

THE SWAMP IS FULL OF MYSTERY

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[Acknowledgements](#)

[Chapter One: A Day in the Life](#)

[Chapter Two: Erase and Rewind](#)

[Chapter Three: The Usual Suspects](#)

[Chapter Four: Cry Me A River](#)

[Chapter Five: Blurred Lines](#)

[Chapter Six: Rolling in the Deep](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Connect with the Author](#)

[Other Releases by this Author](#)

[Check out Alex Apostol](#)

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y'all.

Chapter One: A Day In The Life

“I can’t believe you brought me here to be healed by some wild-haired crazy old lady!” Roy Lestrangle complained to his mother as she pulled him impatiently along.

“I told you, she’s not just some old lady; she’s a witch and she can make you better.”

“The fact that you believe in witchcraft Ma... I mean this is 1989”, Roy complained even as he followed her through the trees to the ramshackle house he could see. It looked like it was standing strictly by the grace of God or maybe some magic the witch was using to hold up her residence. Roy didn’t get it; if she had access to all this magic and shit why didn’t she imagine herself a mansion and a fortune? Why live like an animal in the middle of the bayou with her equally crazy granddaughter?

His mother reached the door, she hesitated, shooting him a glance tinged with apprehension before extending a hand slowly to knock softly on it. They shifted from foot to foot, waiting for someone to come to the door. It was opened by a wizened old woman with a halo of grey hair; she smiled at them in welcome as if she'd been expecting them...

“Come in”, she said and led the way into her house. Roy was expecting to see the skulls of babies decorating the mantelpiece, maybe with snakeskin covering the walls. But no, the furniture was threadbare yet neat. An aubusson rug, old but well kept lay on the living room floor. The couch was covered with throw pillows and a crocheted cover. There were outdated pictures on the wall of men and women dressed in old fashioned clothing. A tantalizing smell of freshly baked something emanated from behind the wooden kitchen counter. Roy's mouth watered, and he

wondered if the witch would offer them something to eat before the day's business began.

She led them past the living room however, toward some narrow stairs. They led up to an attic where all the *good stuff* was. Animal skulls, and chicken feathers, an altar with the requisite freaky statue on it. The statue was surrounded by offerings of rice and tobacco, black coffee and yams, a straw hat and a cane, pennies, palm oil and roses. *This* was more like Roy was expecting.

“What can I do for you?” The witch asked startling Roy with the soft, compassionate nature of her tone.

“My Roy is sick Nannane. Could you heal him?” His mother asked hands clasped and stretched forward in a pleading way.

The witch held out her hand to Roy, and he understood that she wanted him to put his hand in hers. He was scared

though; he didn't want to do it. With his mother's narrowed eyes on him though, he felt he had no choice but to clasp her hands with his own. She closed her eyes, humming softly under her breath. A warmth suffused the area where her hands touched his and it slowly began to permeate the rest of him. He felt his body relax into languid peace while his eyes closed of their own volition. It was like receiving the gentlest massage in human history.

“You have the wasting disease”, the witch intoned, “What are they calling it these days... AIDS?”

Roy jumped in shock. *Nobody knew that; nobody said that...not out loud.* His mama didn't know, she couldn't have told. How had this witch guessed? He opened his eyes and snatched his hand out of hers, standing quickly to leave. His mother was watching him; a sad look in her eyes. The witch's eyes were serene. She sat watching him, waiting for him to do what he would.

“How do you know that?” He whispered.

The witch just smiled slightly and held out her hands, “I don’t know if I can heal you; that is not in my hands. But I can make you feel better,” she said.

Roy just stared at her, “You can’t... tell anyone. You can’t...”, he stammered.

The witch shook her head, “My work is just as confidential as any priest... or doctor. You need not worry that anyone will know of your illness from me.”

“What can you do for me that the doctors can’t?” Roy demanded.

The witch shrugged, “The doctor gives you medicine for your body. You should continue to take those. I deal with a more holistic approach – your soul, your mind and your body – I call on the healing spirits to help you to feel better,

and give you herbs to help your body and soul open to that healing spirit.”

“I don’t believe in that mumbo jumbo,” Roy said belligerently.

“Indeed”, the witch said, seemingly unperturbed.

“Roy, will you sit and let the lady do what she can for you?” His mother’s voice was low yet stringent and strained with emotion.

Roy stared back at her with a frown but the habit of obedience was long ingrained and he sat back down, “Okay”, he said meekly.

The witch lit the candles on the altar and lifted her hands up chanting:

“Papa Legba!

Papa legba open the gate for me.

Antibon legba please open the gate.

Legba open the gate for me and I will thank

The lwa when I return.”

Roy waited for something to happen, maybe a bright light to appear in the statue's eyes or something. Nothing did though, but the witch seemed unperturbed. She leaned forward, lighting a fragrant leaf on the candle and waving the resultant smoke about, wafting the smoke toward him as she chanted. And then she picked up herbs from the shelves, crushing them in a mortar while she continued to chant. She put the resultant crushed herbs into a tiny cloth and twisted it into a small bag.

“Put this in your tea for three nights in a row as you go to sleep. Sip it slowly and then chant three times;

By earth and water,

Air and by fire,

May you hear this wish,

Sources of life and light

Sources of the day and of the earth,

I invoke you here,

Heal my body and mind.”

Roy nodded his head, pretty sure he'd forget those words as soon as they cleared the perimeter fence but not sufficiently invested to ask for a repeat.

“Could you repeat that so I can write it down?” His mother asked and Roy narrowed his eyes at her, wondering if she had somehow guessed what ailed him and that's why she was so insistent on this visit.

The witch obligingly repeated the incantation slowly so his mother could write it down. She handed over the herbs and just like that, the juju session was over.

“Thank you Nannane”, his mother said. The witch nodded and smiled, gesturing for them to precede her back down the stairs. His mother asked about the witch’s granddaughter and she went on about how well she was doing in school which was just freaky considering they’d just been calling out to some pagan god in her attic.

Honestly Roy was surprised the kid even bothered with school what with her future career as a witch not exactly needing a GED.

They left the witch’s place, back through the woods to where they’d left the car. The sun was setting, and they passed the figure of a black girl, walking toward the ramshackle from the direction of the town. It was a small town, so they knew at once who she was. Her tall, slim

figure and big hair marking her out as Matia's grand-daughter Mya. Her clothes seemed to be hand-me-downs straight from her grandmother's wardrobe but she carried herself with dignity. She was a very youthful looking yet poised young lady and smiled slightly at them as she passed but didn't linger. It was as if she knew they didn't want to be seen. They must get a lot of visitors like them up at the Andrewes house. They must be used to people skulking away through the woods. His mother touched him gently on the arm.

"Everything will be alright Roy," she whispered.

"I know ma", he replied.

∞

Mya was daydreaming as she walked, a slight smile on her face. She was having a good day for once and she wanted to savour it. Her grandmother had packed cucumber

sandwiches with a piece of chocolate cake for her lunch, which was great. And then she'd gotten to eat it in peace at the back of the chemistry class. Mrs. Rogers had held her back to finish her experiment. She expected that the teacher had meant it as a punishment; but chemistry was her favourite subject and she *wanted* to finish the project. To be given the chance to do it over her lunch hour was a plus. The chemistry class was quiet; it was a distance from the dining hall and the madness disguised as the lunch time crowd in there. If she could, she'd eat lunch there every day. The sharp smells of the chemicals didn't bother her at all; not after grammy's attic...

After lunch, she'd had her phys ed. class which quite honestly, was her least favourite. She was always the last to be chosen for every team, and some of the more prejudiced kids were pretty quick to cause her hurt. She had gotten good at dodging them these days, but it still sucked. Today

had been one of those days where some idiot had stepped on her ankle and twisted it. She'd been in so much pain and dreading the walk to the nurse's office but then her classmate, Teddy 'The Bear', had picked her up and carried her to the infirmary, murmuring comforting nonsense all the while.

"You'll be just fine", he'd said as he put her gently down on the nurse's bed.

"Thanks for the ride", she'd replied with a shy smile.

"No problem. Hey I can take you home if you like."

Mya would have liked... but she had this thing about getting in strangers' cars. Even nice enough almost strangers like Teddy The Bear. Sure they were in the same class so yeah, not exactly strangers. But he was a big guy and she was a girl with no friends and none but an old grandma to defend her. So she wasn't putting herself in

compromising situations if she could possibly help it. But she enjoyed the attention that Teddy paid her, it was tender and solicitous without being patronising. She thought that given time, and effort, they could be good friends. Who knows? Maybe even more. Though she'd noticed the way he looked at Charlotte le Carre. To be honest everybody'd noticed how he looked at Charlotte. Mya shrugged internally, it wasn't like princess Charlotte looked back... she was too taken with that jock; the one all the girls fell over. What was his name again? Louis? Lester?... Leo. His name was Leo. Leo Devereaux. And he was so much larger than life that Mya just couldn't take him seriously. Maybe seeing as Teddy didn't have even the ghost of a chance with his crush, he'd look at her as a suitable substitute. I mean god knew it was way past time that somebody kissed her. And if someone was going to do it, she wanted it to be a guy that was as good and kind as Teddy. Mya scoffed at herself;

‘Good and kind Mya? Really? Could you get any more pathetic or desperate?’

Mya hated that voice; it was always snarky and superior and spoke to her like it knew a lot more than she did. I mean sure it was in her head, but she didn’t recognise it as anyone she’d ever heard or known. Usually the voices in her head followed a pattern; there was the comforting voice of wisdom that sounded a lot like her grandpa George, and then there was the disappointed, ‘but what are you doing Mya?’ voice that sounded the way she imagined her mother used to sound. The indulgent ‘Oh Mya, what am I to do with you?’ tone definitely belonged to Grandma Matia... and then there was this snarky bitch who Mya did not know and would have preferred if she left. Nevertheless, Snarky Bitch had a point - perhaps there *was* more to a partner than kindness and goodness... maybe she was playing it safe; but

who the fuck cared? It was her choice and her life and that's what she wanted.

“So there”, Mya told the voice and then looked around quickly to confirm that no-one had seen her talking to herself. That would definitely not be good PR. People already thought she was crazy as a shit house rat. It was the hair; she knew it was the hair... People weren't used to natural black people hair in this corner of Louisiana; not anymore anyway. This was white people country with old world ranch style houses dotting the landscape. Okay yes, the houses were generally old and decrepit - this wasn't the garden district after all - still, the memory of their predecessors remained; even though there was only one active sugar cane ranch still in operation... The Evans' alligator ranch. Yep, sure they grew sugar cane, and it did even make them money; but most of their income came from the alligator farming they did.

She knew she should maybe try to straighten her hair out a little; comb it in a more 'acceptable' way... But she liked the whole Diana Ross look she had going on; occasionally she *did* switch it up with braids. It was comfortable, and it suited her face and it was cheap to maintain - what was a girl to do? Besides she had better things to think about than how her hair was affecting people's lives. She was well on her way to earning that Rhodes Scholarship to the University of Louisiana and from there the world was her oyster. Hell if Teddy wouldn't take her up on her offer, she was sure she could find someone over at UL who could appreciate what she had on offer. She looked down at her pert breasts, examining them critically as she walked up her porch steps.

"What's up with your breasts?" a voice asked from above her startling the hell out of her.

"Grammy! You scared me," she chided, pouting at her.

“Sorry. What were you thinking about just now though? You were staring at your boobies like you expected them to sprout legs and walk away from you or sum’n.” Matia said looking highly amused.

“Do you think I got nice breastes Grammy?” Mya asked looking back down at them.

“Oh you have perfect boobies honey, made to hang clothes on,” her grandmother replied swaying off to the kitchen, “Now you want Jambalaya or Gumbo for dinner? We have leftovers of both.”

“Can I have both?”

Matia glanced back at her with a smile, “Honey with how much you eat it's amazing you don't look like Fat Albert.”

Mya laughed, “It's all that gardenin and fishin you make me do Grammy. Slave labouuurrr”, she sang the last part in a soft cheeky voice. Matia just laughed.

“Food will be on in ten, wash up.”

“Yes grammy”, Mya said in faux submission. She ran upstairs to her room anyway to drop off her bag and then crossed over to the bathroom to wash up. As she did so, she heard voices downstairs... it seemed they had a visitor.

∞

Phillip Locklear was standing in the middle of the living room smiling at Matia.

“And how is Sally doing?” She was asking.

Phil grimaced but then forced a smile, “She’s fine I guess. I haven’t seen her for a while. You know she had that flower show to attend in New Orleans and we’ve been busy at the farm.”

“Oh? What did she do about the shop while she was in New Orleans?”

Phil shrugged, "I'm not sure. Like I said, I've been busy on the farm."

"Mmmhmm, sure. How are the alligators doing then.

Business still good?"

"Well, cash flow is great. Its tourist season you know so we're doing a lot of tours. We also have a new worker; she's invaluable because the clients love her accent and she's fearless with the alligators."

"Oh? Where is she from?" Matia asked stirring her pot.

"London", Phil said. His colour was high and Mya wondered why.

"Oh how interesting", Matia said with a smile. She moved to the sideboard and picked up a linen bag which she twisted closed and passed to Phil.

"There you go," she said.

“Thank you. My eczema always acts up in this weather and nothing works as well as your herbs,” he said, tucking it into his bag.

“Glad to help. Will you stay for dinner?” Matia asked. Phil turned to smile at Mya as she walked past him to lay the table.

“I’d love to, but I promised Sally I’d pass by her place for dinner,” he looked genuinely regretful.

“Too bad Phil, I was hoping to hear more about this hot London babe of yours,” Mya teased.

Phil blushed, “She’s not mine”, he murmured.

“Oh but you wish she was, am I right? Am I right?” Mya asked nudging at him with a saucy smile on her face. The blush on Phil’s face seemed to get ten times deeper.

“Oooh, you like her don’t you?” Mya said with a huge grin seeing it, “you should go for it”, she whispered.

Phil nudged her back and then turned back to Matia, “Thank you for the herbs Matia”, he said with a small bow. He was about the same height as Mya so he could catch her eye as he turned to the door narrowing his eyes as if exhorting her to behave. She grinned wider at him and waved him out.

“Mmm, something smells good,”, she said.

“Dinner’s ready, dig in,”, Matia replied.

∞

“Oooh Teddy come here. I heard you were quite the sir Galahad today”, Charlotte called to him as he stepped into the sports auditorium. She was sitting with her girls on the second pier while the basketball team practised. Teddy was

already late for practise as it was but he still altered direction to go talk to her.

“I don’t know what you mean”, he told her as he reached her.

“Didn’t you carry that black girl to the infirmary today?” she asked in a tone that was vaguely accusing.

“She was hurt”, he said in confusion.

“Aww, how sweet of you. Better be careful though or I might think you don’t like me anymore,” she said with a pout.

Teddy opened his mouth to protest when coach bellowed his name.

“Theodore Bailor what time is this?” he yelled.

Teddy jumped, “Sorry coach”, he said hurrying to join the rest of the team jogging around the basketball court. He

didn't miss Leo's smirk though as he jogged past. He really hated that self satisfied SOB with all of his heart, and it wasn't just because Charlotte was in love with him. That boy was not good people. Teddy was sorry to have to think that, but it was just the truth. Leo's butt buddy slash best friend Miles ran past soon after; he followed Leo around like a love sick puppy and Teddy just did not understand the attraction everyone seemed to feel for that walking ego. As he huffed through the hundred extra push ups the coach assigned him for being late, he could feel Charlotte's eyes on *him*, so he counted it as a win.

Chapter Two: Erase and Rewind

Leo banged into the house throwing his bag behind the door and headed to the kitchen to look for something to eat. He was ravenous; this latest growth spurt was fucking with his metabolism. It was like he was Dennis the Menace crossed with Garfield he felt so out of sync with himself. Luckily it didn't affect his coordination otherwise he would be completely fucked. He stuck his head in the empty fridge, waiting to hear any sound in the apartment that would indicate his mother was home but the silence was as thick as ever. Since there was nothing to eat in the fridge and he was sure they were out of canned goods he turned around and left the apartment, crossing the street to The Rusty Nail to see if Jon would fix him a burger maybe.

Jon did that sometimes and half the time, he didn't even make Leo pay for it. He was a great guy as shady bar owners went; but he wasn't running a charity. Sometimes

he asked Leo to hang out at the bar and ‘talk’ to his patrons. In other words flirt outrageously and make them buy more beer. Leo’s curious charm seemed to work equally well on men *and* women and Jon wasn’t above taking advantage of it. Not like he had any problem singing for his supper. And it was just talking after all....

“Leo my man, how’s tricks?” Jon greeted him as he came up to the bar. The man knew well that Leo was only fifteen but he wasn’t really sweating it. It wasn’t like the law was likely to visit any time soon.

“My kingdom for a burger brother man”, Leo replied with a smile. Jon was not immune to Leo’s charms either.

“Coming up”, he said placing the order with the kitchen. His bar might be dingy but the kitchen was clean. Jon ate there after all, he expected the food to be good. Leo watched the patrons at the bar; there was a pool table at the other end with some old timers playing a game. He

wondered if he could hustle them for some cash; they didn't look familiar which probably meant they didn't know him and how well he played. They didn't look exactly flush with cash but looks could be deceiving. Maybe they were a couple of truckers just passing through. Those guys tended to be thirsty for any action they could get. They weren't common in a small town like Le Marais but they weren't unheard of... Leo swung off his stool and sauntered over, watching them play intently. One of them kept casting glances at him like he wanted a piece; but he wasn't sure which team Leo played for. Leo stuck out his hip, just enough to give a taste, not enough for invitation. It distracted the guy enough that he was off his game. Leo straightened up and moved in for the kill;

“Fancy a game?” he asked smirking at both men.

The one who'd been checking him out looked up, "Aren't you a bit young to be hangin' in a bar pretty boy?" he asked.

Leo tossed his dark hair out of his face, his piercing grey eyes holding the old man's; he shrugged, "I won't tell if you won't", he said.

The old man smiled at him as if he really could not help himself. Leo stuck his hand out, "I'm Leo Devereux", he said.

The old guy stuck out his hand too, "Trevor McKinney", he said.

"Nice to meet you Trevor", Leo said shaking his hand. His eyes cut to the other guy who was studiously ignoring him. He held out his hand to be shaken, "And you are...?" he asked.

The second guy looked up and met Leo's eyes. That was his mistake, "Phil Carter", he mumbled sticking his hand out briefly to make contact with Leo's and then taking it back like he'd been burned.

Leo smiled at them and nodded his head, "Trevor? Phil? Fancy a game?" he asked again.

"Sure why not?" Trevor said.

"Say... twenty a game?" Leo proposed.

"Son if you is too young to be in a bar, you is definitely too young to gamble", Trevor said looking up and down Leo's five foot eleven frame like he maybe wanted to eat him alive.

Leo searched his pockets, looking for cash to put down. He was sure Charlotte had slipped him a twenty at lunch time to pay for his food... he hadn't used it because *Miles* paid for his lunch so... ah, there it was.

He put down the twenty and stared at both men, challenge in his eyes, “You scared?” he asked. It was one thing to refuse to play with him because he was too young, it was too much to expect to turn away from an accusation of being yeller. Trevor stepped forward, “Rack ‘em”, he said with a glare.

∞

Leo made enough to pay for his burger and go home with a hundred dollars in his pocket. It was a good evening all in all. Except that his chemistry homework wasn't done; neither was calculus. He was too tired for his brain to make head or tails of what he was supposed to be doing though so he resolved to copy Ashley's work the next day. She was the brightest in their little passé; and conscientious about keeping up with school. She didn't fit in with Charlotte and the rest of her mean girls but she liked to be close to Miles. Leo had not seen a torch like that being carried for anyone

since Rhett Butler set eyes on Scarlett O'Hara. Except frankly, he didn't give a damn. Leo snickered thinking about telling Miles that he was Scarlett... he'd probably get a kick out of it; Miles was strange like that. But... Leo loved him anyway - best friends always got a pass.

He was just getting into bed when he heard his mother stagger into the house. By the sounds of it, she was blind drunk. He lunged forward to turn the key in the lock so she couldn't come in to his room. Leo did not have the energy for her drunken shenanigans tonight. He switched off the light so she would think he was asleep or out and sat quietly on the bed, waiting for her to pass out. The sound of the TV came on; the theme song for Moonlighting! and it was the final episode too damnit! He could hear Maddie talking about having a kitchen she'd never cooked in... Goddamn fucking drunk mother... now he would miss the final episode and he'd been looking forward to it. Leo

flopped back on the bed in a huff; he had the worst luck of anyone he'd ever known.

He fell asleep without meaning to and when he woke up light was filtering through the narrow space between his window and the brick wall of the building next door. He never got the full benefit of daylight in his room because of it, but he was rarely in his room anyway so...

He ventured out cautiously, wondering if his mother had passed out in front of the TV again; but the living room was empty. Leo heaved a sigh of relief, rooting in the cupboard for the cereal he knew he'd stowed in there two days ago after he'd swiped it from Charlotte's kitchen. He'd have to eat it dry; there was no milk to be had for love or money in the house.

As he was sitting down to eat he heard the doorbell ring downstairs on the front door. At this time of the day, it could only be Miles. Leo jumped up and went to answer it.

They lived above his uncle's Alligator Shoppe, rent free in return for his mother manning the till. She wasn't a great administrator, but she was Gregory Evans' only sister. As a result he felt an obligation to look out for her. Especially when her no-good husband and Leo's father hauled ass and left them high and dry. Leo worked at the Alligator Ranch during the summer holidays. He looked forward to it if only because it meant regular meals and some spending money in his pocket.

He opened the door to a smiling Miles who held up a brown paper bag with a triumphant grin; Leo knew that smell anywhere... Donuts from Mrs Jean's bakery. He peered in the bag, seeing the donut box and a fragrant cup of coffee! The wave of gratitude he felt toward Miles could not be articulated in words. He darted a glance at him and then turned on the stairs, "Come in", he said.

Miles followed him upstairs where Leo asked why there was only one cup and Miles told him he'd already eaten so Leo could go crazy on the rest. Leo nodded his head and tucked in; they discussed homework and the fact that Leo hadn't done it yet. Miles offered to write them up for him while he ate and Leo shrugged as if to say, "As you like..." There was a lump in his throat, he didn't know why it was there. He did know that sometimes he thought that Miles was the only thing keeping him alive.

∞

Mya looked at the blank paper in front of her; she was supposed to write an essay about herself and why she felt she was the right fit for University of Louisiana school of Chemistry. She thought about what her life was like; the libation they poured out to the ancestors every morning before breakfast, the altar dedicated to Papa Legba in the attic that her grandmother kept well supplied with

offerings, the garden in the back where she grew herbs, some medicinal, some for cooking, some for both... her little boat where she went fishing over the weekend to supply them with food. Was she supposed to write about all these things or invent a suitably apple pie all-American existence? Her mother had gone to college and so had her father. But she and her grandmother didn't talk about them - there was nothing of her mother's anywhere in the house she could find so she suspected that looking for help in that corner was a dead end. Pun (maybe) not intended.

Unfortunately this wasn't a problem she could bring up with her teachers although Mrs. Argent *had* volunteered to help her with her applications. Maybe she could ask her some general questions and see how it went from there.

Mya sighed, getting up to see if she could snag some of the chocolate cake whose smell had been wafting all over the

house since she came home. She lived by a simple policy,
“When in doubt, eat.”

She swiped chocolate cake from the tin and poured herself
some milk and then went back to staring at the paper.

Nothing occurred to her even after stuffing her face so she
shrugged, gave up and went to bed. Tomorrow was another
day.

*The swirling mist was blinding... not just because it
obscured her vision, but it also stung her eyes.
Furthermore it smelled... evil; like the aftermath of a great
conflagration in the bayou. She'd seen one or two of those
when lightning had struck a tree and set it on fire... The
combination of swampy smells and burned wood was an
assault on the nostrils. That's how the mist smelled. Losing
sight and smell and taste disoriented her so much that she
didn't know which way was the right way to go. Not that
she even knew where she was or how she got here or what*

she was doing here. She stepped carefully forward, not able to see the ground and her foot bumped on something solid. It was a narrow thing but sturdy. It didn't budge even when she pushed her foot against it to see if it would. Reaching her hands out slowly she tried to feel her way forward, past this obstacle.

Her hands closed on another narrow solid piece of horizontal something. She found that she could curl her fingers around it... it must be some sort of bar, or barrier. She stepped forward and looked down at her hands trying to see what she was holding. She was startled to see a crib... with a baby in it. She peered at it noting the piercing grey eyes and a full head of curly brown hair. She suspected, from its size, that it was newborn or close to it. The thought flashed through her mind that she'd seen nothing so beautiful ever. Weirdly enough the baby seemed able to hold her gaze, its eyes looking eerily aware. She

studied it; it couldn't be more than three months old. Did intelligence show in babies' eyes that quick? The baby opened its mouth, and she tensed herself to hear him cry.

"What took you so long?" it said.

Mya woke up with a startled cry.

∞

Matia rowed slowly down the bayou, taking her time. The Ageless One was never up before noon anyway. And the day was less humid than it usually was. A slight breeze caressed her face, cooling her heated brow warmed by the effort of rowing. An alligator seemed to study her; eyes peeping from the water's surface like a pair of beady... eyes. She ignored it though - it stayed unmoving on the opposite bank and she guessed it had already eaten.

Besides, alligators would know better than to come near this pirogue; it was warded against water predators and

capsizing. Nannane Maie as she was known by a select few; or Matia Andrewes, was a witch of renowned repute throughout Southern Louisiana. It was a quiet life she led; avoiding prejudice and censure by keeping to herself.

Unlike most witches that peppered the bayou, Matia dealt only with white magic. She called on Papa Legba to smile upon her efforts like most witches she knew, and she had an altar where she prayed to the *loa* and beseeched him with song to carry her messages to the underworld where the ancestors dwelt. She made sure that his red and black altar was well supplied with all of his favourite things. In return for her devotion, he granted her prayers.

The grey wolf was at the shore, waiting for her to bank. She had been feeling increasingly restless and that had prompted her to make this impromptu visit to the Ageless One... still, it seemed she was expected.

“Mama”, she murmured softly, confident that the wolf could hear her even with the wind blowing the other way.

The wolf turned and trotted away and Matia tied her pirogue to a nearby tree and followed slowly. She was familiar with the route and didn't feel the need to keep the wolf in sight. However she didn't let it get completely out of sight in the wooded swamp; there was a reason that the wolf always came; and it wasn't to be a guide dog.

They came to a halt at a clearing so thickly surrounded by trees that they created a kind of wall, blocking out everything. The wolf disappeared as Matia stepped into the circle of stool shaped stones. The only light was from the massive fire burning in the midst of the stones and Matia imagined that she could see figures dancing in the flames. She dropped her offering next to the statue of Papa Legba that towered over the flames - a bar of chocolate - chanting a greeting as she did so;

I praise the mysteries and power of Eshu!

*You are the messenger of Olodumare, the Orisha and the
Ancestors*

You are the owner of the four directions:

North, South, East and West

You are the keeper of the Ashe' of the Orisha

You are the guardian of the gates of fortune

You are the Lord of flexibility

You are the Lord of choice, chance and change!

She sang softly, her voice blending with the song of the trees above her. As the song came to an end, she looked up to see a short, yellow skinned woman with long grey dreadlocks regarding her from the edge of the clearing. She was barefoot and dressed in a grey shift dress that blended

well with her hair. Her hands were clasped in front of her as she smiled at Matia.

“Nannane”, she said softly.

“Mama Ruth”, Matia replied.

“We have much to discuss”, the Ageless One said.

“Indeed?” Matia inquired. Perhaps it had been Mama Ruth that sent the restiveness.

“You feel the stirring do you not?” Mama Ruth asked.

Matia thought about it... was that what had her all tetchy and on edge?

“What is stirring?” she asked Mama Ruth.

The Ageless One merely smiled, “Things are waking up that have slept for millennia; I feel it in my bones. Do you not Nannane?” she asked.

“I feel *something*”, Matia replied.

“Indeed Nannane. Go home, keep watch. We shall speak again”, Mama Ruth said. Matia blinked. And the Ageless One was gone... so was the wolf.

∞

Mya woke up and knew immediately that the house was empty. She didn't know how she knew that; the aroma of coffee was wafting up the stairs in temptingly tantalising tendrils of addiction so she knew her grandmother was up and had made breakfast. The tangy aroma of cinnamon pancakes was wafted behind the coffee. Nevertheless, she knew she was alone. Or as alone as a house this old and with so much history could be. She knew that most of the creaking and groaning she heard were just the old wood settling... well she knew that most of the time; but sometimes she wondered if it wasn't more than that. There had been times recently when she was sure that some...

thing else was near. She got up and padded to the bathroom, relieved to find that her grandmother had switched on the boiler whenever it was that she'd gotten up and the water was piping hot. It was still very early and a light mist coated the bayou. Damp tendrils of cold seeped between the slats of the window to nip at her heels - the only part of her body not enveloped in flannel. She got in the shower and let the water pound on her for ten minutes before exiting to tramp wetly downstairs in her robe. She felt like she could really use that cup of coffee. Okay well she always felt like she could use a cup of coffee; what with the blank white mass of paper waiting impatiently for her brilliant exposition on what an excellent addition she would be to UL sitting accusingly empty on the table. And the prospect of Teddy The Bear maybe possibly somehow making out with her and *finally* satisfying her curiosity on what it felt like to be kissed by a boy. Madonna seemed to think it was great. Mya was an empirical animal; she liked

to have personal experience to draw on rather than rely on hearsay.

Coffee cup in hand, she ran back up to her room to dig into the back of her closet, looking for her jeans. She was sure she'd put them in there at some point. They were old and bell bottomed. She'd gotten them cheap at the flea market and they made her legs look long and her butt look round. So who cared if they were thirty years out of date? The sixties rocked and so did she. She drew them on, one leg at a time, smiling at the yellow dragon motif over the pocket. In all honesty the motif was why she'd chosen this particular pair. The dragon was soo badass; at least in her humble opinion. She rummaged in the closet, looking for a clean shirt quickly realising that it was time to do laundry. A frown marred her forehead as she sighed – she *hated* doing laundry. If only her grandma would show her a cleaning spell or something so she didn't have to. Anytime

she tried to suggest that using magic to expedite housework was about being efficient though, she was given ‘The Look’ and grammy acted like she hadn’t spoken.

There was a splash outside, and she shuffled over to the window to see who might be coming in from the bayou or if it was just an alligator. *The* alligator... the one which seemed to like to keep her company as she gardened next to the river. She suspected it was one of the tame ones from over at the Evans’ alligator farm. It had probably wandered far from home and had now adopted Mya as the alligator’s new guardian. She mostly ignored it, not wanting to encourage its friendliness; not that it seemed even the slightest bit discouraged...

It was actually her grandmother mooring Mya’s boat on their little dock. Mya wondered where she’d been and what she’d been up to so early in the morning. Obviously it wasn’t fishing because her arms were empty...

“Hey grandma”, she said as they converged at the bottom of the staircase; Mya coming from upstairs and her grandmother from outside, “What’s shakin?”

Matia Andrewes smiled at her granddaughter fondly, “Young people and your crazy expressions. What does that even mean?” she asked.

“Aww, don’t think you can fool me grammy, I know you know all the current lingo; after all you speak to more ‘young people’ than I do,” there was maybe a touch of chagrin in Mya’s voice but it was overshadowed by the fondness.

“Have you had breakfast?” Matia asked taking a left on that conversation and heading on to more pleasant topics.

“I was just about to murder your coffee and pancakes,” Mya declared.

“Oh dear”, her grandmother replied looking pseudo concerned, “are you really sure that’s necessary?”

Mya punched her lightly in the arm and skipped off to the kitchen to eat her breakfast. She was suddenly *famished*.

“Where did you go?” she asked once her mouth was stuffed with pancake.

Matia shrugged, “I had to see Mama Ruth”, she said.

Mya didn’t inquire further; Mama Ruth was an even more powerful witch than her grandmother she knew that. She was also maybe slightly afraid of Mama Ruth and her weirdly sharp teeth and long grey dreadlocks. There was something just not... right about her.

Mya finished her breakfast and gathered her books. She had a walk to school so she didn’t really have time to linger.

“Bye Grams. See you later”, she called as she left the house.

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The problem with long quiet walks through the tall grass that lined the road from their house to the town of Le Marais was that it gave her plenty of time to think. And her mind kept returning to that dream and what the hell...?

She wondered if she should have told her grandmother about it; or if she was making a huge fuss over nothing. She had plenty of strange dreams. Why just last night she'd dreamt that her mother appeared on her boat while she was fishing and they had a long conversation about seventies disco of all things. Not that she had anything in particular against seventies disco, but it was just so *random*. If her long dead mother really appeared to her Mya guessed that how people partied in the previous but one decade would not come up in their list of Things to Discuss.

Malia Andrewes had died when Mya was only five years old and her father had followed soon after. She knew little about them other than that they had loved each other deeply and that they were both witches descended from long lines of witches. Her father had also been a talented musician in the style of Robert Johnson. Mya still had his guitar enshrined in the below stairs room where she kept what few relics she had of his. During one memorable occasion - in which her grandmother drank too much of the home-made wine she brewed in the basement - she'd gotten a little glimpse of who her parents had been.. The basement was really a room in the centre of the earth as far as Mya could tell; it was at the bottom of a steep flight of stairs which went from brick to clay about half way down. It branched into a network of tunnels that were closed off mostly. Mya was forbidden to explore and she was generally an obedient child. In it, Matia kept all the dangerous ingredients. The ones Mya wasn't allowed to touch on pain of severe pain.

She also brewed her wine down there and on the occasion of what would have been Malia's thirty eighth birthday, she'd sampled too much of it. They did not mark her mother's birthday normally except with silences where usually there were words. That day was different; Matia had spoken about her daughter. How she loved to laugh, how much she would delight in the songs that her husband composed for her. How she would blush and jump about in delight. Mya smiled to think of it but couldn't relate to feeling like that about anyone. At least not anyone in *this* town with their bigotry and small mindedness. Perhaps Teddy the bear would change that. Hopefully soon.

Chapter Three: The Usual Suspects

Leo waited outside the flower shop for his aunt Leyla to arrive. She usually picked him up here to go over to the farm over the weekend. This weekend he'd had to evade Charlotte who wanted him to come over to her place and 'hang'. Leo had no time for that; for one thing Charlotte was suffocating even if she did make life easier with all her financial contributions to his life. However, he wasn't ready to be tied permanently to her apron strings; the world was full of girls who were throwing themselves at his fifteen year old ass...he wasn't about to settle down with just one ball and chain. One extremely cloying if generous prison guard at that.

Leyla Evans drew up in a pick up truck and smiled at him, "Hi there", she said.

"Hey Aunt Ley", he replied as he got into the truck.

She drove off as they indulged in easy conversation, avoiding awkward subjects like Leo's mother and school. They stopped at Mrs. Jean's bakery to get some baked goods to snack on, then made their way to the farm. If Leyla Evans had her way, Leo would have been a permanent resident at the ranch. He was a growing boy who was severely neglected by his alcoholic mother and Leyla sometimes wanted to take a baseball bat to Jade's head... maybe wake her up and make her see sense. All she could do though was kidnap Leo every weekend and feed him up. This latest growth spurt must be hell on him what with the survivalist diet that he was on by default. Leyla made a mental note to pack him enough food for the week at least.

They drove up to the ranch and Phil opened the gate for them, smiling at Leyla and Leo as they passed. He was the ranch accountant but enjoyed getting his hands dirty.

Especially since they'd employed the British chick with the long legs and the strawberry blonde hair. Jade had a feeling there was a break up not very far in Phil's future. She wondered if Sally was aware that her days as Phil's girlfriend were numbered. Especially as Leyla had noticed Lillian looking back at Phil...but only when he wasn't watching her. It was fun to watch in a nostalgic 'I remember when I was at that stage' sort of way.

Leo alighted from the vehicle and went to speak to his uncle. It was usually his first port of call when he got to the farm just to get that out of the way. Leo and his uncle had a very uneasy relationship; Gregory was the only father figure that Leo had in his life and he was also his employer. To top it off he was responsible for the roof over his and his mother's head...it tended to create a bit of tension between them though Greg tried his best to diffuse it.

Leyla could hear the phone ringing in the house. Nobody seemed about to answer it so she ran in to see who was calling. Most likely it was a client or vendor; it was her job to man the phones and deal with marketing anyway... She was wrong though, it was not a client or a vendor on the phone; it was Sally. She'd seen Leyla draw up to her flower shop and wanted to know why she didn't come in. Didn't she like flower arrangements anymore? Hadn't Phil sent her a message or was he avoiding her? Leyla sighed inwardly; she didn't know how Phil coped with Sally's high maintenance personality...but to each his own, she guessed. She soothed Sally, talked her down from the ledge she was trying to get on, and then promised that she'd get Phil to call her as soon as he was free while all the while wondering why she was bothering. This was none of her business.

“He’s cheating on me”, Sally said hanging up the phone.

“You got that from what exactly? Ms. Leyla not coming into your shop? You know that woman feels kind of high and mighty cause of her husband owning that ranch. She figures she’s better than us” Charles le Carre said.

“Huh, you mean because she refused to fuck you in high school?” Sally asked with a twist of her lips.

“Always thought she was too good for me. Bet she wishes she’d known better now”, he said smugly. Charles *was* the richest man in town and he knew it; he also made sure everyone else did too. He had the requisite trophy wife and the most beautiful daughter ever, whose whims he pandered to; when he had time.

“Yep. She probably going to die through an alligator bite the way things are going on that ranch o’ theirs”, Sally said,

“And if Phil ain’t careful, an alligator gon’ bite him too.

And he is not gon’ like it.”

“I don’t see what you see in Cochise anyway. He’s not good enough for you.”

“Easy for you to say. *You* already got a spouse.”

Charlie came close and wrapped his arms around her,

“Trust me Sal darlin’ marriage ain’t really all it's cracked up to be in those wedding magazines you like to read.

You’re better off single and ready to mingle”, he said hands drifting up and down her sides, caressing the swell of her hips and the slight dip in her waist; mapping her.

Sally leaned into his touch bending her neck backwards to rub against his shoulder, “Yeah, well whatever”, she murmured, hip gyrating lazily against her brother.

“And if you got an itch you gotta scratch, you know all you gotta do is ask”, he spoke into her neck, taking a bite out of

her skin. He left a brilliant red mark to document that his teeth had been on her skin. It was something for that Phil fella to be jealous over if he really did like his sister and wasn't just fucking around with her. Sally's hands rose and closed on his neck, pulling him closer and rotating her pelvis into him with a little more energy.

“Mmm, I love when you get all frisky on me; wanna close up shop and go scratch my itch upstairs?”

“Do I ever say no to you sis?” Charlie asked.

“Only when I tell you to divorce that bitch”, she said.

Charlie laughed, “Yeah well...”, he said leading her up the stairs to her apartment. She had a bungalow located a few miles out of town but she didn't use it much; this apartment was much more convenient for her in terms of getting to work and keeping an eye on Phil. Charlie picked her up and

threw her on the bed. She fell on it, skirt flying up to expose her red-silk-underwear-clad butt cheeks to his gaze.

“Sally”, he intoned reverently covering her with his big hands. He rubbed his palm against her soft flesh, revelling in the feel of her satiny skin against him. He had always loved her skin; it was the softest he’d ever touched - she was the first female who's behind he’d ever touched; and she would probably be the last. He clutched them hard at the thought and pulled her toward him, rubbing his pelvis against hers. She arched backwards, encouraging him wordlessly to get on with it. He unzipped his flies without shifting away from her and positioned himself.

“What do you plan to do if he *is* cheating?” Charlie asked as he thrust into her to the hilt. She squeaked in surprise and then took a deep breath, pushing back at him as he rutted into her.

“I’ll kill him”, she gasped out every word, “I’ll kill them both.”

“That’s my girl”, Charlie moaned head thrown back and mouth open in ecstasy as they fucked each other.

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Phil knocked softly on her door, “Hi”, he said shyly.

“‘ello, wot do you want?”. Lillian asked as she pulled on her boots; she was getting ready to go on the water, locate a ‘gator which had gone AWOL.

“I just wanted to find out if you got the flowers I sent you yesterday”, she said.

“Yeah I got them”, Lillian said.

“Oh”, Phil replied and stood uncertainly not knowing how to take this conversation forward.

“I don’t really like yellow”, she said walking toward him and prompting him to step back out the doorway, “I prefer white or red. Yeller’s for cowards”, her aquamarine eyes bored into his as she paused in the doorway one leg jutting in front of the other. She was a vision; an Amazon vision drowning him in pheromones of love. Phil had it really bad and he didn’t know what to do about it. This had come out of left field. Lillian brushed past him and he turned to watch her leave. She was a challenge he admitted, but one he aimed to overcome. Whatever it took.

“Phil!” Leyla called to him from the main house across the quad. The compound was arranged in such a way that the main house was the epicentre, surrounded on one side by employee quarters and separated from them by a grassy knoll. On the other side of the house was the bayou where a pen had been built to house the domesticated alligators and where others wandered in at feeding time. Harvesting was

done monthly; and the hides and skins were sold on to shoemakers and other leather goods makers to be converted into wearable items. The meat went to speciality restaurants or was rotted for use as feed. Nothing was wasted.

Phil walked to the house to meet with Leyla. Her face was pinched, and she looked worried.

“Sally just called”, she told him, “She did not sound happy with you.”

“Why would she call *you*?” Phil asked shoulders hunching and his hands bunching into impotent fists.

Leyla lifted her hands, “I just answered the phone man. You need to sort things out with your girl; it's spilling over into your workplace.”

Phil's shoulders bunched even harder as he dropped his head, “I know I need to break up with her-” he began to say.

“Whoa, that’s not what I said Phil”, Leyla protested.

Phil smiled, “I know its not. Its what *I’m* saying.”

Leyla’s shrugged, “Well...I’m sorry to hear it. It’ll make buying flowers really awkward”, she said making Phil laugh, “But I’m sure you and Lillian will be very happy in spite of the height difference.

Phil blushed and grimaced, “Is it that obvious?” he asked.

“What? Your soulful pining? My nephew’s noticed and he’s hardly ever here.”

“Ouch”, Phil said, “Has Lillian said anything?”

“I’m not sure she knows. She might be the only one still in the dark. I think the alligators have noticed”, Leyla said thoughtfully.

Phil blushed and laughed at the same time, brushing the ground with his leg in a shy gesture.

“She won’t even give me the time of day anyway”, he said in a low voice.

Leyla snorted, “Don’t be too sure about that”, she said making Phil glance sharply at her questioningly. Leyla ignored the look, slapping him on the arm and walking off.

“I have to see a man about a dog so...back to work Phil”, she said.

“Yes. right. of course”, Phil said hurrying off in the other direction. It was of course completely by accident that it led to the alligator pens where Lillian was busy wrestling with them.

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Leyla disappeared into the woods, walking along the water on a little used path. As far as she knew, she was the only one who used it from the Evans farm. She preferred this route because it was peaceful; apart from the rustle of

fauna in the underbrush and the occasional call of birds in the air. It calmed her mind and the walking was stress relieving. At the end of the path was a grotto where she went to sit sometimes; she'd encountered her northern neighbour here many a time, picking up herbs or singing to herself as she burned stuff and did rituals. Leyla wasn't sure about what she was up to, but it didn't seem that she was up to no good. She'd thought herself unobserved as she watched her neighbour but then one time when she was finished chanting she'd lifted her head and looked straight at Leyla.

"Missiz Evans, fancy meeting you here", she'd said.

Leyla had frowned, "Do we know each other?" she'd asked uncertainly. I mean she knew that Matia Andrewes was some kind of witch who lived down the road but she hadn't met her formerly. She certainly didn't know that the witch knew *her*. That was disconcerting.

Matia smiled, “Apparently not”, she said. Her voice was really low, kind of gravelly. It washed pleasantly over Leyla and she’d felt herself relax almost in spite of herself.

“I was just enjoying the ambience”, Leyla felt compelled to explain that she wasn’t lurking or spying.

“I actually called you here”, Matia had said. Leyla opened her mouth in shock.

“I beg pardon?” she said.

“I called you here, because I have something to tell you”, Matia said.

“What?” Leyla said her heart inexplicably speeding up.

“There are people who are close to you, who are in danger.”

“Who?”, Leyla asked anxiously.

“I can’t say”, Matia replied.

“What? So why tell me that people around me are in danger if you can’t tell me who?” Leyla’s voice was rising as she thought about her husband and her nephew and the possibility that it was one of them who Matia was talking about.

“I can’t say because I can’t see their faces. All I see is you in the centre of a swirling mass of blurry people courting danger. The colour yellow is prominent among them.”

“Is there a way to tell if they are family or friends or...?”
Leyla asked hands fisting and loosening as she shifted from foot to foot.

“They are close to you; they are connected to you in some way that is related to the danger. I’m sorry, that is all I can tell you. You just have to keep your eyes open.”

“You’re not very helpful for a witch”, Leyla had said with a pout.

Matia smiled, "I know. I'm sorry", she said and then turned and left.

Since then, Leyla had made the trek to the grotto at least once a week. Sometime she came upon Matia and they exchanged words. Leyla always asked if she had acquired more information but Matia always said no. Sometimes she saw Matia's granddaughter on the water, steering her boat or fishing. She looked to be a very serene girl; unbothered by outside influences including the fact that her clothes were not fashionable or her hair wasn't straight...Leyla knew how high school kids could be; how mean and judgmental - she'd been one herself once. So she really admired Mya's lack of visible depression. Perhaps her grandmother was more effective in finding a remedy to ward against bullying than she was in telling Leyla who the fuck was in danger in her life. Or maybe Mya was just that evolved. Perhaps, she thought, she should introduce Leo to

her. He was the opposite of serene; ‘angry, bitchy and discontented with his lot’ was a more accurate description of *him*. She worried sometimes that he would end up destroying himself if he didn’t find something worth living for soon. Still, Mya never saw her and Leyla didn’t try to call attention to herself. She felt like enough of a lurking snoop as it was.

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Dear Dean of Admissions,

My name is Mya Andrewes, and I’m an only child of an only child. I lost my parents young and was brought up by my grandparents. We lost my grandfather early as well so it is just me and my grandmother surviving, of my direct family members. My extended family on my grandfather’s side still live in New Orleans, and we occasionally visit them especially around the anniversary of my grandpa’s death where we go to see him at Lafayette Cemetery and

remember what a man he was among men. My family are farmers and I'm extremely interested in how nature interacts with itself in ~~many ways~~ various intriguing ways. That is why Chemistry and Science in general ~~fascinates~~ interest me ~~a lot~~. ~~It gives up~~ Science ~~holds to its breast~~ gives access to the secrets behind nature; why the grass grows, why ~~certain~~ particular plants help with certain medical conditions, why the sunlight ~~on the water~~ ~~looks like it does~~ reflects on the water like it does...Nature is ~~really~~ the greatest mystery in life, and I ~~want~~ look forward to unravelling it as much as I can. That is why I feel confident that awarding me a spot in your Science programme would be ~~a~~ beneficial ~~move~~ for both of us. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Sincerely,

Mya Andrewes.

Mya read over the letter and nodded her head resolutely.
She felt it was just the right balance between honesty and
prevarication. Of course it was just the first draft...

Chapter Four: Cry Me a River

“You know, you really need to piss or get off the pot”, Lillian said startling Phil quite badly. He hadn’t known she was aware of his presence.

“I don’t know what you mean”, he said blushing furiously.

“Yeah you do”, Lillian said as she scraped dirt from her blade, “You’ve been watchin’ me almost since I stepped off of the bus. Piss or get off the pot. A girl can wait only so long.”

Phil opened his mouth but only a clicking sound came out. He closed it and opened it again, for a second try, “I...” he managed to get out.

“You...wot?” she asked smiling at him in amusement.

“I...have a girlfriend. You must excuse me, I don’t mean to be taking up your time like this.”

“S’no bother”, Lillian said seemingly unmoved by the news that he was taken, “So you gonna give her the boot or wot?” she asked.

“Give her...oh you mean break up with her? The next time I see her I suppose” , he said surprising himself but apparently not her.

“Splendid. Well you just do tha’ and then we’ll see wots wot”, she said.

“Right. Okay”, Phil said finding that he was walking away from her, heading toward the jeep. He had some meat to pick up from the slaughter house anyway; he’d promised Leyla he’d do it for her so she could go do something mysterious in the woods. He could pass by the flower shop and...end it with Sally. He found that he was curiously light headed at the thought that the decision was made and he would be a free man before the end of the day. It made him want to sing with joy. He would buy some flowers for

Lillian while he was there; red or white - not yellow. He grimaced thinking that that might not be the best idea he'd ever had. Buying flowers from his future ex-girlfriend to give his hopefully future wife would not go down well with either of them he suspected. Besides, it was tacky, he could see that. No, he could maybe pick her some flowers from the garden.

He got in the jeep and drove off quickly, eager to get the hard part behind him. He arrived at the slaughterhouse first and picked up the rotted meat which was used to feed the alligators before heading for Sally's flower shop. He found the 'closed' sign hanging on the door and went round the back to see if she was in her apartment. He rang her bell and waited for quite a while before he heard footsteps on the stairs. He straightened unconsciously wanting to meet her head on when she door opened. To his surprise, it was her brother who opened the door, not her.

“Yes?” Charles le Carre said as if was a stranger who hadn’t sat at Charles’ dinner table not two weeks before.

“Er, I wanted to see Sally. Is she in?” Phil asked.

“She’s asleep. You should come back another time”, Charles said and began to close the door.

Phil reached out to stop the door from banging shut in his face, “It’s important that I see her”, he said.

Charlie sighed and widened the door again, “Fine, I’ll wake her up”, he said padding up the stairs and leaving Phil to get the door. Phil shut it behind him and followed Charlie up the stairs. He did not like Sally’s brother - there was just something cold and lizard-like about him. He was glad that he didn’t have to associate with him again after today.

Charlie walked to the bedroom, shutting the door behind him and Phil meandered about the living room, picking up knick knacks and putting them down. He knew that some

of them were priceless artefacts that she'd acquired on her travels either with her brother or on her own. He also knew that the place had state of the art security in spite of its simple setting.

Sally emerged from the bedroom, smiling to see him waiting. Charlie wasn't with her.

"Phil! What a pleasant surprise", she said holding out her hands to him. He took them, and kissed her cheek and then let them go.

"We need to talk", he said.

Sally smiled, "The four most dreaded words in the English language", she commented. Phil smiled but didn't contradict her. He looked down at his hands and then back up into her eyes.

"I'm sorry Sally, but I-" he began to say.

“Don’t. Don’t say it”, Sally interrupted him.

He stared soulfully at her, eyes misty as he shook his head,

“I didn’t want this to happen but it has and-”, he said.

“No Phil, just no”, Sally said shaking her head and moving away from him.

“I’m in love with someone else”, he continued with ruthless honesty.

Sally gasped theatrically and clutched her head shaking it from side to side repeatedly, “You don’t mean that”, she whispered.

“I do. I’m so sorry Sally; I wish I could spare you this knowledge. But I respect you too much not to tell you the truth.”

Sally laughed wryly, “I wish you respected me a bit less”, she said.

Phil sighed, “Look, Sally; I just came here to be honest with you about how things stand. I’ll leave you now. I hope that one day when all this is less raw, we can be friends”, Phil said walking toward the stairs that led to the door.

“Phil?” Sally called.

Phil stopped and turned to look at her, “Yes Sally?”

“Who is she?” Sally asked hoarsely.

Phil didn’t pretend to misunderstand, “Lillian. Her name is Lillian Ecclestone”, he really couldn’t help how his face lighted up at her name.

“And you’ve been cheating on me with her?” Sally asked sounding close to tears.

“No! No Sally, I wouldn’t do that to either of you”, Phil protested.

“Either of us huh?”, Sally said. She sounded bitter.

Phil was silent, just looking at her, not knowing what to say to make it better.

“I’ll leave you now”, he said quietly walking out quietly.

His heart was hammering in his chest; sure he’d done it fast and hard, like ripping out a rotting tooth. Didn’t mean it didn’t hurt like hell. He and Sally had come a long way together; for it to end this way was...sad. He straightened his shoulders thinking about telling Lillian about this later on in the day. He couldn’t help it; his heart was speeding up for a whole different reason.

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Charlie emerged from the bedroom and studied his sister, “You want me to go break his legs?” he asked. That was all the trigger Sally needed to burst into tears and run into Charlie’s arms. Her brother held her close as she cried her

eyes out, petting her back over and over again as his eyes narrowed, looking inward, making plans.

“Oh baby”, he said rubbing harder. His hands were becoming less soothing, more seeking as his lips came down on her neck, licking and biting gently. Sally burrowed deeper into his chest, still crying and Charlie lifted her up and carried her to her bed. He placed her down gently on it and then straightened up to take his shirt off. He leaned down and pushed her dress above her waist, even as silent tears left a trail down her pale cheeks. He divested her of her panties, discarding them on the soft white woollen carpet next to her bed. Then he took each of her lanky legs and spread them as wide as they would go. He stood back, surveying his handiwork before reaching for his fly and discarding his pants. He stepped forward, putting one knee on the bed as he stared at her exposed centre concealed by a mass of blonde curly hair. His eyes

glazed over as his hand reached out to touch... pressing forward into her. She watched him face blank, still leaking at the eyes as his other hand fingered his dick until it stood stiff and straight, a deep red purple colour with fat veins prominent, spreading out in tributaries along his shaft. He leaned forward, clutching at his member as he sought her entrance and pressed into her with laser concentration. His hips undulated slowly eyes on his pelvis, following his own movements as he plundered her. Their eyes did not meet. Somehow they never did maintain eye contact while engaging in their incestuous passion. Charlie's hips snapped forward faster and faster. His breath hitched and sped up with every plunge. His big hands, red veined and powerful reached out to grasp her breasts as an anchor as he rutted into her. She made little squealing noises of need in the back of her throat.

“Uhh huuh hu uhuh”, he groaned as surrendered all control; fucking into her with no more semblance of coordination or conscious thought. His eyes were closed, veins standing out and face red as a beetroot.

“Uuuunnnnnngg”, he growled as he strained at last, whole body rigid as he emptied his seed into her. Sally whimpered through it all; not stopping even after he’d collapsed on top of her in satiation.

“Was that good?” he asked gently.

“Yes”, she replied, and sniffed hard.

o

Phil picked up Mya on the way back home, as he found her ambling along from school. He had to pass by her place to get to the farm via the back road so it wasn’t going out of his way. Besides, he liked talking to Mya. she was by far the most mature fifteen year old he’d ever seen. Not that

he'd seen many; his family, what was left of it, still lived on a reservation up north and he hadn't seen them in years. He'd done his CPA in New York city right out of high school and then worked in various places as an accountant, never settling, always finding a reason to move on. Until he came to le Marais that is, and met Sally and got a job at the ranch. He had not felt as at home anywhere else as he did in this town, and now that he'd met Lillian, he felt like she was the reason. The one he'd been waiting for all his life. Of course, she might not want to stay here. She might want to return to the country of her birth or her visa might expire. In that case, Phil made his mind up on the spot that he would follow her. He'd follow her to the ends of the earth if that's what it took to keep her. Phil had always been a passionate man, but his feelings for Lillian had shaken even him to the core.

“How was school today?” he asked Mya to take his mind off things.

“Great. Only one kid tried to pull my hair today and they ran away when I glared at them. I thought about baring my teeth like this”, Mya demonstrated, putting all 35 of her pearly whites on display, “but then I thought, overkill. Save it for next time.”

Phil smiled at that, being Navajo and small, he was no stranger to being picked on, “That’s the spirit” he said.

“Yeah, and a funny thing happened too; this girl in my calculus class asked me for a love potion, can you imagine?” she laughed.

Phil frowned, “Why would she ask that?” he said.

Mya shrugged, “If I was to guess, I’d say its probably because of the massive crush she has on that boy. The one who's your boss’ nephew?”

Phil laughed, “I like the way you say ‘that boy’ as though you’re your grandmother’s age and not slightly younger than the ‘boy’ in question”, he said.

“Well...these kids make me feel pretty old”, she said with a sigh.

“You mustn’t let them get you down”, Phil said patting her thigh.”

“Anywho, how about you? Have you won the fair English maiden yet?” she asked.

“Nooo but we’re making progress. I broke up with Sally today.”

“Yay!”, Mya clapped, “I never liked her for you.”

Phil rolled his eyes, “Now she tells me.”

“I should probably have told Susan the same thing huh?”

Mya asked thoughtfully.

“Who is Susan?” Phil asked.

It was Mya’s turn to roll her eyes, “The girl? the one who wanted a love potion?” she said exasperatedly.

“Oh”, Phil said, “Yeah, you probably should have.”

o

Leo was training at the basketball court. He was also hungry as fuck; he’d missed lunch because he had a make up test to do and his entire afternoon was filled with classes. He didn’t dare miss any because he didn’t want anymore residual exams to do. Being held back in school did not fit in with his plans. A bar of Raven’s Revenge appeared in his sight line and he looked up to see that Miles’ hand was attached to the bar. He reached out and took it.

“Thanks man” he said gratefully.

“No problem. How was the test?”

“Ace”, Leo said.

Miles nodded, “Good, now eat fast because I saw couch coming and he didn’t look happy.”

“What’s the issue today? Arthritis acting up or hangover?”

Leo asked.

“Probably one thing led to the other?”

Leo huffed a laugh, “Well anyway...”, he said.

“Yeah”, Miles replied as if he’d completed a full sentence,

“Not all of us can be teacher’s pet though.”

“Teacher’s pet my ass; he just knows how to value the MVP”, Leo said with a grin. Miles made a face at him and went to do his warm up laps. Leo tore into the candy; it was one hundred per cent sugar which was good enough to power him up; after the game though, he needed to get a

decent meal inside him. He joined Miles in his laps, jogging along effortlessly as the couch came into the gym.

“You wanna come home with me for dinner?” Miles asked.

It was like he could read Leo’s mind.

o

Miles’ mom was working late so she gave them some cash to go eat at Fat Sal’s. It was early when they got there so the dinner crowd was still fairly light. They spotted Leo’s uncle Jamie; who wasn’t really an uncle, more of his mother’s boyfriend. He waved them over and invited them to eat with him...his treat. Miles and Leo smiled conspiratorially at each other, thanking him politely as they split the cash Miles’ mother had given them for dinner.

“So how have you been Leo? I haven’t seen you around in a while”, Jamie said.

Leo shrugged as he dug into his steak and potatoes, “Been busy”, he said.

“Yeah I figured; your mom was complaining the other day that she never sees you”, he said.

Leo grimaced, “She sees me; she’s probably just too drunk to remember”, he said nastily.

“Don’t be like that Leo”, Jamie chided, “Anyway, the reason I wanted to see you is that I got a jeep in my shop recently. It was totalled in an accident but I think it's salvageable with a little...okay a lot of love and care.”

Jamie was a mechanic who had his own garage. When Leo was in the mood he’d drop by and they’d talk shop and Leo would dream about what kind of car he’d like to drive. Jeeps had featured in these discussions.

“I thought ‘totalled’ meant it's good for nothing but the scrap heap”, Miles said.

“Mmm”, Jamie hedged, “Not always. It depends on how much time and work you’re willing to put in. some so called scrap heap candidates just need a little more love and care than their owners are willing to give.”

“And this is one of them?” Miles asked.

“Yeah”, Jamie said.

“When can I come by?” Leo asked.

“Any time. You know you’re always welcome.”

“Thanks”, Leo said.

o

When Jamie had said ‘totalled’ he had not been exaggerating. The entire hood of the car was crumpled In on itself, it was missing two tyres and the seats were all misaligned. In spite of this, Leo could see the potential. He just needed to clear an hour every day to work on it. He

thought about cutting class but dismissed that as stupid. He would just have to wake up an hour earlier...he was sure Jamie would give him breakfast so two birds with one stone. He proposed this to his fake uncle who was game to be at the shop at 6am if Leo was willing to do the same. Leo smiled, that was why he liked Jamie for his mother; he made up for her inattention with his willingness to be available for Leo. It was almost like having a father...

They began work the very next morning and as predicted, Jamie arrived with coffee and croissants. Leo was impressed at the baked goods; they were clearly freshly baked.

“Madame Jean lets me in the back and gives me her first batch. She’s had a soft spot for me ever since I repaired her 1967 Chevrolet. You know the red one?” Jamie’s face lit up just thinking about it and Leo grinned at him.

“Hey should my mom be worried that you’re cheating on her with a car?” he teased.

Jamie flipped him on the shoulder, “Don’t even try that with me Leo, I know you love that car as much as I do.”

“Yeah well, it belonged to her husband who died in the goddamn Vietnam war so she’s not selling it to either of us. Better to concentrate on achievable goals.”

“I’m actually aiming to have her leave it to me in her will”, Jamie confided. Leo burst into loud laughter.

“Good luck with that”, he said.

Jamie just smiled, picking up his end of the car, “One... two...three...hup!”, he called as they lifted it onto the ramp. They cranked it up so they could work on the bottom first. It was a hell of a job, but they were up to doing it.

“I broke up with my girlfriend”, Phil told Lillian rather abruptly as they stood feeding the alligators their morning meal.

“Oh yeah? How she take it?” she asked.

Phil shrugged, “Pretty well considering”, he said.

Lillian nodded and turned her head to study him, “Should I give yer me condolences?” she asked.

Phil smiled, “Well considering you’re the one who told me to get rid of her...”, he said.

“Oi! Struth! I did no such fin'. I just said yer should shit or cop off the pot. Didn't tell yer wich one ter choose”, she mumbled.

“Yeah well...I choose you”, Phil said.

Lillian looked over at him, biting back a smile, “Good to know”, she said as she threw rotted meat at the alligators.

Phil studied her from beneath his lashes watching her muscles flex as she cut the meat and threw it. He opened his mouth to ask her something and then closed it, swallowing hard to get rid of his dry mouth and then trying again.

“Will you go out with me?” his voice came out cracked and much lower than he wanted and he cleared his throat, face red with embarrassment.

“Wot? Now?” she asked in faux disbelief.

“Er, no...of- of course not. Later...obviously”, the rotted meat fell out of Phil’s hand.

“There is a film I want ter see on the television tonight; its called Indiana Jones and the bleedin' Last Crusade. Yer can join me if yer want”, she offered.

Phil reflected on the fact that they were obviously soul mates, “I would love to”, he said in a quiet voice, smiling to himself.

Chapter Five: Blurred Lines

Lillian trudged the swamp land, searching for Bozo; it was her personal name for one the alligators that seemed to enjoy a good joke. He liked to disappear just when it was time to feed or harvest...seemed to find that very funny when no-one could find him. But she was on to him now – she knew his MO. He usually swam downstream to lounge out near the neighbour's ramshackle dwelling. She'd never actually made it to the house so she hadn't met them. They probably weren't a bunch of rednecks since they hadn't shot Bozo yet. It would serve him right if they did though.

She heard a rustling up ahead. It was different than the constantly moving underbrush beneath her feet or the chittering and twittering of birds and whatever else in the trees. She stopped to listen, wondering if she should just turn right around and head back. But she was a curious person by nature so instead she crept forward, peering

cautiously through the trees. There was a clearing up ahead and she caught sight of a ladder against a tree. She relaxed figuring that if whatever it was had to climb ladders to get up a tree then how dangerous could it be? She walked forward to see who it was and what they were doing. It wasn't like these were fruit trees that could be picked. She inclined her head to see better through the thick leafy branches and jumped as she heard the sound of a branch shifting under great strain. A pair of legs appeared in her line of sight, dangling and shaking wildly as if the owner had no control over them. Or else as if they were looking for purchase and failing to find it.

Lillian ran forward to see a young man with a rope around his neck, slowly choking as he hung off the tree. She ran forward trying to catch hold of his legs and pull him upwards. She almost didn't manage it but the branch he chose to hang himself off of was slowly bending under

his weight. It would break soon enough and who knew what might happen to him then. She grabbed hold of his legs and put them on her shoulder so he had something to anchor himself with.

“Come on now lad, yer can do this. Take the bloody rope off of yor neck!”, she yelled up to him standing on tiptoe so he had enough leverage. She’d never thanked God for her height before but she did now. She could feel his weight pressing down on her shoulder which meant he wasn’t still choking slowly to death on his rope. The desperate sounds he’d been making before had also stopped.

“Okay then, right, yer good, is it? Come on now, right, take the rope off”, she encouraged. She could hear sounds as if one rough surface was being rubbed off another. His weight on her shoulders was suddenly gone and she looked up quickly to see that he’d gotten the rope off his neck and

was holding tight to it with his hands. He swayed a bit and then jumped down onto the ground, next to her.

“Awright’?” she asked extending her hand to touch him gently on the shoulder. He looked up at her breathing hard.

“I guess I am...for now”, he said.

“Wot’s yor name?” she asked inclining her head at him.

He looked down at his feet as if thinking if she was authorised to have that information. He shrugged and then said, “It's Roy. Roy Lestrangle”, he said still watching the ground.

“Oi Roy, yer can’t be more than nineteen years old.

Wotcher finkin' tryin' ter kill yorself?” she asked bending down to stare into his face. He stared at her, mouth open, eyes on her lips like he could decipher what she’d said just by watching them.

“Excuse me what?” he asked.

“Why. Are. You. Trying. To. Kill. Yourself?” she enunciated clearly.

Roy shrugged, “I thought I’d save myself the trouble of wasting away”, he said to his shoes.

“Excuse me wot?” It was Lillian’s turn to ask, “Are yer sick or sumfink?”

Roy just continued to watch his feet and say nothing.

“Oi wotever it is, it can’t be worf killin’ yorself over! Are yer in a bit of pain?” she asked. Roy smirked and shook his head.

“Then wot, then, eh? Doctor gave yer six monfs ter live or sumfink?” she persisted sitting next to him on the forest floor.

Roy sighed, “They don’t even have the decency to do that. I mean obviously they can’t...it's different for everyone. But...I think I’d feel better if I knew how long I had, you know? At least I’d *know*”, he wailed looking up at the sky. The pimples on his face stood out redly; Lillian figured that it wasn’t that long since he left adolescence behind...if indeed he wasn’t still one.

“So yer decided ter do Deaff a favour and do 'is dirty work for 'im ?” she asked not without compassion.

“Its going to happen anyway so...”, Roy shrugged.

“Boy I know nuffink is certain but deaff and taxes but wot yer 'ave ter realise is that we’re all on a deaff sentence. We’re all gonna die. So just because yer know 'ow yer might go, right, doesn’t mean yer should just give over on life!” she said throwing her hands in the air in agitation.

Roy sat with his hands on his knees, head hanging between his legs. He opened his mouth, breathed in and then closed it again. He turned his head to look at Lillian and then back down to the grass, “It's not so much the dying I don't think. It's the process. The slow, painful, undignified wasting away that's waiting for me. The shame and humili-“, he stopped talking really abruptly.

Lillian sat patiently waiting for him to continue; his breath began to hitch and he was hiccupping, moisture falling from his face to the hard ground beneath. Lillian put her hand on his shoulder, rubbing slowly.

“I'm right sorry Roy. Cor blimey guv, I wish I could make this better for yer.”

Roy laughed bitterly, “Yeah, that's exactly what my mother said. She's been sooo understanding.”

“And that makes yer mad ?”

Roy covered his face with his hands, leaning back on the tree that had almost been the instrument of his death, “I just...I’m so ashamed”, he whispered, “I don’t even know how to look at her and she just keeps giving me these understanding, compassionate looks. Its like a knife in my heart every time.”

Lillian didn’t know what to say...just continued to rub his shoulders soothingly.

“I can’t talk to anyone about this”, Roy said softly.

Lillian glanced at him, “Yer can rabbit and pork ter me, init? Oi Roy, 'ave a look at me ”, she said putting her fingers on his chin and turning him to face her, “Yer can talk ter me. Anytime yer need to. I’m 'ere.”

o

It’s the low hum of the television that woke her, that and the crackle as static filled the room. The movie they’d been

watching was long finished. Lillian blinked against the darkness, disorientated, and tried to stretch out her cramped limbs, the small couch in her room not really built for her height. Especially when she had to share.

Phil's arm was warm and heavy across her midriff, his leg a possessive weight across her thigh. Hot puffs of air breathed into the back of her neck in a regular, sleep-filled rhythm. Lillian thought about moving, but didn't want to wake Phil. He looked like he needed the rest for one thing; for another she was enjoying having him pressed all up close to her, unaware.

Lillian moved just a fraction, and felt Phil's protest. It was grunted into the back of her neck. Phil's arm tightened around her waist, pulling Lillian back against his hard stomach.

That wasn't the only thing that was hard. Lillian felt like she really should move, but every time she tried Phil

tightened his grip until Lillian could scarcely breathe without Phil protesting. Lillian found that she was wet; a standard reaction to having a hard dick pressed against her. Or so she told herself.

Phil bent his leg, and groaned aloud in his sleep when his cock made contact with Lillian's ass. Lillian forgot to breathe, just for a second, and then Phil shifted his weight, pushed up against Lillian's ass and groaned louder.

Lillian waited. Holding still, as Phil's hips rolled away only to grind forward again, finds a rhythm and keeping to it. He nosed his way through Lillian's hair, mouth open, and breath hot against the shell of her ear. Phil's breathing sped up, as his dick rutted up against Lillian's ass, and for a second, just a second, despite her best efforts to remain still, Lillian pushed back, adding to the friction.

“Yeah, just like that,” Phil slurred in his sleep. His hand sliding down to cup Lillian's silk covered breasts,

squeezing just a touch, enough to make Lillian want more. Lillian tried again, pushed back a fraction, gasped when Phil cupped her harder. He flicked at her nipple, making it hard as he shunted them both forward.

Lillian huffed out a frustrated moan. It was awkward and she couldn't get the angle right, needed more, more friction, more movement. She reached down to unzip her jeans, shocked when Phil slid his hand into the space provided, pushed cotton aside to expose bare skin, fingers curling into her centre to rub at her sensitive wet nub.

“Jesus,” Lillian hissed quietly so as not to wake Phil. She wasn't sure how he would take the fact that he was basically fucking her in his sleep. It might be embarrassing; he might never come near her again. Her brain was screaming at her to move away, when Phil tightened the grip he had on Lillian and stroked inward, exploring her

responsive flesh with dedication, fingernail dragging against her slit.

Lillian rocked back against Phil, feeling the harsh brush of three-day stubble as Phil nuzzled in against her neck, breathing hot and heavy against Lil's skin. She pushed, slow and steady, into the warm cradle of Phil's practised fingers.

She kept to Phil's rhythm, rocking back, when Phil eased away, forward, tilting her hips slightly to get a better angle as she pushed down onto his fingers, biting the inside of her cheek to prevent the moan that threatened.

Phil was not so restrained, moaning loudly, when Lillian finally got the angle right and pushing back harder than before, grinding down into her lap. Phil rewards Lillian with a sharp twist of his wrist on every stroke, tightening

his fist as he works it up, all the way to the epicentre of Lillian's heat.

It's so quiet, Lillian was sure she could hear her own heartbeat, felt it thump erratically in her chest, and just when she thinks, she can't take it any longer, needs faster, harder, more; Phil picked up the pace, attuned to her needs even in sleep.

Lillian hissed out a breath, as Phil stroked her, shorter and faster, thumb ghosting over the head of Lillian's nub on every down stroke. Lillian was a hair's breadth from coming, spilling herself all over Phil's hand, as he pushed up, hard against her ass and groans, long and loud. The sound of his pleasure, the heat of it breathed out against her cheek was more than she could take. She didn't think she could be any more turned on, but somehow she is with every pleasure-filled moan that slips past Phil's lips.

She wanted to praise, encourage, tell Phil how good it felt. She didn't dare make a sound though as the slow heat built and caught fire. Her body jerked in Phil's hand, and again causing him to stroke her faster until all she could feel was heat and movement and the desperate need to come. She almost whimpered, probably did as her body jerked again. Phil squeezed tight as she came, pulsing warm wet liquid over his hand.

Lillian held her breath and waited. She waited as Phil's breathing returned to normal, finding a slower, steadier rhythm. Until Phil moved his hand, pulled it free of Lillian's pants, and only then did she breathe. She sucked in a breath as reality slammed in. As the wetness about her legs cooled to leave her sticky and wet. She thought she should probably move, but didn't know how to disentangle herself from Phil without waking him. She took another breath, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth.

“Damn it Lil, either piss or get off the pot,” Phil mumbled, shifting back a touch and moving his leg from her thigh.

Lillian blinked, but didn't say a word as she climbed off the couch and made her way to the bathroom. She switched on the light, avoided looking at herself in the mirror as she shrugged free of her clothes, and rinsed the flannel under the hot faucet before cleaning herself off. She could hear Phil moving about in the next room, and waited until it was quiet again before switching off the light and opening the bathroom door.

“I saved a life today”, she ventured to say to him. He was lying in his bed, on his side, back to Lillian, the sheet pulled up to his waist.

He turned around to face her, “Oh yeah?” he asked eyebrow and voice raised with interest.

“Yeah I met this boy in the woods, about to off himself. Literally talked him down off of a tree”, she said. She took a step forward, and another until she was standing beside the bed, didn’t over think it, just climbed in. Her back was to Phil, one hand beneath the pillow as she took a deep breath, and settled.

Phil was silent, still for a moment, and then he shifted, turned over, threw one arm over Lillian’s midriff, warm and heavy as he pulled her in, and huffed out a breath.

“That is amazing”, he said into the flesh of her neck.

“Yeah, it really was”, she agreed with a smug smile as her eyes drifted closed.

They slept.

o

Mya knocked softly on the classroom door. She poked her head in the door and waited for Mrs Argent to notice her. She was sitting at her desk, eyes on a piece of paper on her desk as a student stood beside her, body language radiating anger.

“You can’t go on like this Leo; scraping by is not acceptable. You’re better than this”, Mrs Argent was saying, staring earnestly at Leo who was nodding his head. His eyes darted from the window to the teacher’s table. He seemed not at all interested in her words.

“I’m sorry”, he said.

“I don’t want platitudes”, Mrs Argent snapped, face red and eyes narrowed, “I want action.”

Leo actually looked at her like he was seeing her at last.

“I’m doing the best I can”, he said.

“Do you need help Leo? Ask me for help and I’ll give it to you”, she said.

‘I need help’ Mya thought with a mental lift of her hand,
‘Ask me if I need help.’

Mrs Argent turned at last to look at her, “Mya”, she said brightly, “Come in.”

Mya stepped in the room slowly, wondering if it might not have been better to come back another time. Mrs Argent pointed at her eyes on Dean, “You see her?”, she said to Leo who darted Mya a glance filled with resentment, “She comes from an extremely disadvantaged background but she does her best; she *tries*.” She said. Mya bristled a bit at the ‘extremely disadvantaged background’ and to his credit, Leo quirked his forehead and smiled slightly in a way that said he got it. She said nothing though, just leaned on the wall and let Mrs Argent finish.

“Mya do you know this young man?” Mrs Argent demanded. Mya looked up at him; seeing as he was said to be responsible for the remarkably good run the basketball team was having...she couldn't exactly say she didn't know who he was.

“I know *of* him”, she said.

“He's in your year you know that?” Mrs. Argent said as if she was pushing for something. Mya shrugged.

“I'm mostly in AP classes anyway”, She said and then blushed. That implied that there was definitely no way that Leo could be taking any advanced classes. Mya thanked the gods that she was too dark for them to see her blush, “Not to put down your academic abilities or anything”, she said quickly.

He did that smile again, just a small uplift like he was just too cool for a full stretch of the lips, saying he got what you were sayin; but it just wasn't that serious.

“Oh this young man is bright enough to be in any AP class if he applied himself but he's barely scraping by”, Mrs. Argent complained. Leo didn't look too moved, Mya was at a loss for something to say.

“Mrs. Argent”, she said straightening up and choosing to ignore the whole ‘Leo’ thing, “I wanted to show you my application letter if you have the time”, she said. That actually got her eye contact from Leo; he seemed surprised at her words.

“Oh yes Mya dear I remember; why don't you leave it on my desk and I'll read it and get back to you?” she said.

“Uh huh”, Mya said hesitantly, “I'll just go make a copy.” She glanced at Mrs. Argent's table which is chock full of

papers and shit. She's not risking losing her only copy of the letter in that avalanche; it was hard enough to write the first time.

"Good call", Mrs. Argent said. Mya disappeared out the door, headed to the office to use the copy machine. When she came back, Leo was gone and Mrs. Argent had calmed down.

"I'll get back to you with feedback on this", she promised, "And if you see that Devereaux boy in the corridors, giving him a good nudge for me", she smiled wistfully at Mya as she said it and Mya tried to respond with a smile; but she couldn't care less about the Leo kid. She only wanted her letter polished up and that was *it*.

Chapter Six: Rolling in the Deep

Mama Ruth stirred her tea slowly, adding two lemon slices into the mix to give it that tangy flavour she so loved. The wolf in her growled in protest; it wasn't partial to vegetation of any kind, but the old lady in her pushed it back impatiently. She had lived five hundred years...she was entitled to her geriatric taste in late night treats whether her wolf agreed with it or not.

“How much longer *Mama*?” A voice asked from behind her where there had been no-one a second ago. The Ageless One didn't turn a hair.

“What are you doing here Armand? You have your instructions”, she said pouring out a cup of tea as she did so, hand steady on the kettle, eyes on her delicate china.

“I have my instructions...”, he laughed bitterly, “Yeah and that's it then. Sit on your ass and wait. You'll be told when

to move. *Until when Ruth?* When will this fucking begin already?" he growled.

"You know it's out of our hands Armand", she said sipping serenely on her tea.

Armand sighed coming slowly into the light. Mama Ruth looked up at him, even now marvelling at the resemblance to the Devereaux boy. Except that this one's hair reached halfway down his back and he had that scar under his right eye; grey as his antecedent's. There was something about him that screamed 'other' but it was nothing one could pin down. He was tall yes; but not too tall for a man. His lanky frame perhaps too slim for his broad shoulders and his arms were powerful but not so out of the ordinary that it would stand out. The thing that gave him away the most was the way he moved; like a cobra about to strike. You hardly saw it happen, until after the fact. He narrowed his eyes down at her, not quite glaring. But not quite not either. He believed

she had answers, but she was only the watcher at the gate. She could only see what was approaching, not predict when it would come.

“You have felt it, haven’t you? The stirring? The restlessness? Something is coming”, she said to him over the rim of her cup.

“The spirits in the wood and the town tell me so”, Armand said.

“So why bring your agitation to *me*?” she asked.

“Because I need you to confirm it for me. Tell me what is real and what is just talk. Spirits after all, have nothing to do *but* talk”, he said with a sneer.

“Don’t be so contemptuous. They’ve kept you company over the centuries. What would you do without them?” she asked gently teasing.

Armand flicked his wrist, “That is neither here nor there. Tell me what is coming; and how is my many times great grandson involved; he is but a child. Filled with angst and confusion. How can this burden be laid upon him?” he asked.

Mama Ruth smiled, “You ask me like I have a say”, she said.

“So it is true then? He *is* involved?” Armand asked taking another step closer.

“Curb your excitement Armand. One would think that you haven’t learned your lesson”, she said in warning.

Armand inhaled deeply and then exhaled slowly, “Four thousand years I’ve been kept in the dark. I just wish to know”, he said.

“I have nothing to tell you Armand. You know everything I do”, she said. Armand was pacing in front of her fire, deep in thought.

“And the girl...how does she fit?” he asked as if he hadn’t heard her. Mama Ruth sighed and put down her tea. She had been looking forward to enjoying that all evening. She leaned back in her high backed chair and watched him think aloud as he paced.

“I mean obviously...she’s a witch or will be soon. And her family is powerful; Mairiebelle Andrewes was the most powerful witch of her day when she lived. This current one, Matia? She is less so but only because she chooses not to utilise what she has. Do you think her granddaughter will surpass her? Perhaps if she knew what happened to her parents she would be moti-“

“You will not go near Mya Andrewes do you hear me Armand?”, Mama Ruth boomed from her seat, startling him. He showed it by turning to stare at her.

“I had no intention of doing that”, he said quietly, “I am not a fool Mama.”

“No. But you *are* impatient and sometimes people do foolish things when that happens.”

“I have lived four thousand years with this wait. You think I will fall off the wagon now?”

“So close you can taste it? You look like a man at the very edge of being strung out Armand. You have to watch it. You feel it...the magic is getting stronger. Its feeding your addictions”, she said wagging a finger at him.

He turned away from her, looking into the fire, “I just need to know when”, he growled softly.

“And you will. Keep an eye out, the times they are a-changing...now go. Back to your post. I expect things will start to pick up real soon”, she said picking her cup back up. The tea had cooled and she passed a hand over it to get it to piping hot again, “Say hello to Andy for me won’t you?” she said just before she took a sip.

Armand’s grey eyes were slits of emotion, shooting laser beams of anger at her. But he said nothing, simply vanishing as suddenly as he’d appeared.

Mama Ruth sighed and threw some herbs into the fire. They caused multi-coloured sparks to fly into the air and then the statue above the flames began to speak.

'Semel intra plures millenniis

Pure magic incarnatus

Mater vera et intemerate

Potens pater , agilis , mollit

Opposita attrahunt fataque conspirant

Qua incredibile , inception aboriatur

In custódia super

Natam suus '

Mama Ruth was silent a long time after the statue's words had stopped, thinking hard. She shook her head dismissing her musings and sipped her tea. She was just as curious as Armand; but she was also scared to death. She didn't know if she was ready for this.

o

Lillian walked up to Phil and smiled, "Guess wot?" she said.

Phil smiled at her, wiping his hands of deer guts. He'd just come in from a hunting expedition with Gregory Evans and his nephew. They had felled two deer or as Leo had put it, "Bambi's parents."

"Wot?" he asked imitating her accent.

"I got my green card today", she said grinning.

"WHAT!?!", Phil shouted in happy surprise, "You're kidding."

"I kid you not", she replied still showing all her teeth.

"That is such great news. We should celebrate", he said.

"How?" she asked.

"Well, I know this old woman who makes the best jambalaya you ever tasted..." Phil said.

“Did you hear about those deaths over at the Evans place?”

Charlotte leaned forward to whisper to her girls.

“They weren’t at the Evans’ place; they actually died at the hospital”, Ashley corrected, always a stickler for honesty

and detail. Charlotte didn’t know why she stuck around.

Still, she was useful and their group needed a brunette. She

looked up to see Leo approaching. He was talking to Miles

about something that had him actually gesticulating

excitedly. Charlotte narrowed her eyes, wondering what

could make Leo that happy that wasn’t *her*. If it was

another girl-

Leo and Miles were intercepted by that Susan girl from

Home Ec. She was talking nervously to Leo, clearly asking

him something. Maybe to go with her to the school dance.

She watched Leo’s body language, eyes sharp, on the look

out for any sign of interest.

“We should ask Leo about the deaths”, she said to her friends not taking her eyes away from him, “The Evans are his relatives so obviously he’ll know something.”

“Good idea”, Tina the Barbie breathed. She stood up and began to wave frantically at Leo and Miles. They couldn’t miss her pretty blonde figure even in the crowded hall. First Miles, then Leo looked over at them, the latter lifting his brows in enquiry. Tina began to gesture for them to come over. That was why Charlotte kept her around in spite of her blonde prettiness. She knew how to be useful...without being dumb enough to cross Charlotte.

“What?” Leo asked as they ambled up to the group of females, “Where’s the fire?”

“We wanted to ask you a question”, Tina breathed then stepped back, looking to Charlotte to pick up the story.

“We were just wondering about that tragic double death that happened. People are saying it was a murder suicide. You knew them right? They worked for your uncle?” she said looking faux concerned. She basked in having all of Leo’s attention on her. It was proving harder to keep him engaged than she’d imagined.

“I really don’t know much about it. I mean Phillip Locklear was my uncle’s accountant. He was just a normal guy and him and the British chick just started dating not too long ago”, he said.

“People are saying she killed him in a fit of jealousy because he was leaving her for his ex. And then she killed herself”, Charlotte said placing her hand on his hard chest to express her utter shock at these events.

Leo inclined his head to the side, “Isn’t his ex your aunt? Is that what she told you?” he asked.

Miles sniggered, “Small world”, he murmured, dimples prominent in his cheeks. Ashley veritably melted.

“No! She didn’t tell me that. We don’t hardly speak anyway. My mother doesn’t like her”, Charlotte said.

“Well I don’t know what happened. The only thing I heard that’s confirmed is that the food they were eating was poisoned. Who poisoned it or why, I don’t know.”

“Its so...*tragic*”, Charlotte said putting a hand on his arm and leaning forward so he could see the lovely pout of her lips.

“Yes it is”, he agreed.

o

“Did you kill him?” Sally demanded as she stormed into Charlie’s town office huffing with agitation, “Did you kill Phillip Locklear?!?”

“Now now Sal, why would you say a thing like that? And in public too”, Charlie replied walking behind her to close his office door. His personal assistant knew enough to pretend not to have heard a word.

“Because he’s dead Charlie! And I. didn’t. kill. Him”, she bit out. Her brother shrugged, “I didn’t either”, he said.

“Don’t you lie to me Charles Frances le Carre!” she growled.

“I am not lying to you. I swear on the grave of our mother”, he said, “I’m not saying I didn’t want to...or even that I didn’t plan to. I’m saying someone got there before me.”

Sally stared at him for a long while, assessing, “I wondered how you got into the old woman’s jambalaya”, she said.

“Indeed”, Charlie said with chagrin, “that witch is a pain in my ass. Has been for years.”

“So if not you, not me...then who? Phil didn’t exactly have enemies”, she said.

Charlie shrugged, “Beats me”, he said.

o

Leyla met Matia at the grotto, picking her herbs.

“Was this what you meant?” she asked tearfully, “When you said my loved ones were in trouble?”

Matia straightened up from her digging, “I am so very sorry for your loss”, she said softly, shaking her head, “I wish I could tell you definitively that the danger is past...but I can’t.”

“No!”, Leyla shouted, tears streaming down her face, “You can’t just give me vague warnings and then...and then...not..”, she choked as her crying overwhelmed her. Matia sighed deeply, and watched her sob her way to silence.

“You have no idea what I would give to not have had this happen. And it was my food that was poisoned...I don't understand at all. Some bad juju was at work here”, she murmured mostly to herself.

“So now what? What do we do? Do we just go about life like two people weren't just fucking...*killed*?” Leyla asked.

Matia shook her head, “I will get to the bottom of this Leyla Evans. Go home. Look after your family”, she said before walking away. Leyla watched her go, speechless at her words.

“Just go home? Look after my family? Pretend everything is fine? Sure old lady, no problem”, Leyla murmured to herself as she stood there staring after Matia. She did turn for home however, mind composing the letter she would write to Lillian's family that would travel with her cremated remains to her native London. The poor girl had

come to America seeking a new life; and now she was leaving in an urn. Life was just so unfair.

o

Matia made the trip downriver early the next morning, mind clouded with worry. If there was another witch operating in her territory, she needed to know. If the witch was powerful enough to break through her protection spells...

The grey wolf was waiting for her, appointment notwithstanding. It turned as soon as she was in sight and trotted off into the swamp; a different direction than it had taken before...

Matia followed. Closely this time as she did not know where she was being led. The wolf turned a corner and then was gone. Matia saw a wooden cabin at the end of a path, in a clearing surrounded by tall redwood trees. She

suppressed a smile thinking that it resembled the picture in her mind of how the wicked witch's cottage would have looked like in the Hansel and Gretel story. Only less sweet looking. Tendrils of smoke emanated from the chimney like swirls of ribbon. Matia approached slowly and knocked softly, wondering why the Ageless One chosen to show her where she lived now. It was disconcerting. She had gotten used to the idea of Mama Ruth as a perpetual watcher of the flames at the Nemeton. Never moving, eating or sleeping. It was stupid of course; she knew Mama Ruth was human...she was pretty sure.

Suddenly the door was open and Mama Ruth is smiling at her from a dim room, furnished with antiquated furniture in very good repair. There were also a myriad of statues made of precious metals like copper, silver and gold. Matia looked around, trying not to be too open mouthed. She wondered again why she was here...and would she be

allowed to leave. Matia laughed inside at the thought then glanced at Mama Ruth, wondering if she'd caught the thought. She knew that the Ageless One read minds sometimes.

“Sit Nannane. Will you have some tea?” Mama Ruth asked making Matia jump. She hurried to sit, embarrassed at her unease and hoping against hope that Mama Ruth hadn't picked up on it.

“Er thank you”, she said resolving not to take a drop.

Mama Ruth moved to the fireplace where a huge cauldron was steaming gently, filling the room with a delicate mint flavoured mist. She scooped out a cupful of the liquid and dropped a tea bag in it.

“Sugar? Cream?”, she inquired.

“No thank you”, Matia said meekly, accepting the proffered cup with a smile. Mama Ruth smiled back, showing her unusually sharp teeth and then sat opposite her.

“Tell me Nannane Maie, what brings you?”

“Juju brought me.”

Mama Ruth lifted an eyebrow, “Whose juju?” she asked.

“I was hoping you’d tell *me*”, Matia said pretending to sip.

“Its not poisoned or spiked you know”, Mama Ruth serenely said. Matia thanked the gods that her blush was could not be seen on her dusky skin. She took a real sip of her tea and found it to be quite delicious.

“I know of no juju south of here. It's been quiet”, Mama Ruth said.

“Well, a dear friend and his woman were killed...using my food. This was no ordinary murder.”

“Indeed.”

“You have ways to find out who did this.”

“Such confidence in my abilities Nannane.”

“Is it misplaced?”

Mama Ruth leaned forward to pick up her own cup of tea not deigning to answer. She took a sip and then placed the cup back on the stool, reached down to a small compartment next to the fireplace to extract a piece of liquorice root and a mirror. She dropped the liquorice root in the cup of tea and then took the resulting liquid and used it to write something on the mirror. She blew on it, chanting words Matia couldn't hear and then sat back. The mirror misted over as if the steam from the cauldron had covered it; and then a deep male voice spoke from the mirror.

“*Wenya si?*” it said as a smoky mist wafted upwards into Mama Ruth’s face. It made her bones stand out, hollowing her eyes and sharpening her cheeks. Matia shivered as she felt the second hand power pass her by. The Ageless One chanted something back, eyes glazed like she wasn’t here anymore. The deep voice from the mirror replied with something long and convoluted. It sounded like the voice was displeased or annoyed...maybe agitated or out of sorts. Whatever it was, Matia didn’t want any part of it.

The conversation lasted an interminable while as Mama Ruth’s complexion went greyer and greyer by the minute. Matia began to worry for her. Finally she opened her hands and let the mirror drop to the rug covered stone floor. It shattered into pieces and then reassembled itself with no fuss. As Matia looked back up at Mama Ruth, she saw that her eyes were aware again and her skin had a honey glow

as usual. She twisted her lips as if whatever she'd heard had not pleased her.

“You were right”, she said.

“About?” Matia asked.

“Bad juju took place here. But the one who cast the spell is beyond your power...and mine.”

“Who was it?” Matia stepped forward, looking into Mama Ruth's eyes; not willing to be fobbed off.

“A servant of Met Kafu possessing a boy who came to you for help”, the Ageless One said quirking her eyebrows at Matia, “A boy named Roy.”

Matia reared back, “Why him?”

“He was vulnerable to possession; weak. Open.”

Matia sighed looking down, “He had...issues”, she said.

“And Met Kafu used that. He had need of their spirits.”

Matia inclined her head in puzzlement, “If its spirits the *loa* wanted, are there not thousands to be had in the bayou?” she asked.

“Its not the spirits per se; but the love between them”, Mama Ruth explained, “And they had to be fresh... vulnerable.”

“What are we going to do about it”, Matia asked narrowing her eyes at Mama Ruth. The Ageless One lifted an eyebrow in surprise.

“Against Met Kafu?” she asked her voice rising incredulously.

“Yes.”

“You’re an ambitious witch Nannane. Who would have thought it?”

“We have to help them”, Matia said stepping closer and lifting her hands palm upward; insistent.

“Help who? Your friends? They are dead already.”

“Mama Ruth, whatever Met Kafu wanted them for, it *cannot* be good.”

Mama Ruth smiled her concession to that argument, sighed deeply in resignation and said, “I sent another spirit to them. He should guide them to me...eventually. If they are sufficiently brave and true. If they do show up, I will protect them.”

“Thank you Mama”, Matia said.

“Don’t thank me”, she said with a shake of her head, “I have done nothing yet.”

“Indeed”, Matia said, and smiled.

Andrew Crenshaw followed the couple as they made their slow and cautious way down the hall, following their bodies to the mortuary. They wouldn't be able to leave but obviously they didn't know that yet. He watched them talk to the surly watcher; he was dressed like James Bond today with his Armani suit and his sunglasses. Talk about a being who was full of himself. Considering he had no time off, he sure found a lot of time to primp and polish himself...

The Ageless One had said to watch out for them. Andy was sceptical on how effectively he could do this. They *smelled* of fear. The evil spirits could sense it just as well as he. Still he had to try.

“You guys are new, right?” he said as they came up to him.

“New?” the pretty Amazon chick said; she looked a little surprised to see him. Not that he could blame her. She was probably just getting used to being dead and here she was having to socialise. The small guy with her was bristling

though. Someone had definitely kicked him in the fight or flight reflex. And he was all fight.

“Yeah, you know. Like, newly dead,” he said mainly to distract them.

“You ... see dead people?” the guy asked him looking really shocked. Andy almost laughed but his non-existent heart was sinking. This might be about ten times harder than he’d imagined. Reinforcements were required.

o

The girls were sitting in Charlotte’s palatial room, matching outfits for the next week of school.

“Do you think Leo really likes me?” she asked Tina.

“Whaaaat? Of course he does. Why wouldn’t he? Just look at you!” she gushed.

“Yeah I know right? But sometimes he just acts so disinterested”, Charlotte said.

“You wanna maybe call him and ask him?” Tina suggested.

Charlotte thought about weighing pros and cons. Usually she liked a guy to chase *her* but Leo wasn't showing any signs of doing that so...

“Yeah lets call him”, she said, “Ash, where are they?”

“They're probably at Leo's uncle's house at this time. I heard Miles say he'd be giving Leo a lift there”, she said.

Charlotte suddenly knew why she kept Ashley around. She was a walking encyclopaedia on anything Miles-related. And where you found Miles, Leo usually wasn't too far away.

“Do you have the number for the ranch?” she asked Ashley.

“No but its probably in the directory”, Ashley said standing up to go get it. Another reason why Charlotte kept her around...she was quick on the uptake.

“So what was all that about you and Teddy the Bear?” Tina asked when Ashley had left.

“What about him?” Charlotte asked absently as she debated whether the pink or the green went better with the black jeans she’d got to match Leo’s.

“You were acting all jealous girlfriend when he carried that black girl to the nurse. You like him too or something?”

“No, I mean, it's nice having the attention and I won't be upstaged by some cotton picker”, she said.

“Oh”, Tina said taken aback by the slur, “Well, she’s nice enough. She’s in my English class and she’s like...really really clever.”

“Huh, and why should I care?”

“Nothing...no reason”, Tina said in a small voice, “I think she’s nice is all.”

“Whose nice?” Ashley asked coming into the room clutching the directory.

“Mya Andrewes”, Tina said.

“You even know her name?” Charlotte asked in disbelief.

“Her grandmother is like...super powerful or something. A sorceress is what I heard”, Tina said.

“*Really?*” Charlotte said eyes gleaming, “Well then, we really should get to her better. But first...what’s that number?”

Charlotte snatched up the phone and dialled the number as Ashley read it out. It rang for a long while before a breathless person picked up.

“Hello?” the voice said.

“Hi. I’m looking for Leo Devereaux?”

“Leo? Er, well he’s outside on the farm. Do you mind waiting while I call him?”

“No problem.”

Charlotte covered the receiver, turning to her friends,

“They’re getting him”, she said. Tina gave her two thumbs up.

“Hello”, Leo’s low, gravelly, bad tempered voice rumbled down the line.

“Hi”, Charlotte said, voice going higher than she was happy with.

“Who is this?” he asked sounding suspicious.

“Its Charlotte silly, I wanted to see if you were free later on. We’re having movie night.”

“What are you watching?” the suspicion hadn’t disappeared from his voice.

“Back to the Future two”, Charlotte said widening her eyes at Tina to go, find it.

“Really?” Leo’s voice had brightened considerably, “I’ve been wanting to see that. Can Miles come?”

Charlotte rolled her eyes, “Sure. Why not?” she said.

“Great. We’ll see you then.”

“Cool”, Charlotte said all smug again. She hung up the receiver, looked up and smiled at her friends.

“They’re coming. Quick, we need to get dressed”, she said as the scurrying began. Make up, hair, the exact right outfit, nothing was left to chance.

“By the time this night is over, Leo’s gonna be my boyfriend or my name ain’t Charlotte le Carre”, she declared.

Tina nodded emphatically, “You go girl”, she said.

Ashley smiled, “If anyone can do it; it's you Charlotte.”

o

Mama Ruth was tending the gigantic fire when she looked up into the sky. A shooting star streaked across the sky in a long arch, finally falling away across the edge of the horizon. This star was different than others she’d seen before; it glowed with multicoloured lights. Of course that could be from the afterimage of the flames. She looked back down to see Armand standing beside her, watching the sky as well.

“Its beginning”, he said arms crossed and stance relaxed.

“Is it?” she asked, “Or is it wishful thinking?”

Armand turned his head to look down at her with a feral smile, “Wilful blindness you mean” he said.

Mama Ruth gave him a sharp toothed smile of her own, “The beauty of the situation is, all we have to do is wait and we’ll know for sure soon enough.”

“Indeed”, Armand agreed, “Soon enough.”

Author's Note

This behind the scenes look gives more context to the story behind *Between Death and Heaven*.

Read an excerpt from the next instalment; *Child of Destiny* below: Release Date: August 8th 2015

“IF YOU DON’T DO THIS spell, Charlotte is going to die!” said Leo Devereaux , looming over her.

“You think I don’t know that? I told you, I can’t do it! It requires ‘passion acquired in a lover’s arms’, and I. Don’t. Have. That!”

“Are you seriously going to stand there and declare that after 17 years of unsupervised living , you’ve never once been kissed?” Leo sneered, invading her personal space.

“This isn’t the time to play the shy and retiring maiden. So stop the shenanigans and do the spell!”

He looked quite intimidating as he towered over her. His cold grey eyes, burning with contempt, seared right through her soul,. The sheer force of his glaring nearly caused her to quail but she rallied, stiffening her spine. She was made of stronger stuff than that. After all, her maternal line was descended from Abramelin the Mage, and her father’s people traced their roots to Mekatilili, female leader of a proud African people and renowned sorceress. She could hold her own against this overindulged, pretentious basketball star-type idiot. Okay, maybe not idiot, but he was undeniably an entitled bloody teenager. An abundance of sporting talent, a six-foot-four, slender, muscular frame, jet-black hair that fell about his face like it was windblown (*‘blow-dried more like’*, she thought with a sneer of her own), and the hypnotic eyes, led him to believe he was

God's gift to the universe. She, for one, wasn't buying whatever he was selling. She wasn't one to be taken in by the superficial.

With this point settled firmly in mind, she drew herself up to her full height and parted her lips to order him from her room... because clearly this was a case of trespassing. Too late; he got there before her. As she tried to tell him where to get off, he swooped down and planted *his* lips on hers!

o

While she was planning to eviscerate him with words, Leo was trying to get through this as expediently as he could. But when he was scared he became irritable. And nothing scared him more than the thought of losing Charlotte, who was lying as if dead in her living room. Here he was, forced to interact with this...creature from the black bayou, who may or may not be able to perform actual witchcraft,

because it was his only chance to rescue her. He had to save Charlotte. The alternative could not be considered. So, much as he found this strange girl repugnant in a ‘do you even care that you look like an extra from BeetleJuice?’ type way, he had to grit his teeth and get this over and done with. He only meant to kiss her long enough for her to work up enough passion for the spell. In his mind he was doing her a huge favour because, after all, he was yet to meet a girl who could resist him, and this was a matter of life and death.

About the Author

Annemarie Musawale was born and bred in Nairobi, Kenya, where she grew up reading everything she could get her hands on, much to the chagrin of everyone around her. She’s a pharmaceutical technologist by profession but quit

that line of work to become a full-time research writer, so she could have more time to spend with her son. Coming up with stories has always been a part of her psyche, but this is only the second full-scale novel she has completed, the first being *Child of Destiny*, which is the sequel to this.

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"Supernatural meets Buffy. I can't wait to start the next one."

Reviewer

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