. Some are strong while others are weak. It doesn’t matter how long a soul has been roaming around, some will never be as influential as others. It’s a just a myth that we are all equal. People go running around thinking that they can offer their soul to the Devil, and he will come and shower them with riches,” she paused for dramatic effect. “The Devil’s no fool and he doesn’t want any old soul, he wants the powerful ones. The spirits also only help the ones that are strong enough to accept their gifts.”

“So, what you’re saying is that, my soul is worth more than others?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t buy that.”

“Oh, my dear Arelia, you’re always trying to be so logical.” Ms. Mae frantically shook her head. “Not everything is black and white. There are some things that are not meant to be proven logically, they just are. They have existed long before us and will continue to do so long after we leave this earth. Now my child, if you want me to explain the specifics of how or why you are powerful, why us LaRue woman are gifted, I cannot help you. On the other hand, if you are willing to listen to me and learn, I can help you develop your powers. So the

question is, are you willing to believe? Are you willing to put aside all of your doubts and fully embrace your destiny, or are you comfortable living in denial?"

"I guess I'm willing to give it a try." I didn't really have anything to lose.

"There is no giving it a try, once you start, things will never go back to normal," Ms. Mae warned.

"Great, so I won't have to live in that cramped apartment with James always breathing down our necks to pay him the rent on time? That doesn't sound too bad. I'm in."

My choice pleased Ms. Mae immensely. "Perfect, let's not waste any more time then. However, before we officially begin, I need you to understand you will be officially initiated when I deem appropriate."

"Initiated? My blood isn't going to be involved is it?" I felt nauseous at the thought of her trying to fill a cup up with my blood and offering it to some random spirit. Maybe I wasn't cut out for this after all. It was getting serious now.

"Just a tiny bit," she replied. "Since you are already blessed by Erzulie, you have no need to undergo a formal ordination. However, to complete the bond, you need to pledge your dedication and accept your post as a voodoo queen. This can only be done after you undergo sufficient training with me."

I froze. When she put it that way, it sounded more than a little serious. "Can I have a minute?" The room was starting to move, my pulse was racing. I was sure I was having a heart attack or at least a panic attack.

Ms. Mae looked at me without an ounce of concern. "Take your time, my child. There's nothing I haven't seen before. Fear, doubt, and hesitation are all normal emotions under these circumstances."

"They are?" I stuttered.

"Yes, that is what makes us human."

I got up and clutched the door handle. "I'm just going to get some fresh air. It'll only be a minute." I rushed out before she had a chance to respond. I found my way into the kitchen and let myself into the little back garden. I had to talk to Grand-mere Bea. What if she was right and all of this was too dangerous? A part of me wanted to run away and forget Darkwood and the stupid money. However,

a larger part of me wanted to stay. I dialed home, praying that Grand-mere was there and could offer me some advice.

“Hello.” Grand-mere Bea picked up on the first ring.

“Oh thank God!” It was so good to hear her voice. Even though I had promised her that I would call every day, things hadn’t exactly worked out that way. We hadn’t spoken since I had confronted her about Ms. Mae.

“Arelia, I’ve been so worried about you. Why haven’t you called?” She sounded angry, but she would eventually get over it.

“I know I should have called. I’m sorry, but I’ve been busy.” My excuse sounded lame even to my own ears.

“I’m sure you have.” She knew something was up. “So I take it you’re going to be studying with Mae?”

“I think so. I want to, but I’m not sure.”

“Don’t let me hold you back. Like I’ve always said, we are all responsible for the choices we make, and there’s no changing that. If you feel that you have to study with Mae then do so, but beware of the consequences of your actions.”

“I know, Ms. Mae said that there would be some kind of initiation. It all sounds so serious to me.”

“It ought to sound serious because it is. There won’t be any going back once you start.”

I groaned. “Ms. Mae said the exact same thing, you know.”

“Well she better have because it’s the truth. That’s just the way it is.”

“I do want to come home, but I just can’t.” I didn’t understand what was keeping me here, so how could I explain it to her any better?

“Tsk tsk tsk. I take it you’ve met Lucas?”

“What? How do you know Lucas? And even if I did run into him, what difference does that make?”

“Please, Arelia. I still know what goes on at Darkwood, even if I don’t live there. Of course I know about Lucas. Be careful- once your heart gets involved, all reason goes out the window.”

“My heart isn’t involved,” I protested. It was a little too loud for my own liking. What was I trying to prove?

“I know you better than I know the hairs on my own head. I know you’ve never given your heart away to anyone, but I also know that when you do you won’t be taking it lightly.”

“This has nothing to do with a boy, especially not Lucas. Besides, Sabrina has already sunk her claws into him.”

“It doesn’t matter what Sabrina does or doesn’t do, what matters is what you do. Sometimes the hardest thing any of us can hope for is finding the courage to be honest with ourselves.”

“I am being honest,” I claimed.

“Sure you are.” She wasn’t convinced. “Let me warn you though, Arelia, Lucas comes with a great deal of baggage. I’m not allowed to say what as that isn’t my place. I can’t stop you from being close to him, but you do need to be careful.”

“You don’t need to worry about me developing any type of feelings for Lucas. It hasn’t happened and it won’t.” Even as I said those words, they sounded so empty and hollow. They sounded like I was trying to convince myself of what I was saying. “The only thing I’m freaked out about is all the spirit stuff, and of course the responsibility of learning all of this magic.”

“You have every reason to be scared. You must be cautious, but at the same time allowing fear to hold you back won’t get you anywhere worth being.”

“I guess.” I thought about what she said, and as always she had a point. If I left Darkwood now, I would always wonder about what I left behind and whether I made the right choice. “I’m going to stay. I’m going to study with Ms. Mae.” My voice was firm and certain. I was prone to bouts of indecision, but there was no time for any of that now. It was all or nothing.

“I see.” Grand-mere reflected on what I just said. “I have faith in you Arelia, I do.”

“I wish I was confident as you Grand-mere Bea.”

“Don’t worry my child. You’re so young, and confidence comes with age. It’s not something that any of us are born with.”

“Thanks for listening to me whine.”

Grand-mere Bea laughed exuberantly. “Whine all you want, I’ll always be

here to listen.”

We said our goodbyes and I hung up. I was determined to march right back into Ms. Mae’s office and tell her I was ready for all of this.

“So you’ve made up your mind, queen?” Ivan asked from the doorway where he stood lazily puffing on a cigarette.

“What the hell are you doing? Were you listening in on my call?” I was furious at the possibility that he had heard every single word that I had said to Grand-mere Bea. He had no right invading my space or privacy.

“Take it easy, drama queen. I just got here,” he said easily.

“You’re a liar!” I spat out. “You’ve been here the whole time, and you know it.”

“So what, I’m on my break. Besides, it’s a free country and by the way, you’re making a mistake.” His voice took on an ominous tone and his eyes darkened.

“My life is none of your business. I have no idea what you mean by your little comments. If I’m making any mistakes, what the hell does it matter to you?”

He walked up to me. I could smell the nicotine on his breath as he grabbed me by the wrists and dug his nails into my skin. His lips hovered close to mine. “You don’t understand,” he whispered. “You don’t understand any of this. You don’t belong in this world. You’re too good, too fragile. Don’t mess with what you think you can control.”

I shook my wrists free and punched him in the shoulder. “It’s none of your business. You’re nothing but a whiny, condescending jerk that obviously has issues.”

For a minute, he looked shocked and in disbelief. “Suit yourself, queen. You’re going to be sorry.”

“Whatever!” I spat back as I hurried into the kitchen and slammed the door behind me. I walked into Ms. Mae’s office, more determined than ever to get this training underway.

“You’re back.” Ms. Mae looked up from the book she was studying from.

“Yeah, I’ve made up my mind. Let’s do it.”

“You’re certain?” Ms. Mae asked. A hint of a smile started to spread across her face.

“Yes, I’m positive.”

“Then let’s get started, shall we?”

“Go for it.” I sat down and got ready to listen to whatever Ms. Mae had to say.

“Let’s start with the basics. These are the most common ingredients used to make *gris-gris* and cast spells,” she said, pointing to the materials that rested in the jars. “You do know what *gris-gris* is, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. Everyone does. Voodoo word for charms,” I was proud of myself for getting an answer right. “I have one right here.” I showed her the charm that Grand-mere Bea had bought for me, which prompted Ms. Mae to shake her head, because as I had suspected the charm was a fake.

“So what are the most common ingredients?” I was eager to get started already.

“This is asafoetida, used for protection,” she pointed to a jar full of greenish yellow powder.

“Devil’s shoe string,” she demonstrated a jar of what appeared to be twigs of varying lengths. “They are used for an assortment of purposes such as warding off evil. The devil’s snuffbox is most useful when dealing with curses.”

She continued explaining the different ingredients for what seemed like an hour. When she came to the last jar, her voice got low. “This is graveyard dirt.”

“What, wait?” I wasn’t really sure I had heard her correctly. “Did you just say graveyard dirt- like, actual dirt from some graveyard?”

In a very calm and matter of fact tone, Ms. Mae replied, “Yes dear, dirt from an actual graveyard.”

“Okay, that’s a tad creepy, should I even ask what graveyard and from whose grave?”

“Don’t make it sound so dramatic, my child. The dirt is taken from a grave connected to the spell you are planning to carry out. When used to make sure an ancestor safely passes from this world to the next, you would take the dirt from their grave. If you desire to reverse a curse placed on the living or dead, you

would collect the dust from the grave of a person who is responsible for the curse.”

I couldn’t really imagine myself running around some graveyard stealing dirt from graves, but I had to admit it was a rather intriguing concept. “So, is there like a particular time or something that someone should break into a cemetery and steal this stuff?”

“It’s not stealing; never think of it as stealing. All dirt collected must be approved by Papa Ghede. Without his approval, you will never be able to successfully carry out a spell involving graveyard dirt.”

“Okay, I’m a little confused. I thought I was blessed by Erzulie and all, so I didn’t have to ask for permission to speak to the *loa*. They pretty much torment me whenever they feel like it. Why would I have to ask Papa Ghede for permission to take some dust?”

“Of course, you can hear them and speak to them, but that doesn’t mean all of them are willing to give you permission to do what you would like. You still need to be respectful of the spirits at all times. Before entering any graveyard, you must ask Ghede’s permission because he is the guardian of the graveyard. Upon leaving, you must leave some sort of offering such as coins.”

I listened intently to what Ms. Mae was saying, becoming increasingly fascinated by complexities of what was being presented. At school I was a decent student, but most of what we were forced to learn was boring and I often found myself drifting, but not when Ms. Mae spoke. The way she explained things was simple and to the point, which made it much easier to pick up on.

Every day for a week, I met Ms. Mae promptly at seven in her office. With my iced-coffee and usual breakfast treats that consisted of some form of chocolate or another by my side, getting up so early didn’t seem entirely horrid. Ms. Mae tried to cram as much information as she could in the few hours we had before the guests started to come down for breakfast. At this point, I had managed to remember the name of most of the materials needed for spells. I learnt how to mix together various elements to make protective charms as well as ones that were harmful. I was hesitant at first, too afraid to learn how to cast curses, but Ms. Mae explained that there were times when curses were necessary

to protect oneself and reverse any dangerous spells that may have been cast by someone who meant ill.

Prior to my lessons, I hadn't given palm reading and tarot cards a second thought. I had always been under the impression that they were tricks invented by scam artists to make a quick buck. In New Orleans, there was always some sketchy gypsy-type woman with a shop, willing to sell you your fate. Ms. Mae told me that although a majority of people who claimed they tell fortunes were frauds, some actually did have the gift. Since Erzulie had blessed me, I had no excuse not to understand how to read the tarot, as well as palms. A truly powerful voodoo queen was expected to do it all, and since that was what I supposedly was, I had no choice but to learn. The LaRue family tarot wasn't like the typical tarot decks you found at Barnes & Noble; it was a bit more complex. It had four suits, but they were divided by the names Rada (Sky), Petro (Fire), Ghede (Earth) and Kongo (Water). As much as I tried to memorize the significance of all the cards in the deck, the task seemed utterly impossible. I figured that I would probably be around Grand-mere Bea's age when I finally did.

I was disgusted to find out that human hair, blood and bone were powerful materials when casting a spell on a target, and almost threw up my *pain perdu* when Ms. Mae showed me her collection of human hair samples. Ms. Mae told me not to be so dramatic, like she always did, and clarified that all the human hair she had was used to cast spells that were meant to bring luck or cure rather than curse. She also explained that when casting or making charms, using personal belongings made the spell more effective.

I was really eager to get to the part about voodoo dolls and was a bit shocked to find that, according to Ms. Mae, they weren't just an epic myth, but did serve a real purpose. Apparently, voodoo dolls are charms that can be used for carrying out a spell on a person they are meant to resemble. That made me think of Sabrina, and how badly I wanted to make a blond, bossy doll and curse it to endure a lifetime of being unable to wear makeup. There were a few times, when I woke up in the middle of the night to her snores and was tempted to cut off a lock of her hair. Of course, I didn't, but I sure wanted to. Things were still bad

between us, and we hadn't spoken since the fight.

I went about doing my daily duties while she continued to throw herself at Lucas. From my observation of him, I had come to the conclusion that he wasn't trying to pit Sabrina against me. In fact, he knew that if he spoke to me in front of Sabrina, she would continue to be bitter and angry. He respected my wishes and kept his distance all the while being polite and courteous to Sabrina no matter how obnoxious she got. I convinced myself that I didn't care about their relationship, but there were times I caught myself mesmerized by Lucas a little more than I should have been. He was always so composed on the surface, but his eyes were a clear giveaway that there was sadness within him. Although I tried to justify that he was just another guy, I knew I was lying to myself. Sometimes I was really good at doing that.

THE ALLIGATORS AND THE GHOSTS

One morning, the guests were anxious to take a tour of the swamp. They claimed they wanted to see the wildlife but in reality they were eager to see if the swamp was really haunted like everyone in New Orleans said it was. There was something about New Orleans and ghosts that made tourists unafraid.

I could hear Mr. Dumpty threatening to ask for a full refund if he didn't see at least three ghosts while he was at Darkwood.

"Look here; I didn't come all the way from New York to leave empty handed. I promised the guys at work that I'd bring back pictures of ghosts. It would be preferable if they were standing by a grave or tomb of some sort."

"Yes sir, I do see your point about not wanting to leave Darkwood empty handed. I'm certain you won't be disappointed by the tour," Lucus desperately tried to appease Mr. Dumpty. From where I was standing, I could see little beads of sweat forming on the back of his neck and starting to drip onto his white t-shirt. It was barely nine am, and the sun was already threatening to scorch us to death.

"Finally a man who understands the importance of souvenirs," Mr. Dumpty sounded wholly satisfied as he slurped from his water bottle.

"I'm sure we can manage to find a ghost or two that would love to get their picture taken." From his tone, I could tell Lucus was trying to be as solemn as possible for Mr. Dumpty's sake.

“Seriously, the swamp is going to be buzzing with flies, mosquitoes and who knows what other creepy things,” Sabrina whined dramatically.

“As long as you’ve got repellent on you’ll survive,” Henri calmly replied.

We had the honor of lugging around bottles of water, bug repellent, and parasols in case any of the guests needed the supplies. Although Sabrina had put on a brave face in front of Lucas, as soon as he was out of ear shot, she couldn’t resist complaining. Of course, she was ignoring me and directing her complaints to Mrs. Gopal who politely nodded in agreement.

Lucas led the group with Henri. Henri apparently had an air boat license, so he was going to do the driving, while Lucas was going to fill the guests in on the wildlife that made their homes in the area. It sounded rather boring, but hey, the tourists were paying customers. It had been a little over a week since Lucas had barged into my bedroom insisting that he needed me, but I still didn’t know what he had meant. Secretly, I was dying for more details, but knew if I dared to step within ten feet of him, Sabrina would probably throw me into the swamp. Things were still cold between us. When we were in our room together, we were like an old married couple, who had run out of things to say to one another. The only interaction we had involved shooting evil glances at one another from across any room we were in together.

As we walked deeper into the swampland we were greeted by moss draped cypress trees and the calls of snowy egrets. The moist air made my hideous uniform cling to my skin which prompted me to curse at the genius who thought it had been a good idea for us to wear them.

“Cool! Look, what is that?” Ben shouted hysterically as he pointed to a turtle resting on a log.

“That there is a snapping turtle,” advised Henri.

“A snapping turtle, does that mean the alligators are close?” Ben reasoned.

“They certainly are. May I present to you Lady LaPlante.” Henri pointed to a large air boat that was parked on the swamp water.

“Are you sure that boat is safe?” questioned Mrs. Scott as she eyed it in suspicion.

“It’s completely safe,” Lucas assured her. “It was purchased only a few

months ago specifically for the tour, so it is entirely up to code.”

“If you say so dear,” Mrs. Scott still didn’t sound convinced as she got on board. The rest of them followed her lead, except for Sabrina.

“I get motion sickness on the water,” Sabrina annoyingly whined as she crossed her arms in defiance.

“In that case, would you like to head back to the house by yourself, or wait here until the tour is over?” Henri gave Sabrina an ultimatum.

“Head back by myself? I’ll get lost, why can’t Lucus take me?” she pouted.

“I’m a bit busy here Sabrina,” Lucus advised her evenly. “Stay for the tour. It will be entertaining.”

“Fine,” Sabrina muttered bitterly as she swatted mosquitoes off of her arms and stomped on board. Since all the other seats were taken, she had no choice but to sit beside me.

“Great.” She rolled her eyes.

“Trust me, it’s no picnic for me either,” I hissed.

“Whatever,” she turned to the side facing away from me.

The boat started moving, and the cameras began snapping. As Lucus was describing the various species of birds and fish that lived in the swamp, my eyes started getting uncontrollably heavy. Biology wasn’t exactly my favorite subject, and I’d already been to enough swamps to know the basic animals that lived there.

“Wake up, Arelia, an offer has already been made. You may be too late,” a familiar voice beckoned as a breeze blew through my hair. My eyes snapped open, and I looked at the faces around me. Luckily, the guests were too busy snapping pictures of the wildlife, and Sabrina was too absorbed with filming Lucus.

“Bade?” I whispered. “What do you want?”

“I’m just trying to warn you that an offer has already been made.”

“On what? Is there a poker game I wasn’t invited to or something?”

“This is no time for games, Arelia, if you don’t act now you may be too late,” he urged.

“I can’t do anything if you don’t tell me what you’re talking about.” I didn’t

mean to sound rude, but it was true. I really had no clue what he was referring to.

“Damballa has been called upon to protect the swamp and guard the grave,” he explained.

In voodoo, Damballa was known as one of the most powerful spirits and could be called upon for protection. He was sort of like a father to all of the other spirits. From what I knew about him, anyone who called upon him was pretty serious about whatever they wanted to protect. “Who called him and why?”

“I cannot tell you that. It is not my place. Keep your eyes open, Arelia. Keep your eyes open.” With those words, I felt him leave.

“I see it, I see it!” Ben was in a wild frenzy. “I see an alligator!”

“Good work son.” Mr. Dumpty’s camera flashed in rapid succession as he tried to capture the full length of the twelve foot alligator.

“Can we get closer?” Ben begged frantically.

“A tiny bit, too close and we’re in trouble,” Henri warned.

“Awesome!” Ben had been waiting to see an alligator forever. This was an epic moment for him.

As we got closer to the alligator, it ignored us and concentrated on a pile of what looked like white powder close to the shore.

“What is that?” I asked Henri. I got up and tried to take a closer look.

“No, it can’t be... But how?” Henri sounded confused.

“What’s going on?” I turned to Lucas for an answer.

“It’s an offering to Damballa,” Lucas explained. “Someone is trying to protect that part of the swamp,” he pointed at the area beyond a cluster of cypress trees.

“Why?”

Lucas turned to me, “I’m not certain.”

“That’s so cool, are they dead?” Ben pointed to the white powder and six white hens that were placed against it. From my study sessions with Ms. Mae, I knew that a typical offering to Damballa was a pile of flour with an egg on top. He was a spirit who liked all of his offerings to be in white. Animal sacrifices were only performed if the asker was really looking for extra help or special favors.

“Oh my!” Mrs. Gopal was disgusted.

We got closer and saw the hens strung together with vine and wrapped around the large pile of flour like Christmas tree ornaments. Their mouths hung open, and blood still flowed from the slits in their stomachs. The offering must have been fresh because the hens weren’t rotting and the flour hadn’t been swept away by the water. Whoever had made the sacrifice must have done so right before we got there.

“That’s nasty,” Sabrina commented on the scene in front of us.

“Animal cruelty,” Mrs. Scott angrily added. “Who could have done something so ghastly?”

“They’re only props,” Henri lied. “We thought it would be educational for you folks to see a traditional voodoo altar. The designer did manage to exaggerate the nature of the altar a bit.”

“So those are fake hens?” asked Mr. Dumpty.

“Yeah, can’t you tell?” I felt my stomach churn as I looked at the poor hens. However, it was pointless to frighten or disgust the guests any further, so I played along with Henri’s lie. “They look so waxy.”

The guests relaxed knowing that there wasn’t a psychopathic hen murderer running around. Things got back to normal, and the tour continued as we ventured further into the swamp. That was, until the boat stopped.

“What’s going on here?” Mr. Dumpty demanded.

“Just a minor hiccup,” Henri assured him. He unsuccessfully tried to start up the boat again.

I wasn’t so sure. Around me, I felt a storm starting to form. “You don’t belong here,” whispered a voice. The sky darkened, and lightning struck. Damballa wasn’t going to allow us to go any deeper into the swamp.

“We can’t stay here,” I said to Lucas under my breath. “It’s not safe. We have to get the guests out of here as soon as possible.”

Lucas shifted his eyes from the sky to me finally making the connection between the words coming out of my mouth and the events that were taking place around us. “You’re right Arelia, but Henri can’t start the boat. We need your help.” He sounded slightly defeated.

“I’ll try, but I can’t make any promises.” I was fully aware that he wanted me to use my powers to start the boat.

“It’s the ghosts!” Ben was having the time of his life rather than being terrified that two seconds ago it had been broad daylight and now we were cloaked in near darkness.

“I can’t believe it’s going to rain.” Sabrina was unhappy that her hair was about to get wet.

“I don’t understand. This boat is supposed to be good as new.” Henri was still struggling to get the air boat running.

“I see it, I see!” Mr. Dumpty wildly started snapping pictures of the clump of cypress trees on the horizon.

“I see it too!” Mrs. Dumpty chirped in as the rest of the guests stared at the shadow moving amongst the cypress trees and turned their attention away from the altar. The shadow they saw was most likely a bird rather than a ghost. The dark sky and lightning were obviously making them see things that were not there.

Sabrina leapt up from her seat and threw her arms around Lucas. “I’m scared,” she whimpered. Lucas shot me a nervous look. His eyes were pleading that I help them get out of there.

“Everything will be fine, Sabrina,” he reassured her and gently unwrapped her arms from around him. It was an action that Sabrina did not approve of, especially since she knew that I was watching.

“Whatever.” She slumped back down into her seat and took out her Chanel compact to check her hair.

Lucas moved towards me and leaned in so that the guests wouldn’t hear. My heart picked up its pace as his fingers made contact with my forearm.

“Can you help?” he asked.

“I’ll try to get the boat moving, so we can hopefully escape the storm. I can’t actually stop the storm if it’s been conjured through sacrifice,” I admitted. “I need you to distract the guests and make sure no one sees what I’m doing. I don’t want the guests to think I’m some crazy person muttering to myself.”

He grinned. It was the first time I had seen him beam in a while. “I’ll do my

best to protect your sanity. Thank you, Arelia.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” I headed to the back of the boat praying that Bade would listen to me and get us out of this mess alive.

While Lucus and Henri distracted the guests, I attempted to call Bade. Of course, he showed up whenever he wanted, but would he actually come when I called him and would he be willing to help me?

“Bade,” I called out in caution. “Are you there?”

No answer.

“Look, I’m sorry that I was rude to you when I first got here, but we could really use your help right now. Would you be able to push the boat back to the shore?”

No answer.

“Please.”

“I can help you, Arelia,” he finally spoke. “What is the price you are willing to pay?”

“Price? I don’t have anything to offer, Bade.”

“Silly Arelia, you know there is always a price to pay, something must be offered.”

“Okay fine, what do you want?” I asked.

“Bring me the fat man.”

“What, are you serious? You want Mr. Dumpty?”

“Yes, I want the fat man. He is too greedy and selfish; he must sacrifice himself for the good of the group.”

“Bade.” I tried to remain as cool as possible. “You know that’s not fair. You know that would be black magic. Human sacrifice is only used to bring back the dead, not make boats move. Do you see the difference between what I’m asking from you and what you’re expecting?”

He laughed, and a bitter chill came over me. “So you’ve been studying I see.”

“Yes, I have. Please try to be reasonable.”

“Okay fine,” he paused. “I want the egg.”

“You mean the egg on top of the flour?” He had to be kidding.

He responded in a perfectly rational voice. "Yes, I want that egg."

"But the shore is almost a mile away, and who knows what's lurking in these waters." Even though the swamp water only came up to my knees, I knew it was infested with alligators and snakes, not to mention sand pockets.

"If you're not interested, you don't have to do it," he taunted, knowing that I had no other choice.

"That altar isn't for you, it's for Damballa." I tried to reason with him.

"He's already accepted the offering, and that is why your boat has stopped and the sky has turned dark. You don't belong in the swamp. If you want the boat to move, go to the egg and crack it open in my name."

"Why do you need that egg? Who cares about a stupid egg?"

"Arelia, do you work for free?"

"No."

"Then why should I?"

"Fine," I reluctantly gave in. "I'll go and crack the egg open in your name, but as soon as I do, you promise you'll deliver the boat safely to shore?"

"You have my word, but you better hurry, there's not much time."

He was right. I could feel raindrops starting to slide off my skin and knew it would only be a matter of minutes before there was a full-fledged thunderstorm. Whoever wanted us out of the swamp had to be awfully powerful. Lucky for me, the guests were still busy snapping pictures of the shadows in the cypress trees, so they didn't notice as I slipped into the murky water.

The water had turned icy along with the wind. Goosebumps invaded my body, as I tried to ignore everything else around me except for the egg. I needed to crack open that egg and nothing was going to stop me.

"Arelia, are you insane?" Sabrina had followed me into the water.

"Go back," I snarled without even turning around. What did she want? We hadn't spoken in over a week, why should I listen to her now?

"Just because we're not speaking right now doesn't mean I want you dead," she pleaded. "Some alligator is going to snap your arm off, and Grand-mere Bea is going to blame it on me."

"Listen to me ,Sabrina; I have to get that stupid egg."

“No, you don’t.” Her voice took on a peculiar tone, as she clutched my wrists. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“What’s your problem?” At this point, I was frantic. I turned to face her.

“You see, Arelia, *you* need to be cracked open, not the egg.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” My annoyance was quickly turning into confusion.

“You’ll see.” Her wicked laugh filled the air. “Guys, I got her!”

“Good job, Sabrina!” Lucus was pleased.

“What the hell is going on?” I shouted to Lucus.

“You need to be cracked open, Arelia,” he responded. “Doesn’t she?”

He turned to the guests.

“She sure does.” They replied in perfect harmony. One by one they got off of the boat and made their way through the dark water. Before I knew it, they had me surrounded. I tried to run, but my feet were glued to the ground. I stood there frozen, unaware of my fate.

“Get her!” Mr. Dumpty commanded as the guests moved closer. I could smell their determination.

Mrs. Scott’s normally kind eyes had a look of vengeance in them. “I’m sorry dear, but I have grand kids. I can’t stay stuck in this swamp on your account.”

“Mrs. Scott, please. I’ll do whatever you want, just let me go.”

“Hush dear, you’re going to be sacrificed, and that’s the end of the story. Didn’t your mother ever teach you to respect the elderly?”

“You crazy old bitch!” I spat back. “Get away from me!” I screamed. “Sabrina, help me!”

“I can’t Arelia. It’s too late, isn’t it?” She turned to Lucus.

“Yes it is, my love.” He pulled her closer and gave her a long kiss. What? No. This couldn’t be right.

“Bring her to the altar!” Lucus commanded.

MY EYES JERKED OPEN. A dream. It had all been a stupid dream. My body was shaking, as beads of sweat poured down my forehead. It had felt so real. Pale

moonlight illuminated Sabrina's face, as she slept and snored away without a care in the world. I decided that I needed fresh air, so I got out of bed and made my way downstairs. Ms. Mae had taught me that all dreams had a meaning. All I got from my dream was that the guests were insane, Lucus and Sabrina must be hooking up, and I had no idea what I had gotten myself into. Maybe Ivan had been right, and I wasn't strong enough to be a voodoo queen. Something told me that he knew a lot more than he was letting on, but what?

I was still shaking uncontrollably as I got to the bottom of the stairs. The house was silent except for someone playing the piano in the ballroom. Figuring it must be a guest, I decided to see who it was. The music was beautiful but at the same time undeniably haunting and melancholy. To my surprise, the mystery pianist was Ivan. He was so immersed in the music that he didn't even notice me enter the ballroom. Moonlight glistened off his hair and even at a distance I could tell that his brow was crumpled in concentration.

After a few minutes, he sensed that someone was watching him and stopped. "What are you doing up?" he asked.

"Couldn't sleep," I said quietly, not wanting to get into another argument with him. It seemed that whenever Ivan and I were placed in the same room, we always wound up quarrelling. I had been careful to avoid him after the incident in the garden. It wasn't exactly professional or anything to be constantly at battle with your coworker.

"So what are you doing here?" He got up from behind the piano and walked across the room.

"I just heard the music and wanted to know who was playing. It's not a big deal or anything," I shrugged. I turned my back on him and headed to the kitchen.

"You had a nightmare, didn't you?" he asked coming up behind me.

I wanted to tell him that it was none of his business, but I was supposed to be playing nice. "Yeah, maybe."

It was distinct, but I heard a soft gasp escape from Ivan's lips. "So what was it about?"

"Nothing you'd be interested in." I wanted him to stop hounding me with

questions, but at the same time I was so freaked out by the scene that I had dreamt, I really wanted to talk about it.

“Try me.” His tone was more menacing than it was curious.

I grabbed a glass and filled it up with water. “Fine, it was about the swamp. The dream was about the swamp. I think that maybe there is something out there.”

Ivan’s face grew tense as he crossed his arms and shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“Yeah, well then you better stay away from there. What else happened?” He pressed on intently.

“What do you care?”

“You know, I bought one of those “interpret your dream” books from Amazon.com, and I’m wondering how much I’ve learned and all. Thought it would be a good opportunity to test out my skills. So what else happened?” He repeated his initial question.

“I don’t remember,” I covered the truth.

“Sure you do.” He came closer. His grey eyes were probing me for answers. They made me tremendously uncomfortable.

“Look, I said I don’t remember.” I regretted saying anything at all.

It became clear to Ivan that no matter how hard he insisted that I remember, I wasn’t going to tell him anything.

“Fine, I believe you.” He finally stepped back.

“Goodnight, Ivan.” I rushed out of the kitchen and back into my room before he could follow me and ask me any more questions. Somehow, I knew that he was connected to the dream I had, but that was just a hunch. I couldn’t prove it. He wasn’t even in the dream or anything, so I couldn’t run around making any accusations. The only person who could help me understand was Ms. Mae, and it was too late to go barging in on her at this hour. It would have to wait until tomorrow.

DANCE WITH ME

“**A**relia, help me glue this on,” Ben commanded, pointing to a hot glue gun. It was ceaselessly raining, so all of the guests were stuck indoors for the day. After lunch and afternoon tea, Henri had suggested that it would be a perfect opportunity for the guests to make their own masks for the Darkwood masked ball that was taking place in a few weeks. It was an offer that only Ben took him up on. All of the other guests were lounging around the house, either in their rooms or hanging by the kitchen waiting for whatever new pastries the cooks whipped up.

“So what’s the theme of this ball anyways?” I asked Henri eagerly when he came over to see how Ben’s mask was coming along.

“I know, I know, the theme is ghosts!” Ben blurted out.

Henri laughed. “Very good Ben, the theme is ghosts, or as we old people like to call it, a gothic theme.”

“Are you serious?” I couldn’t believe that they were so eager to add more weirdness to this place. After last night’s nightmare, the last thing I needed was more drama and scares. All day I had been on edge, expecting the guests to suddenly attack me and want to offer me as a sacrifice. Luckily, things seemed pretty normal.

Although it had only been a little over a week since I had started studying with Ms. Mae, I was more aware of what was going on around me in terms of the spirit world. I knew that Darkwood had more than just one or two ghosts

lurking around. It was funny how once you started paying attention, everything could become so much clearer, and things that you never saw before come into focus.

“What’s wrong with ghosts?” Ben questioned interrupting my thoughts.

“Nothing,” I instantaneously replied. He was right, as of yet, none of the ghosts I saw had messed with me. They were actually a little terrified of me, disappearing whenever I looked at them directly. Last night, I had seen the ghost of a fat chef in the kitchen. He wasn’t doing anything wrong. He was standing over the shoulder of one of the cooks while he was making shrimp gumbo. I think the ghost was trying to warn the chef that he was putting too much salt or cayenne pepper into the pot. I had told Ms. Mae about this incident, and she had been less than pleased with my take on the situation. She thought I was taking the spirit world too lightly, which according to her could result in deadly consequences.

“Well, I’ll let you two get back to it. Your mask looks mighty terrifying, Ben.” Henri pretended to be scared by Ben’s skeleton mask. “Arelia, Ms. Mae has advised me to make you aware that she’s free to meet with you at six.”

“Thanks Henri.” I glanced at the clock on the wall which indicated that it was already five pm.

“I think it’s done.” Ben waved his mask in the air.

“You’re right. You just have to let it dry a bit.” I was relieved that the last two hours hadn’t gone to waste, and Ben was satisfied with his mask.

“Thanks Arelia. You’re the best.” Ben gave me a big hug.

“No problem Ben. I have to go and do some chores now. I’ll see you later.” I left him to head to Ms. Mae’s office where I was eager to spend some time alone reading and learning more about various spells until six. On my way there, I got distracted by music coming from the ballroom. It sounded like some kind of waltz music, so I decided to see what was up.

“That’s perfect Mrs. Dumpty, just like that.” Lucus gently encouraged Mrs. Dumpty as she attempted to keep up with him.

“Ellen, you’re moving beautifully. Don’t you think so, dear?” Mrs. Scott gleefully asked once she spotted me standing at the entrance of the room.

“Much better than I could ever move,” I honestly admitted.

“I’m dancing the- what is it called again?” Mrs. Dumpty asked.

“Viennese Waltz,” offered Lucas.

“I adore Johann Strauss.” Mrs. Scott was clearly relishing the moment. “Why don’t you give it a try dear? You need to get ready for the masked ball. A little practice never hurt anyone.”

“No, I really can’t. I have chores to do. I’m not much of a dancer.” I prayed that she would buy my excuse.

“We all know that, who can forget that ghastly scene that took place at the welcome ball.” The time Mr. Dumpty dragged me all across the dance floor like a rag doll was permanently etched into my memory.

“I’m out of breath!” Mrs. Dumpty suddenly stopped moving. “Take over, Arelia, before I have a heart attack.”

“I can’t.” I started to back out of the room, but Lucas gently grabbed my hand before I could move any further.

“Come dance with me, Arelia,” he invited coolly.

“You kids have fun. We ladies are going to get some refreshments.” Mrs. Scott wiped her sweat-drenched brow.

“I must have lost ten pounds from that dance alone.” Mrs. Dumpty finally caught her breath and was eager to leave in search of food and drink.

They left me alone with Lucas in the ballroom. A sense of utter panic gripped me. It was the first time we had been alone since the conversation in my bedroom. Was I supposed to continue our discussion on why he said he needed me? Was I supposed to ignore that it ever happened? Besides, after last night and what he did in my nightmare, I was a little hesitant to go anywhere near him. Lucas looked as anxious as I did. He slowly drew me close to him. My heart started to rapidly race. I could smell him. His hand on the small of my back gave me unexpected shivers.

“Dancing is easy,” he said finally.

“I’m sure it is, just not for me,” I quickly replied.

“How do you know if you’ve never given it a fair chance?” He had a point. I had always convinced myself that I couldn’t dance, but had I actually really tried

to dance? No. It was like most things that I was scared of; I learned to fear them before I gave them a chance. It was just easier that way I guess. If you didn't let yourself try certain things, you'd never be disappointed if they never worked out.

"Follow my lead and I promise you will be fine."

"I'm pretty sure Mr. Dumpty said the same thing to me."

Lucus laughed as he started to move. "That man is quite the character. That's it, from side to side, nice and slow," he guided me.

"I think I'm actually doing it." I was exceptionally delighted to find that I wasn't tripping over my feet or stepping on his.

"Yes, you are." Lucus smiled which encouraged me to try harder. I let myself feel the music, and in response, my body relaxed.

"Right, left, twirl," he spun me around. That was the first successful twirl I had ever done in my entire life. For the first time, I allowed myself to forget about everything that had taken place over the last few weeks. The confirmation that I was a voodoo queen, the horrid fight with Sabrina, Ivan's incessant torment, and the swamp nightmare. I let it all go and gave in to the moment. My body felt light as whipped cream as I spun around the dance floor in pure exhilaration. If someone had told me a few weeks ago that I would be ballroom dancing with a LaPlante, I would have snickered in their face. Once the music stopped, I was more than a little disappointed.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Lucus eagerly studied my face. His hand was still on my back, but I didn't mind.

"It was pretty fun." We were dangerously close now. I looked down at my worn-out flats, not knowing how to bring up what I really wanted to ask without seeming overly eager. I mean, I didn't want him to think that I was some kind of obsessive stalker or anything. I need you could have meant lots of things like I need you to take out the trash. I need you to go downstairs and help with the dishes. I need you to stop fighting with my girlfriend because she's a blonde goddess and we're so happy together.

"Hey, have you ever seen *Dancing with the Stars*?" I spat out the first thing that I could think of that wasn't related to what he had said to me last. I figured since we were dancing and everything, I could at least pick a relevant topic.

“Is that the name of an opera?” Lucas scrunched his eyebrows.

“No! It’s a dancing show that my grand-mere loves to watch. They take a bunch of celebrities desperate for attention, pair them up, and make them compete against one another.”

“Sounds interesting?” Lucas scratched his forehead, as he tried to figure out whether he was supposed to be excited by the concept or horrified.

“Yeah, kind of. I mean they like to do crazy dances like the tango and stuff. Can you tango? Grand-mere Bea is an awesome dancer. I didn’t take after her or anything though.” I was talking too much and too fast. It was something I tended to do when I was nervous.

“You mean like this?” With a dramatic gesture, Lucas placed his cheek against mine, grabbed my hand and extended both of our arms outwards. “I’m not quite sure what we’re supposed to do next,” he admitted.

“That’s about all I know too.” I laughed, hoping he wouldn’t catch on as to how nervous I actually was.

I felt safe standing so close to him, but at the same time, terrified of being unsure of what to say or do.

He spoke first. “Areliia, I didn’t mean to ambush you in your room like I did. I know that I must have confused you.”

“Just a bit,” I shrugged, unwilling to admit that I had been thinking about his statement every day since he had said it.

“It’s just that you’re the only person who can help me, but I don’t know if you’re willing to.”

“I can’t help you if you don’t spit it out.”

“Believe me, I want to, but I just can’t find the words or the way. I’m afraid,” he admitted. “I’m afraid that...”

“Hey lovers, sorry to break-up the party, but Ms. Mae needs to speak to you, queen,” Ivan snapped me out of the moment. I pulled away from Lucas in embarrassment. Ivan would never let me hear the end of it.

Lucas pulled me close again and whispered in my ear. “Meet me tonight in the garden, after dinner. I’ll explain everything,” he promised.

“But, Sabrina,” I wasn’t going to risk another confrontation.

“Please, trust me,” he pleaded.

“Fine,” I agreed, hoping that Ivan wasn’t listening in on our conversation.

REVELATIONS

“Ms. Mae?” I softly knocked on her office door before opening it.

“Come in child.” Ms. Mae gradually looked up from behind a pile of books. Her desk was cluttered with various herbs and pieces of cloth.

“What are you doing?” I questioned.

“I’m attempting a new mixture for a love *gris-gris*,” she answered like it was as normal as clipping her toenails. “Henri advised me that you were eager to speak to me. What can I do for you, my dear?”

I sat down, “I had a dream last night. Well, it was actually more of a nightmare, but anyways I need to know what it means.”

“Go on.” Ms. Mae focused all of her attention on me.

I recalled the nightmare in detail. As my description progressed, Ms. Mae’s grip on the beads around her neck grew firmer. By the time I was finished, it was obvious that Ms. Mae was as upset as I had been.

“*Mon Dieu*,” she finally spoke.

“So what does it mean?” I was anxious to hear her opinion.

“Someone wants you gone from Darkwood.”

“What else?” I pressed her for more details. “And who?”

“I’m not certain,” admitted Ms. Mae. “I need to consult the cards.” She got up and pulled a deck of tarot cards from the shelf behind her desk. As she started

to read them, her expression changed from worried to downright terrified.

“What is it?” I asked again.

“Possession.”

“Umm, okay. What does that mean?”

“Louis Beau.”

“Louis Beau? You mean Mad Marie’s son?”

“Yes, that Louis Beau.” It seemed as if Ms. Mae couldn’t believe the words that were coming out of her own mouth.

“But he’s dead. Lucas told us the story of Mad Marie and how she put the spell on his great great-great grandfather. She did that so Louis Beau’s soul could leave Darkwood. It’s impossible that he’s still alive. What is he some kind of ghost?”

“No. The cards tell me that his soul left Darkwood, but it never left this plane. It never passed on to the next. The cards say that he is very close, but they do not tell me his exact location. Of course, that is why Lucas is bound here, ageless and immortal, because Louis needs him to stay that way, so he can continue to live.” Ms. Mae paused for a minute, reflecting on the revelation before continuing.

“Louis fears your powers because you’re the only one who can help Lucas. You are the only one that can break the curse and free him.” Ms. Mae stood up and came towards me. “Arelia, you need to talk to Lucas. There are things that he needs to explain to you.”

I felt my pulse quicken, as I tried to connect the dots. “Lucas is under a curse? The story he told us at the slave cabins was about him, not his great great-great grandfather?”

“He meant to tell you, Arelia. He’s been trying for weeks now.” Ms. Mae came to Lucas’s defense.

The room started to spin as my mind reviewed the facts. Mad Marie’s curse consisted of a soul for a soul. Louis Beau was still alive. Lucas’s great great-great grandfather’s soul was bound to Darkwood, so Louis Beau could escape. Lucas wasn’t like any other seventeen year-old I’d ever met. So that meant Lucas was the great great-great grandfather he told us about in the story. Lucas

was bound to Darkwood and was probably centuries old. I was drooling over a very old man. He was an extremely well preserved old man, but still a very old man. It made perfect sense. Lucus knew much more about Darkwood's history than he should have. He never spoke about his family or friends. He had told me that physically he was seventeen, but felt much older. At the time I hadn't given it much thought, but in hindsight, it had been a hint.

Somehow, deep within me, I had known for a long time, but my head hadn't let me accept it yet. My head had refused to acknowledge that there are certain things in this world that none of us could control. This whole realm was still very new to me, and I was beyond a little confused. I felt betrayed by Ms. Mae and by Lucus. They both made me feel like they cared for me when in reality all they wanted to do was groom me for their own purposes. I felt like an utter fool thinking that there was something special between Lucus and I. I had thought that he cared for me and that, well... In reality, he didn't give a shit about me. He only wanted me to help break the curse, so he could finally be free from Darkwood, whatever that meant.

At that moment, the only thing that I could think of was how nice he had been to me. It made my blood boil thinking about his stupid apologies and the time I had wasted analyzing every little touch or glance that took place between us. All this time I had thought Ivan was a jerk when the real jerk was Lucus. At least Ivan didn't hide what he was.

Ms. Mae knew what I was thinking. She knew what was racing through my mind, but what I refused to say. "You need to let him explain."

"I'm supposed to meet him tonight." I finally gathered the courage to say something in a calm and rational manner rather than screaming like I wanted to. "I don't really believe..."

I was doubtful of the words that were coming out of my own mouth.

"Arelia, we've been over this before. You cannot control everything, and there are times when it doesn't matter what you believe. There are things that just are. You need to talk to Lucus before it's too late. The cards tell me that Louis Beau is strong. If you wait too long, he won't allow you to help Lucus."

For some inexplicable reason, at her words I felt myself fill with rage. If it

hadn't been for Ms. Mae and her stupid invitation to work at Darkwood, I wouldn't be in this situation. Ever since I'd gotten here, she'd been the one encouraging me to explore my powers. Now I knew the real reason.

"You knew all this time didn't you? You knew that Lucas was under Mad Marie's curse, and that's the reason you called me to Darkwood."

"That's not true, my child. Of course I knew about the curse, but that is not the only reason I wanted you to come here. You have a gift. A gift so strong, that it needs to be developed."

"Stop calling me your child. I'm not your child!" I screamed.

Ms. Mae was taken aback by my little outburst.

"Areliia, please believe that I didn't invite you to Darkwood just to help Lucas."

"Sure you didn't. Then why did you invite me? I should have listened to Grand-mere Bea. She knows too, doesn't she? That's why she didn't want me to come here. She didn't want you to manipulate me. That's what you and Lucas have both been doing manipulating me. You're nothing but a master manipulator. You could have just called me instead of sending Sabrina an invitation. You knew that I would come if Sabrina convinced me. This whole thing has been a sham from the beginning. What are you, in love with Lucas? I mean if you were born here that means that you've known him all of your life. Did he make you believe that he was interested in you too so you would help him break the curse? Well did he?" I was past the point of trying to be composed and rational. I was furious and beyond disgusted.

Ms. Mae sighed before replying. "When I was a young girl, I did have feelings for him."

"That's just great." I could feel vomit threatening to find its way to the surface, as I thought about the implications of what she had just said.

"It never progressed to anything, he never shared my feelings," she admitted. "Besides, that was well over fifty years ago. A tiny childhood crush, that's all. Henri has always been the love of my life. *Mon Dieu*, have you fallen in love with Lucas?"

"No. Even if I have it's none of your business." I knew I was being

disrespectful and condescending, but I couldn't help myself. I was hurt and confused. How could they have lied to me so well? Ms. Mae acted as if she cared about me when really she had her own agenda. "Why do you need me to break the curse? Why can't you do it?"

"You're blessed by Erzulie, that makes you much stronger than me or your grand-mere."

"I'm leaving," I said when I finally spoke. "This is bullshit. I don't give a crap if I was blessed by all of the saints in New Orleans. I don't like being used or lied to."

"Leaving? You can't! I do admit that I should have just called you from the beginning and explained everything. We all make mistakes out of fear. I'm terribly sorry," Ms. Mae pleaded. She walked towards me and placed her hand on my shoulder.

"Don't touch me." I shook away her hand.

"Don't explain, don't apologize, don't do anything. After tonight, I'm leaving. I'll help with dinner, so I can see the guests one last time, but that is it. I don't want to be a part of whatever this is." I rushed out the door making sure I slammed it hard behind me.

YOU WON'T TELL, WILL YOU?

I ran upstairs to my room, just wanting to be alone before dinner. The smell of cigarette smoke greeted me outside the door which I found strange since neither Sabrina nor I were smokers.

“What the hell?” I opened the door, and Sabrina rushed to cover herself with the duvet. In bed beside her was Ivan.

“Areliia, hi,” her voice unwillingly quivered.

“Hey, queen.” Ivan gave me a wink and took a drag from his cigarette.

I shot him an evil glance. This is not what I needed right now. I wanted to be alone.

“Ivan, can you excuse us?” Sabrina practically pushed him out of the bed. He scrambled to collect his clothes from the ground.

“I’ll catch you later.” He gave me a wicked glance before exiting.

“You’re unbelievable.” I was livid. All this time she had been going on and on about how much she loved Lucas, and here she was in bed with Ivan. She was such a hypocrite. She always wanted to be the center of the universe and didn’t care who she hurt. What was wrong with all the people around me? Why was everyone so messed up, so self-absorbed?

“Areliia, please don’t tell Lucas.” She jumped out of bed and came towards me. “Look I’m sorry for all the nasty things I said about you, I was just jealous.”

Tears started rapidly running down her cheeks, streaking them with globs of mascara. “I should have never accused you of trying to steal Lucas. You’re my

best friend and what I said to you was so bitchy. I don't know what I'd do if you weren't in my life."

I wanted to stay mad, but I couldn't. Her apology melted the anger off my bones. This was Sabrina. We had been born one day apart, and from that moment on we had been inseparable. She could have refused to play with the nanny's grandkid, but she hadn't. When we were younger, and I was constantly teased for having parents that were MIA, Sabrina had always been the first one to my defense. She was my sister, we had an inexplicable bond. I had no one else at Darkwood. Ms. Mae and Lucas were both liars who only cared about themselves. What good would it do if I kept on fighting with Sabrina over Lucas? I would never speak to him again. I hesitated and chose my words carefully. "I don't get it, if you're crazy about Lucas, why are you here with Ivan?"

"I don't know. I don't know." Her tears continued to flow. "Lucas, he hasn't even kissed me yet. For the past three weeks, I've been trying, but nothing."

"I thought you already had sex with him." I wanted her to admit that she had been lying.

"I lied. I only said that so I thought you would stay away. I really like Lucas. I know I'm in love with him, but I just lost my self-confidence. Ivan, he's been constantly flirting with me ever since I got here, and I figured that if I slept with him, it would make me feel better, but I was wrong. I feel awful. Please Arelia, don't tell Lucas what you saw, I'll probably lose any chance that I have with him. Obviously he's a bit traditional."

"Look Sabrina, I can understand why you may have been jealous over Lucas, but what you said about me being a freak was super bitchy and I don't think I can get past that."

Sabrina wrapped her arms around me.

"I was scared," she whispered. "I'm not as brave or smart as you, but I promise from this day on I'll be there for you no matter what," she vowed.

"I'm scared too," I admitted. "I don't get any of this stuff. Anyways, you really need to stop hooking up with every guy that smiles at you."

"I know," she moaned. "I would never go out with a waiter,, much less marry

one. I have to keep my eyes on the prize- which is Lucas.”

All of a sudden, her tears stopped, and she eyed me intently. “I wouldn’t want you to change Arelia. You’re my best friend, and you’re perfect just the way you are, and when you smile the whole world stops and stares for a while.”

“Hey, that’s a Bruno Mars song.”

“You caught me. You know I’m not great with words. I missed you, where have you been going off to every day at seven am? Did you meet someone?”

“No, I’ve been meeting Ms. Mae. I’ve been learning stuff.” I didn’t know if I could tell her exactly what kind of stuff just yet and what had happened. It was all too surreal. The wounds were still raw.

“What kind of stuff? Tell me, I won’t freak out or anything. I think I know.”

“Really, what do you know?”

“You’ve been learning how to develop your witch powers.”

“The technical term is voodoo queen, but yeah, I’m pretty much learning how to be a full-fledged queen. Or at least I was. I’m not anymore, not here, anyways. Are you going to call me a freak again?”

“No, are you kidding? Do you know how awesome it is having a best friend who is a voodoo queen? Think of all the possibilities.” Sabrina’s eyes got a faraway look. She was probably thinking of ways she could get me to put a love spell on Lucas. “So, you’re not going to tell Lucas?”

“Sabrina listen to me, it’s not my place to tell Lucas, but as your best friend, you need to believe me when I say that you need to stay away from him. There are things that you don’t know about him.”

“Like what?” Her eyes got large with anticipation.

“I can’t explain. I’m leaving Darkwood tomorrow, and I think that you should come with me.”

“Come with you, are you insane?”

“No, I’m serious. This place is creepy, and we don’t belong here.”

From the cynical expression on Sabrina’s face, I knew that this was going to lead to another battle.

“How can you say that when you’re the one learning voodoo? You can’t just say that this place is creepy and expect me to leave. I can’t leave yet. I haven’t

had enough time with Lucas,” she protested.

“I’m sure Lucas is great and all, but there are plenty of other guys.”

“Not like him,” she maintained. “If you leave, I’m still going to stay.”

“For once can you please just believe me, and not pick Lucas over me? We just made up. I don’t want another fight.”

“You know that I love you, but I don’t have to leave. We don’t have to be joined at the hip 24/7, you know. I’m not picking him over you. It shouldn’t have to be like that.”

“It’s not about that. This place is dangerous, that’s all,” I wanted to tell her the truth about Lucas, but how could I? She was infatuated with him, so there was no way she was going to believe me. A few weeks ago, I wouldn’t have believed me either. I guess it didn’t matter whether Sabrina stayed or not, they wanted me, not her. Besides, I knew that Ms. Mae wouldn’t let Sabrina be harmed if she ever wanted me to consider helping Lucas.

“It’s okay if you go. I’ll give you my paycheck,” Sabrina offered nobly.

“You know I won’t take it. It’s your choice if you want to stay, but I’m leaving first thing in the morning.”

“What’s with the drama, what happened?” For the first time in a long time, Sabrina looked genuinely worried. I hadn’t seen much of that side of her since we’d left home.

“It’s nothing. I just don’t feel right working here anymore. I don’t feel safe.”

“Oh please, the most dangerous thing here is Mr. Dumpty, and that’s only when he has too much gumbo or slams back the hurricanes. I know you’re hiding something,” Sabrina pressed on.

“I don’t feel like talking about it.” I wanted to forget everything about Darkwood and return home to Grand-mere Bea.

“I know what will make you feel better.” Sabrina walked over to the bed and pulled out a box of chocolates from under her pillow. They were the chocolates Lucas had given me. “I was tempted to eat all of the boxes, but I kept this one for us. I figured it would be a great way to kiss and make up.”

“You’ve been holding out on me.” I grabbed the chocolates out of her hand and tore open the box. I didn’t care even if they were from Lucas. Chocolate was

chocolate, and in situations like these, it didn't matter where it came from. Sabrina and I plopped ourselves down on the bed and rehashed the details of our lost time while inhaling down the chocolates. I had my sister back.

MUD FIGHT

After Sabrina and I had finished devouring the box of chocolates, she claimed that she had a headache and couldn't help with dinner. So I went downstairs alone and prepared myself to say goodbye to the guests. Over the past few weeks, I had actually grown attached to them, especially Ben, who I thought of as a chubby little brother.

"Areliia, where did you go?" Ben came running up to me, his face was smeared with chocolate ice cream. "My mask is almost dry!"

"Awesome, you have to show it to me later." I gave him a tight hug.

"What was that for?" he asked when I finally released him.

"Nothing, I just want to let you know how special you are." I figured that if his parents didn't tell him enough someone ought to.

"You're acting weird today." He gave me a skeptical glance. "I'm gonna have some more ice cream. Would you like some?"

"No thanks, Ben, I need to go help with dinner. You shouldn't be stuffing yourself with ice cream right now anyways."

He stuck out his tongue as he walked away, obviously displeased with my opinion on his ice cream consumption.

The kitchen smelled heavenly, as usual. The food was probably the thing I was going to miss most about Darkwood. It was going to be pretty hard going back to Hamburger Helper and Spam, but the honeymoon couldn't last forever. "Hey Pierre, what's for dinner?" I asked the plump chef.

“Grilled shrimp with black bean cakes and coriander sauce to start. The main dish is chorizo-stuffed rabbit roulade and panéed leg, toasted angel hair, escarole, with sherry garlic sauce.” He recited the menu without taking his eyes off of the stove. “The guests need to be seated in exactly twenty minutes.”

“Sounds yummy,” I could feel drool slipping down the corner of my mouth. “I’ll go get the guests.” I found the guests sipping pre-dinner cocktails on the porch. Surprisingly, the rain had stopped an hour ago, and the sun had come out in full force.

“Arelia!” Mrs. Scott rushed up to me almost out of breath.

“This can’t be legal, can it?” she asked as she held up a glass of New Orleans fizz.

“It’s completely legal, and you should be enjoying it, you’re on vacation,” I reminded her.

“It’s absolutely sinful!” She took another sip of the creamy cocktail.

As I was talking to Mrs. Scott, I saw him. My eyes rested on his broad shoulders, unwilling to make eye contact. Suddenly I couldn’t breathe. Even though I was outside and there was plenty of fresh air, I simply could not let out another breath. The chatter of the guests disappeared and in that second it felt as if the only two people on the planet were Lucus and me. I could feel his eyes on me, begging me to look into them. I couldn’t do that; I couldn’t allow myself to be hurt any more than I was. I didn’t want his clarifications or excuses. He had only been nice to me for his own purposes. I needed to get out of there. When I finally managed to exhale, I excused myself and advised the guests that dinner would be ready in twenty minutes.

I ran into the kitchen and let myself into the tiny garden. For some reason, the smell of chrysanthemums always calmed me down. I bent over and smelled them. They reminded me of Grand-mere Bea, who always kept a flower pot full of them at home. They smelled friendly and soothing, yet bizarrely melancholy. There was a bitter-sweetness about them that was consoling. I had simmered down a bit when I felt his eyes on my back. Of course he had followed me.

“Arelia,” he spoke first. I refused to turn around or answer. I felt like a fool. I had created this thing between us in my head. It had been magical and

wonderful, but now it had all fallen apart. I saw Lucas for what he really was.

A light wind blew through my hair, relieving me from the punishing heat that had overthrown the rain. I felt his fingers on the nape of my neck. I didn't want to feel what I did. I didn't want electricity to surge through my body, but it did. I turned around to face him while taking several steps back.

"I don't need your explanations or your apologies. Thanks for having me here for the summer, even if it was just to use me. You can mail me a check for the days I did work, I also have a Paypal account, or if it's easier for you an electronic transfer would work," I rambled.

"Use you?" Lucas looked as if I had just thrown dirt on his impeccable white shirt. That's exactly what I felt like doing. So I did. I grabbed some wet dirt from the ground and bitterly threw it at him. It landed with a thud against his chest, staining his white shirt. It was totally uncalled for, but it felt so good. It made him less perfect and a little less threatening.

At first, Lucas looked absolutely horrified, and I was sure he was going to walk out of the garden. However, to my surprise, he let out a deep laugh.

"Go away!" I yelled as I turned my back at him.

Before I knew it, he flung dirt right back at me.

"You jerk!" I turned around. The dirt hit my shoulder, streaking my ugly uniform.

"If throwing mud at you is going to make you listen to me, then that's just what I'll do."

"I don't want to talk you to! I know everything. I know what you really are. You've been lying to me." I aggressively flung some more dirt at him. It hit his right leg.

"You pretended to be nice to me, to be interested in me, just so I would help you!" I cried hysterically. "You and Ms. Mae invited me and Sabrina to work at Darkwood for your own purposes. You repulse me."

He came closer. "That's not true, Arelia."

"No, don't come any closer or I'm going to keep throwing dirt at you."

"You can throw all the dirt you want at me. My skin can turn dark as night, but I'm not leaving here until you allow me a chance to explain," he pleaded.

Nervously, he brushed aside the hair that had fallen over his eyes before stepping closer.

My knees buckled as he came near. I wanted more than anything to believe him. I wanted to believe that he hadn't been using me this whole time. He hadn't pretended to be nice to me so that I would free him from Mad Marie's curse.

"I didn't invite you to Darkwood. Your Aunt Mae did because she wanted to see you. She wanted to meet you again, and for you to discover your powers."

"Sure, how convenient, and you just happened to be nice to me and stalk me for no reason. All this time, you had no agenda of your own? What are you, some kind of ghost?"

"No, I'm not a ghost. I never died. I am bound to this body, and to Darkwood, for eternity. I can't explain it, but sickness or death cannot touch me. At first, I took pleasure in it, but as the years crept by and I saw those I love age and die in front of my eyes, it became a prison. Only the LaRue family stayed faithful to me all these years, keeping me in contact with the outside world. I admit, when your aunt first told me about you, all I could think of was if you would be able to free me. I wanted to meet you for that purpose only. That's why I agreed to let guests into Darkwood this summer and approved that your Aunt Mae could offer you a job here. She knew you would only come if you were offered a job. She's been keeping an eye on you and your grand-mere for years now."

"I knew it!" I screamed.

"But then I saw you," he continued speaking ignoring my little outburst. "I got to know you, and you made me feel alive again. You pulled me out of my ghost-like existence, the misery I've been living with for over a hundred and sixty years. Before I met you, this plantation had been my penitentiary, and I had accepted that fate long ago knowing that I somehow deserved it. I took pleasure in my torment, giving up that I would ever be a part of the outside world again. I waited for death, but it never came. But then you appeared, as if by some miracle, and the darkness evaporated. I wanted so badly for you to get to know me too, for you to feel something for me."

His eyes searched mine. They begged for me to understand.

“I wanted to tell you so many times, but I was scared that you would reject me. That you would leave, and my world would once again be cloaked in wretchedness. I should have been a man, but dread crippled me. Dread that you would go, and I would never lay eyes on you again. Horror at the fact that I would be unable to ever feel the way I do when you’re in the room. You don’t have to free me, but don’t leave Darkwood like this. Don’t leave angry. Please stay, Arelia. I want you to stay. I can’t stand the thought of never seeing you again, never arguing with you, never being able to hear what you think or how you feel. Never eating fried Oreos again, as repulsive as they may be. Get to know me better. Stay. I need you to stay. I want to learn every single detail about you. Please give me a chance to do so. The image of you running around out there, without ever giving me a second thought is too much to handle. You must stay.”

His speech had taken the air right out of my lungs. He was inches away from me. My heart pounded with intensity as his hand touched me. It was warm and smooth as it grazed my sweaty cheek and tucked a loose wave behind my ear. A million thoughts buzzed in my head. Confusion, sheer joy- but the most powerful of them all was fear. Fear that I would fall in love with him and end up hurt. Fear that if I broke the curse, I would never see him again, or worse, he would die. Fear that I would venture further into a world that I had no control over. Fear that I would lose Sabrina if I stayed. So I said the only thing that I could. “I can’t stay.”

I NEVER WANT TO BE LIKE THEM

Later that night, as Sabrina was tormenting me with her snores, I sat on the window ledge in our room. The moon hung high and the stars shone bright, but none of it mattered. I couldn't stop thinking about how hurt Lucus had looked when I told him I couldn't stay, and that I didn't want anything to do with him or Darkwood. It was as if I had poured a scorching cappuccino over his head while smearing hot peppers in his eyes. I was leaving tomorrow. Sabrina had called her parent's driver, and he would be coming to get me at nine o'clock.

"You're running away, my dear." Erzulie appeared, hovering outside the window. She looked stunning in a turquoise dress and kohl-rimmed eyes.

"I'm not running away. I'm being smart. You were wrong, Erzulie, I'm not strong enough. You picked the wrong person to bless. Your powers would have been better spent somewhere else."

"I was not wrong, Arelia. You are strong enough, you're just scared. Do you intend to live the rest of your life in fear?" Erzulie questioned.

"It's a lot better than what I'm going through now," I reasoned.

"Do you really want to be like them?" she asked.

"Who?"

"Think about it." With those ominous words, Erzulie made her exit.

It took me a few minutes to understand who she was referring to. It was my parents. They were the two people in the entire world that I had no intention of

ever being like. My father had left long before I had come along. My mother disappeared the day after she gave birth to me. I could see a pattern developing here. Maybe it was hereditary. Maybe I was just meant to run when things got complicated or made me uncomfortable.

But then I thought about Grand-mere Bea who never ran. She had chosen to leave Darkwood because she didn't feel it was the right place for her, but not once had she abandoned me. Even though the life we lived wasn't luxurious, it had love. Grand-mere Bea had taught me never to run away from the ones you loved. You stayed with them, fought for them, and loved them the best you could. I wanted to be like her. I couldn't pinpoint my exact feelings for Lucas yet, but I did know they were like nothing I'd ever felt before. If I was ever going to help him, I couldn't abandon him.

I knew what I needed to do. I knew that I couldn't leave yet. I hopped down from the ledge and searched the room for one of Sabrina's silk kimonos. I found a black one with red butterflies on it and threw it over my underwear and bra. I turned on the light and glanced in the mirror. I dabbed on some lip gloss and ran my fingers through my hair. I took a deep breath and convinced myself that I was strong enough to face whatever came my way.

I crept out of the room and closed the door behind me. If Sabrina woke up, there would be hell to pay. I made my way down the hall until I got to Lucas's room. I took another deep breath and tapped on the door.

When he opened the door and saw that it was me, his eyes filled with light. His lips parted as if he were in shock. He was shirtless just like I day I had first seen him. I couldn't stop myself from glancing over his torso which had become a bit more tanned because of all the time we had been spending outdoors. It was more than just a little distracting.

"Areliia." He said my name as if he had never heard it before.

I cleared my throat and remained cool as I spoke. "You need to put on a shirt because we have to talk."

THE SERIES CONTINUES...

To be Continued
No this is not a trilogy
Visit Me
kirasaito.blogspot.com

Punished Book #2 is now available!