

BLOOD ON THE BAYOU

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By Light Unseen Media
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Blood on the Bayou

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CHAPTER 1

Justine Kroft and Simone Gireaux looked from the cell phone in Simone's lap to each other and back to the phone.

"What?" asked Teresa Diaz from the back seat. "*No bueno*, most likely, but what?"

Simone stared at the phone as she said, "According to Clair, one of the girls we are searching for was owned by a Colombian official who dealt personally with Rubicon. He got drunk and told her the location of Rubicon's so-called secret laboratory, and how to get into it."

"Where my Antonia is kept prisoner?" Teresa asked.

"*Très probablement*," Simone said.

The three women took a long minute to contemplate what that meant. Eyes steady on the road, Justine said, "Rubicon won't let that go. He'll be after that girl, if he hasn't got her already."

"The Colombian?" Teresa asked.

"Dead."

"*Dios mio*. We may be looking for a girl already dead."

"Maybe," Justine said. "But we don't know for sure, so, New Orleans, here we come."

Teresa sat back. "I know for sure I have to pee. So stop, soon."

A few minutes later Justine wheeled the big SUV into the parking lot of Tammy's Roadhouse, making sure to park facing out in the dirt lot for a quick exit if necessary. Throwing open the door, she stepped out into the fragrant night. She moaned with pleasure as she rolled her shoulders and stretched. Sunset finally allowed her to expose herself; she had been in the vehicle for eight hours since leaving Delray Beach, on Florida's East Coast. Teresa and Simone also exited and reached for the stars.

Teresa groaned. "I really have to pee. I hate you that you do not."

Simone grinned. "I am sure, Tee, that Tammy's Roadhouse and Trailer Park has *les toilette's* comparable to *Le Ritz*."

"You'll be lucky if they have an outhouse," Justine said.

"As long as they have a spare seat."

The three women headed toward the restaurant, which featured horizontal rough wood siding, red trim, and beer signs. To the right, an arched sign read, **Tam y's Tr iler ark.**

Teresa's full bladder made her walk a bit stiff. Nevertheless, she stopped and stared beyond the sign at ghostly trailers lining a dark road lit by few working streetlights.

"What?" Justine asked, still not sure what magics her friend had learned during her brief stay with the powerful sorceress, Grace. "You an Oracle now?"

"Don't know. Something. Nothing. Oracle enough to know where the bathrooms are."

Simone and Justine followed smoothly, one step behind, two steps to the side, eyes piercing the shadows. They were automatically on alert while passing the few pickups and motorcycles in the dirt lot, though they had no reason to believe it necessary.

A woman with big blonde hair whined a sad country song from a small stage by the bar as Justine swung open the matching red front doors. Teresa headed for the ladies' room, and Tammy herself, thin, weathered, with a pile of dark hair, showed Justine and Simone to a worn leather booth. They ordered a pitcher of beer, made minor jokes at the expense of Teresa's bladder, and ignored the stares of the few Tuesday night customers.

Justine said, "You've been relatively quiet since we decided to go to New Orleans. You've been there, I assume."

Simone shrugged and took great interest in a ring of water from a glass of beer.

"Not such good memories from that visit?"

Simone managed a wan smile. "Some good, some bad. It was a long time ago."

"Tee and I can go, if you want."

"No. We go together. As I said, it was all finished a long time ago."

Teresa returned and slumped into the booth next to Justine. She took her friends' affectionate kidding and ordered a large plate of fried chicken and rice. Though born in Mexico, she'd spent most of her forty-five years as a nurse in Los Angeles where she acquired a taste for fried chicken and cheeseburgers. She was a strong, full-bodied woman and could afford to eat stuff like that. At least that's what she told herself.

Justine leaned across the table and asked Simone, "Didn't Grace feed her while you guys were up there in magic school?"

"Only for training purposes. Grace taught her a spell to remove all her baby fat."

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"She must have failed that class."

"Very funny *amigas*," Teresa said around a chicken leg. "You just hate me because you can't eat like this."

They chuckled companionably; three friends having a night out.

Sated, Teresa sipped her beer and asked, "How far to New Orleans?"

"About two hundred miles," Justine said. "We should be there about midnight."

"Why do we always have to arrive at midnight? Can't we arrive at noon sometime?"

Justine and Simone shot her an amused why-do-you-think look.

Mock serious, Teresa said, "Oh, yeah. I forgot." Grinning, she threw an arm around Justine and hugged her. She pressed her lips to Justine's short blond hair, holding her close for long seconds. They'd been best friends since before things went all to shit. Teresa also reached a hand across to Simone, who held it tight.

Though Florida was warm and humid, a whole different ambiance from California, Justine relished Teresa's warmth. They'd been separated for a week until twenty-four hours ago.

After the vampire safe-house had been blown up they'd all gone into hiding until a new safe-house could be set up. Simone and Teresa had gone North to help the vampire witch Grace set up a new compound after her old one had been compromised. More importantly for the three of them, Grace needed to train Teresa to use her powers. Only finding her power as a *bruja* in the last few months, Teresa hadn't had a lifetime to learn the craft.

Justine and Harry had gone to ground in the Florida Keys where Harry's injuries healed and they reconnected with each other. After a couple of days of saying little, spending time in each other's arms, they talked of what had happened. The women had gone searching for Teresa's missing daughter, Antonia, but had found so much more. And now they were hiding. Several police departments would like a word with them, but a greater danger came from Rubicon, a thousand year old vampire with a megalomaniac desire to take over the world. The past, they discussed. Discussions of the future and vampire-mortal relationships were necessarily limited, being the familiar elephant in the room they ignored because they knew the choices and didn't want to make them.

A phone call from Clair, the keeper of a new vampire safe house, had interrupted a moonlight stroll on the beach. In New Orleans, three girls had been found murdered, along with a man with ties to a white

slavery ring. Evidence suggested two other girls had been imprisoned with them. DNA results revealed one of the missing girls was Rose Mitchell, location now unknown.

Justine, Simone and Teresa had originally left California to search for Antonia, and several other abducted girls they had leads on, Rose Mitchell being one of them. So, the question of Justine and Harry's immediate future had been resolved. Harry, a detective with the San Diego Sheriff's Department, had come to Florida on his own time, tracking a vampire who was supposed to be dead. He had to go back. Justine had to go after Rose.

Justine turned and planted a kiss on Teresa's cheek, inhaling her warmth and love. "We should go."

"What about dessert?"

"That has to go—" Justine snapped to attention. Head cocked, she met Simone's intense gaze, and listened.

Used to her friends' sudden hearing or sensing of things she couldn't, Teresa switched to alert mode. "What?"

"Screams. Not fun ones." Justine and Simone slid out of the booth.

Teresa knew better than to ask if those screams were something they needed to be concerned about. After the death of her daughter, Justine couldn't help but be drawn to damsels in distress. "I'll get the check."



Justine and Simone moved quickly under the trailer park sign, one on each side, heads turning to find the source of the screams. At a cross street, a man shouting, then a woman's cry cut short, drew them to a rusty thirty foot trailer at the edge of the small park.

Two burly brothers in their thirties, one bearded, one with shaved head, leaned against a well-used Camero.

"You'd think Suzie'd know better than to talk back to Kyle by now."

"She's purty, but sure has a mouth on her, don't she?"

"Well, I'm hopin' to get that mouth on me."

"Well, she ain't drunk tonight, so don't get yer little pecker up just yet there Silas," Cleanhead said.

Justine strode right past them up to the screen door. She yanked it open, stomped up the two steps and entered.

"Who the hell was that?" Silas asked, taking a step forward.

Simone strolled past them and took up station ten feet from the trailer. "That's his wife."

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"His wife? Kyle don't have no wife." Silas started to step up to her, but something in her confident stance and unwavering stare stopped him.

"That's what he thinks."

"Well, shit."

"This ought to be interesting," Cleanhead said, amused, but wary.



Inside, Kyle raised his hand to slap Suzie, a pretty blonde with too many bad tattoos. "You do what I tell you, Suzie. You know that. We want to party and I expect you to provide the entertainment."

"Kyle, please. I don't want to do that again."

Kyle pressed her against a fixed table between two bench seats. He ground out, "Yes, you do."

He raised his hand to slap Suzie, who was a foot shorter and a hundred pounds lighter than he was. But something held his arm.

"No. She doesn't want to do that again."

Kyle spun around. "What the fuck? Who the fuck're you?" He struggled to jerk his arm from her grip, and couldn't.

Justine tightened her grip until he winced, then let him loose.

"Suzie, go outside."

Rubbing his arm, face twisted with fury, Kyle said, "Stay here, bitch. Or—"

Like a fast cut in a movie, Justine grabbed his T-shirt and bent him backward over the table. Meeting the young woman's wide eyes, Justine said, "Suzie...out."

"But the Robie brothers are outside."

"Don't worry about them."

Kyle sputtered and struggled to get free. He swung at the surprisingly strong woman, but despite his long arms and lanky frame he couldn't connect. His flailing legs prevented a terrified Suzie from pushing through the narrow space. Justine yanked him up, punched his face and slammed him back down. His legs went slack. Suzie rushed past and escaped out the door.

Justine released him and stepped back. Kyle struggled to stand up. He took a few seconds to work up a head of steam, working his shoulders and finding his legs. "What the fuck, bitch?"

"You were beating up your girlfriend."

"What's that to you? Who the fuck are you?"

"I'm Suzie's new friend. If she's dumb enough to come back in here I'm going to make sure you don't hurt her again."

Kyle snorted as he took her in: jeans and a T-shirt that did nothing to hide her well-endowed, athletic body, short blonde, windblown hair. He chose to ignore the hard blue eyes that showed no fear or respect. "I'll do what I want to her. Matter fact I'm gonna beat you then beat her then we gonna party with you till you just another worn out cunt."

Having convinced himself he had every right to do what he wanted to her, Kyle cocked his arm, stepped forward, and swung at Justine.

Before she was changed, before her daughter was murdered, Justine owned a black belt in Kung Fu. Combine that with her superior speed and strength and Kyle had no chance. She had blocked his punch and twitched her head just enough so his next punch went right past her ear. She stepped in, grabbed his shirt and head-butted him, breaking his nose. She pushed him away and stepped back.

"Kyle, whether she stays or goes, *you* are going to treat her right, like a good little gentleman."

"Fuck you." Kyle held a dirty dish towel to his nose with one hand. With the other he reached into the sink and grabbed a dirty knife. Without a word, he flung the towel at Justine and struck out with the blade.

A backhand swipe, invisible to a mortal eye, with her right hand swept the bloody cloth against the wall. A left-hand block and a slight sideways movement of her head caused his lunge to miss by a fraction of an inch. She grabbed the passing arm, spun, and flipped him over her shoulder. He landed on his back with a thud that shook the trailer.



Suzie burst out the door, barely touching the steps. Ten feet away from the trailer she spied the brothers and skidded to a wavering stop, eyes wide like a rabbit on the run. She spun about and saw Simone. Still spooked, she ran in a new direction, only to bump into Simone who seemed to appear from the air. She let out a short yelp and twisted away.

"Suzie." Simone gave her a sharp shake. "Suzie, you are safe now. I will not let anyone hurt you. *Comprenez-vous?*" She locked eyes with the frightened woman. "You are safe. Understand?"

Suzie glanced back at the brothers, who stood side by side, tense, wondering what the hell was going on.

"You are safe," Simone repeated with another quick shake.

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As Simone's glamour calmed her panic, Suzie fought to comprehend what was happening. "Who are you?" She waved vaguely at the trailer. "And her?"

"We are friends. You have a decision to make. Stay or leave with us."

"He'll come after me." Tension put a quiver in her voice.

"No, he won't. If you stay, he will be nicer to you. But you will still be here. Do you have a place to go?"

"A cousin in Baton Rouge."

"We will take you there. But you must decide now—stay or go?"

"Suzie," Cleanhead called, stepping forward. "Go."

Silas spun his brother around. "Drew, what the hell you sayin'? Suzie, don't go. Kyle will—"

A loud thud from the trailer interrupted him. Through the door they all saw Kyle, face bloody, lying still on the floor. Justine's silhouette appeared in the door.

The brothers swore and started for the trailer. Simone, suddenly appearing in their way, said, "No."

"Get out the way, bitch," Silas said.

"No." Simone grasped their shirts and pushed and dragged them back to the pickup. Their fists had no effect. None too gently, she left them against the truck. "Stay."

They did.

Justine stood in the open door, watching Simone without comment.

Suzie stood under one of the few working streetlights, her face shadow and light, too surprised and confused at the turn of events to think of moving. She watched, too.

"Suzie," Justine said. "Go with us, or stay here."

Simone stood beside the bewildered woman. "You have to choose now. We are leaving."

"I...I don't know you."

"But you know them."

Suzie gazed at Kyle, moaning and bloody, then at the brothers.

Silas took a step forward. "You can't just come in here and—"

Drew grabbed his arm and stopped him. "You should go, Suzie. It won't end well for you here."

Silas shrugged off his brother's hand. "What the hell you talking about? She's a town girl. She can't go nowhere. She belongs here."

"You gonna protect her from Kyle?"

On cue, Kyle shouted out his rage, a long anguished cry, and attempted to sit up.

Justine put him back down with a stomp on the chest.

"I want to go," Suzie said, quietly. Then, louder, "I want to go."

"*C'est bien.*" Simone drew out her cell phone.

Justine nodded and turned to Kyle. She straddled him, held his head and looked deep into his mad eyes. "Okay, Kyle, this is what you're going to do."

A few minutes later Teresa stopped their vehicle by the trailer. Justine and Simone flanked Suzie who looked like a lost child between them. Teresa walked around and looked down at the too thin woman with tear tracks glistening on her cheeks. "*Chica*, you in sad shape."

Justine said, "We should go."

Teresa and Suzie got into the back seat, Simone behind the wheel.

A few feet from the trailer, Drew watched them, arms crossed tight across his chest. "Good luck," he said as Suzie looked back one last time. She pressed a hand against the window, then turned away.

CHAPTER 2

Nobody said much until they crossed the north end of Mobile Bay on Route 90 and were cruising southwest on I-10. Teresa, a former head nurse at a major Los Angeles hospital ER, checked Suzie's vitals and made her eat. When Teresa let her alone, Suzie hugged her thin legs and stared out the window at the passing night.

As they crossed the line into Mississippi, Justine asked Suzie, "This cousin, is she going to take you in without a hassle?"

Suzie said nothing.

When she didn't answer, Justine turned in her seat and studied the young woman, noticing the tear tracks glistening on her cheeks. Teresa noticed, too. She laid a sympathetic hand on her shoulder.

Without any acknowledgment of their scrutiny or touch Suzie said, "She been begging me to stay with her for years."

"Why didn't you go?"

"Did once." She rested her head on her knees. "It was too hard. I couldn't stay. And..."

"Kyle?"

A nod. She stared at the passing night, darkness matching her mood. "We'd just hooked up. He had drugs and friends and...I thought he loved me."

"That I get." Justine's husband's betrayal still rankled after all these years. She became a much stronger woman because of it, but it still hurt.

Teresa asked, "What about the two other men? The shaved head one seemed to care. He wished you good luck."

"The Robie brothers, Drew and Silas. Drew's the one with no hair. He spent time in rehab, too. He'd like to kick it, but he's weak. He'll do whatever his older brother says and Silas does whatever Kyle says."

"He did not seem inclined to help Kyle," Simone added.

"Drew hates Kyle."

"Yet he hangs out with him. Why?"

Suzie continued to look out the window, her body saying *Leave me alone. Leave me alone.*

The three women traded glances.

Justine said, "Because of you, right?" Suzie gave a weak shrug for an answer. "Maybe you should have hooked up with him?"

She snorted a non-humorous laugh. "He's a cousin of some sort." Her voice took on an edge, "Besides, after what he did to me with the others...I'll cut his balls off if I get the chance."

"How many cousins do you have?"

Suzie shrugged. "Lots of cousins, first, second, third, aunts, uncles. Some of 'em cops, too. In case you're kidnapping me or somethin'."

"Parents?"

Suzie hesitated. "Dead. Mama drank herself to death. Daddy got high, tried to cut firewood with a chainsaw." She shook her head. "Cut his leg off and bled to death." She sighed heavily, pressed her head against the window and closed her eyes. "Been on my own since I was sixteen. Twelve years. I'm sure they'd be proud I'm still alive. Not good for nothing, but alive. That's an achievement, ain't it?"

Teresa took her hand. "That is an achievement. Sounds like you're ready for more than that." She felt an answering squeeze from Suzie's hand. She also felt the hand tremble before Suzie pulled away and hugged herself, shoulders quivering. From long experience Teresa knew what that meant—the first sign of withdrawal.

As Teresa dug through her extensive medical kit for something to relieve Suzie's coming discomfort, Simone said, "So, *cher*, it seems you have another decision to make. Possibly your last chance." She turned to Justine and they had a quick conversation with their eyes. She then caught Teresa's dark eyes in the rear view mirror and had the same conversation, with the same conclusion. "We can help you."

"Why would you help me? I'm nobody."

"But you could be somebody."

Nobody spoke as the saltwater scented air and the miles flowed past. For the three women, years also flowed.



But you could be somebody.

Teresa thought back to her mother who brought her as a child to *Los Estados Unidos* so she would have a chance for a better life; to her first nursing mentor who for some reason took a liking to a young, awkward nurse; to all the women, nurses and patients, she had mentored and guided to healthy decisions; to the vampire sorceress who taught her a

little of how to use her *bruja* powers.

Simone thought back to the newly widowed woodcutter's wife who gave her temporary refuge after she was accidentally changed; to a young woman she saved from ravishment who became a wealthy duchess and in turn helped Simone learn to live with mortals; to an escaped slave who became a most powerful vampire sorceress.

Justine thought of the real estate man who saw something in a betrayed and widowed woman with a young daughter, desperate to succeed; to her only friend, there when she needed her; to Harry, a mortal who inexplicably loved her; to a three hundred and seventy year old vampire who helped her gain vengeance and taught her how to live a new and different life.



Around midnight, Suzie directed them to a well-to-do neighborhood south of Baton Rouge. They drove through a lightly treed area with wide-spaced, mostly single-story houses of pink brick and white paint, many fronted with white columns. Wide swaths of grass buffered the houses from areas of dense woods.

Her voice flattened by sedatives reinforced by a bit of glamour, Suzie said, "This one." She pointed to a brick sprawl of a house, with a two story, three door garage attached. Lights illuminated the flagstone patio.

As Simone wheeled the SUV up a short drive a light went on in a window and the front door swung open revealing the silhouettes of a man and woman. Nobody in car or house moved or spoke for a long half minute.

"You're ready for this," Teresa said.

"Yes. No."

Justine and Teresa escorted Suzie along the short walk. Simone stayed behind, leaning against the vehicle. There was no need to overwhelm the cousin with three powerful women who made Suzie look like a starving refugee. At the three steps up to the entrance terrace Justine placed a hand at the small of Suzie's back in case she needed a little push. Suzie shrugged it off, raised her chin, and stepped up.

The cousin, Mona Lambreaux, with four inches and thirty well-shaped pounds on Suzie, inspected her with horror written on her face. "Oh, Suzie, what have they done to you?" Then, tears welling, she wrapped her arms around her cousin and sobbed, "Oh you poor girl, you poor girl. I'm so sorry. I won't abandon you again. I won't. I won't."

Suzie finally hugged back, tighter and tighter, squeezing out her own tears.

Justine felt heat behind her eyes, but could shed no tears—the vampire's curse. Teresa had no such restriction.

Eventually, Mona addressed Justine and Teresa with a light Southern drawl. "Thank you so much for bringing Suzie back to us. I've been so worried, but I didn't know where she was. I'm Mona Lambreaux, a first cousin. This handsome hunk is my husband Randy. Probably a cousin, too. Someday when I'm mad at him I'll try and find out."

Justine doubted that. She didn't need a detective or any vamp super power to know they loved each other madly.

Randy stuck a hand out. "A pleasure to meet you." Justine had no choice but to shake his manicured hand. "Justine."

"Teresa."

The couple turned their gaze to Simone casually leaning against the SUV.

"She's not very sociable," Justine said. "And we should be going."

"Are you sure you won't stay the night? There's lovely guest room above the garage."

"Thank you, but we need to get back on the road."

"Yes, all right. We should go, too." Arm around Suzie she squeezed her close. "They're waiting for us."

Suzie forced a smile, managed a nod at the inevitable. "I have to pee."

"Of course, Suz. You know where it is."

Suzie freed herself and like a condemned prisoner walked into the house. Teresa pointed at her back and followed. Suzie wouldn't be the first addict to walk right out the back of the house and disappear.

Mona's expression said she didn't need an explanation. "May we at least pay for a hotel room, a tank of gas?"

"Thank you, we're good. There is one thing."

Instantly wary, Randy and Mona waited, eyebrows questioning.

Justine smiled. "Don't worry, I don't want your first born." Her body tensed, lips tightened, as she did a slow blink. *I want my own first born back.* "Suzie mentioned she had a cousin who is a detective in the New Orleans Police Department."

The couple squinted at each other in confusion, then brightened. "She must mean Cyrus St. Paul," Randy said.

"He's my uncle, actually," said Mona. "Though it's hard to keep 'em all straight. He retired from the police—"

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"Got fed up. Did his twenty and got out," Randy threw in.

"He has his own security and investigation company now. Though he still has his connections, I'm sure."

"He wouldn't throw them away."

"I assume you'd like to contact him. Why, if I may ask?"

Justine stared out into the darkness. "We're searching for a missing girl. We have word she might be in New Orleans. It would help to have contact with someone who knows the city. Her parents would like to see her again."

"That would be Cyrus. You private investigators?"

"Let's just say we all know what it's like to lose someone." Justine shook as if she had a chill. "Suzie's going to be hurting in a couple of hours. You should get her where she's going soon."

"Do we need to worry about anybody coming to look for her?"

"No."

"Did you...? Never mind."

Teresa and Suzie returned from the bathroom.

Suzie clung to Mona. Beside her cousin she looked more like a lost, half-starved waif than a twenty-eight year old. "Thank you for helping me. I don't know why you did."

"We help you, you help someone else. Be somebody, Suzie."

Before they left, Justine erased any memory of their names from the Lambreauxs. Just in case.

CHAPTER 3

The sun had finished setting in a red blaze when the Girl appeared at the hostess station of Tammy's Roadhouse. Short and slender, she might have been sixteen, but was much older. She waited patiently for Tammy to notice her.

"What can I do for ya, missy?" Tammy asked.

"I'm looking for my mother. She might have been in here yesterday?" From her jeans pocket she drew out a photograph and held it up.

Tammy squinted at the photo of Justine with an ocean background. "Yeah, she was here, maybe around eight. Couple other gals with her. She leave you behind?"

"Just a miscommunication, ma'am. Do you know where she was heading?"

"Nope. But her and another gal left sorta quick. Don't know why."

"Thank you, ma'am." The Girl moved close to Tammy and looked deep into her eyes.

Tammy shook her head in time to see the door swing closed. She didn't remember anyone leaving. *Musta been the wind kickin' up.*

Outside, the Girl stood in the shade by the trailer park entrance considering her next move. Two women somewhere north of fifty, wearing shorts and shapeless blouses, walked by.

"Did you hear what happened to that awful young man in D-4?"

"I heard some yelling. I bet he was beatin' on that girlfriend of his, poor girl."

"Someone beat on him this time."

The Girl let them pass then went in search of space D-4. There she slipped between the trailer's back side and the thick brush that formed the park's boundary. She peeked in a window and listened.

On a couch, nursing a beer, the lanky guy with a bruised and swollen face must be that awful man. Two other men sat on opposite sides of a dinette table.

One with a beard said, "Come on bro, you're not going after her? Those bitches took your woman."

"Give it a rest, Silas. Doubt she'd come back so easy this time. She too much trouble."

"Shit man. Where'd they take her?"

"Don't know."

Drew jerked at the question, pressed his lips tight, and kept his head down. He knew something.

The Girl waited. Born to serve, she would be as patient as she needed be for her new master.

Silas continued to drink and rant and threaten with minimal comment from the others. Finally after peering unsteadily into the built-in refrigerator, he stated, "Drew, there ain't no beer left, man."

Drew saw his chance to escape. "I got some in the truck," he said and left without a word, letting the screen door slam.

The Girl followed him to the truck.

"Hey. Drew, right?"

He looked down on her with no fear, in the dim light seeing an innocent girl. "Yeah. Who are you?"

"Did three women take a girl away from here last night?"

He was wary now. "What's it to you?" He lifted a six pack of beer from the truck's back seat.

"I'm looking for them. Do you know where they took her?"

"Why are you looking for them?"

"They took someone from me. Where are they? You know."

"I can't help you. Beat it." He slammed the truck door.

"You will tell me."

"Don't threaten me, kid. I ain't in the mood."

"Me either."

Drew couldn't follow her movements. His legs suddenly went out from under him. He landed on his ass with a grunt. Before he had any chance to react, she drove him flat with a punch to his chest. Looking deep into his bulging eyes, she slapped him. He had no choice but to look into her weirdly dark eyes.

A few minutes later she marched over to the trailer, up the steps and through the door. Kyle slept on the couch. Silas swayed by the passage that led back to the bedroom. He struggled to zip his fly, but gave it up when he spied the Girl.

"Hey darlin'," he said with slurry cheer. "You come to party with us?"

In silence she grabbed the big man and threw him down. She just wasn't tall enough to reach his neck standing up. Her jaw stretched open

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more than humanly possible and she drank. Leaving him alive—dead bodies drew attention—she took a kitchen knife and made a shallow slice through the two punctures, hiding them.

Then she woke Kyle.

CHAPTER 4

Teresa stepped into the understated office of Security Investigations Inc., obviously a place more for work than show, and approached the attractive receptionist smiling a welcome from behind a high counter.

"Maria Gonzales to see Mr. St. Paul."

The receptionist consulted her computer, then murmured into a head set microphone. "Mr. St. Paul will be out in a minute," she told Teresa. "Have a seat if you like. Coffee?"

"No thank you. I've had enough of both lately."

The only door from the reception area to the back offices buzzed open. Cyrus St. Paul came through wearing a smile, a golf shirt, wrinkled dark blue slacks and deck shoes. Not quite six feet, not quite handsome, he filled out his shirt nicely. "Ms. Gonzales, I'm Cyrus St. Paul." She returned his firm handshake and smile. "Please, come with me."

She followed him through an open area furnished with five desks manned by three women and two men, none of whom looked more than twenty-five, all intent on their computer screens. Down a short hall, he ushered her into a bare-bones office—just a desk, some chairs, pictures on the wall. Teresa took a moment to scan the photos, most of St. Paul as a cop or his family. She recognized him with an arm around a younger Mona holding a diploma.

He offered her a comfortable armchair, and moved to his chair behind the desk. He turned his back on her for a few seconds, long enough for Teresa to whisper a few words and make a few subtle gestures. An invisible dome formed over her, the desk, and St. Paul, forming a barrier to any recording device, audio or video, inside or outside.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Gonzalez?"

"You know about the three girls and man murdered two days ago?"

"Yes. A nasty business."

"The police believe there were two other girls with them who are now missing."

"Yes."

"We are looking for one of those girls." She drew a photo out of her messenger bag style purse. "Rose Mitchell, abducted from California eighteen months ago, two days before her sixteenth birthday."

"And you want me to find her for you?"

"No. I want you to help us find her."

"Us?"

"Two others."

"Why are you looking for her?"

Teresa stared out the window at the Mississippi river in the distance. "She's missing. She's alive. Her family would like to see her again."

St. Paul lay the photo down, centering it on his desktop. He leaned back and studied Teresa with pale blue eyes that could be equally soft and comforting or, like now, hard and icy. "Exactly what sort of help are you looking for?"

"Mona Lambreaux said you still have contacts with the police department. We'd like to know what the police know. Any leads or suspects. We can help." His thick eyebrows rose to a skeptical height. "And we prefer to stay in the background. When we find Rose and the people who killed those girls, you can take the credit." Teresa watched his skepticism turn to serious consideration. "And we can pay." She drew out an envelope and placed it on the desk.

St. Paul riffled the cash in the envelope. "Generous. I'll see what I can find out. How can I contact you?"

"I'll call you. Five o'clock this afternoon." She stood up.

St. Paul wrote on the back of his business card. "My private number. I assume you'd like to keep this off book."

"*Perfecto*," she said, taking the card. "One other thing. What is the exact address of the crime scene?"

CHAPTER 5

At midnight, they parked around the corner from the crime scene. Teresa hadn't learned an invisibility spell yet. Her training had been cut short by the news that Rose Mitchell might still be alive. But she could do a warding. Anyone touching the SUV would feel their worst fear, would know a horrible death waited for them.

The building was a three story brick office building close to the docks. A faint white line between the first and second floors marked the water level on this street after Katrina. Justine, Simone and Teresa were the only people on the street.

"You ready, Tee?" Justine asked.

"As ready as one can be to go into an abandoned building at night where four people were murdered in a dangerous neighborhood in a city with one of the highest murder rates in the country."

Simone patted Teresa's shoulder. "Do not worry, Tee. You have two bodyguards who would die for you."

"Again?"

"As many—" Simone tensed, cocked her head, and sniffed. Quickly she scanned the surrounding buildings.

Justine, alerted by Simone's actions, repeated them.

"Vamps," Simone murmured.

"Watching?"

"No. But they have been here, recently."

All three carried razor sharp machetes strapped to their legs and a handgun. Unconsciously, all three made sure their blades were loose in their scabbards.

Wary, senses reaching out, they rounded the corner. No guard stood watch. In that neighborhood only a SWAT team would feel safe. Yellow tape crossing over the single door accessing the building advertised the crime scene. Simone ducked through the tape and in thirty seconds had the door open.

Once inside, Teresa waved her hands and mumbled a few words at the door. "I'll know if somebody comes through after us."

A trail of dirt and blood across the dusty black and white tile foyer led to a wide wood staircase. On full alert, blade in hand, Justine mounted the steps. Following the odor of dried blood, they climbed to the third floor and made their way to a back room.

The door had been reinforced with a metal frame and two crossbars. Justine pushed it open. The stench of blood, sweat, urine, shit, fear and despair overwhelmed her. “*Mon Dieu*,” Simone said, wrinkling her nose and backing away. Teresa gagged and strode ten feet down the hall. They took a minute to turn down their senses.

“You’d think they would treat their wares better,” Justine said.

“Slavers are not known to be kind to their property.” Simone entered the room and surveyed the grisly scene. Six thin mattresses covered most of the floor. One was bare. Five were covered with filthy sheets and a pillow. On three of the mattresses, the sheets were soaked with dried brown blood. By each mattress, one end of a chain was bolted to the floor, the other end fitted with a leather covered shackle.

Justine nudged a shackle with her toe. “See how nice they were to their property.”

Simone continued to inspect the room. “I’ll pick up a pair of those for when you act out as *l’enfant terrible*.” She squatted by the two non-bloody beds. Lifting each pillow, she inhaled a deep sample of their individual odor to commit it to memory. To Justine she said, “You, too. One of these scents is Rose Mitchell.”

Heavy plywood covered one of the two windows. The other covering was probably removed by police. Teresa, attempting unsuccessfully to breathe through her mouth, peered out. “Can we get on with it? I can’t hide our presence while I’m doing this. Vomiting won’t help either.”

“Okay,” Justine said. “I don’t want to spend any more time here than I have to. What do you need us to do?”

Teresa knelt on a clean area of the floor and opened her messenger bag. “Just wait outside the door. Keep to the side. If I run out the door, follow me. Don’t let me get hit by a bus.”

Justine and Simone left the room and peered in from outside. They watched Teresa light a simple candle and lay a picture of Rose—tanned, long sandy hair, wide-spaced eyes and warm smile—beside it. She placed the two pillows on each side. “I don’t know which of these is hers. I may see from the other girl’s point of view.”

She breathed slow and deep while making hand movements over the candle, then rested her hands on the pillows. Focusing on the flame, she murmured an incantation.

Blood on the Bayou



Heavy footsteps coming down the hall woke Rose from her drowse. She'd been captive in the room for five days. The fear and anger at escaping then being caught had turned into nagging, dull background feelings and finally boredom. Stifling heat, relieved only in the early morning hours, had sweat out the energy for any other emotion. Shame and revulsion had left her after the first month as Señor Sarcasan's sex slave. Mi hermosa amante, he called her as he forced her to do what he wanted. But still, a slave. At least he didn't get off by beating or torturing her, like poor Mary who bore the scars of a brutal master.

Mary had come to the room for the same reason Rose had. Someone murdered her owner. The man's wife paid his mistress to kill Mary, but he intervened and ended up dead himself. Though wounded, Mary took advantage and ran. Finding herself in the outskirts of Bangkok, unable to speak Thai, she hid in a small patch of forest. That night two of the pale men she'd seen when she was first abducted found her. "We smell you blood," one told her, before she blacked out.

Señor Sarcasan had been deputy mayor of Guadalajara, Mexico. A car bomb killed him. Rose thought she would be free. She ran, but with no place to go the police quickly found her and put her into a holding cell. After a drugged-out journey she woke up in this room.

Carly, fourteen, was abducted two days ago and hadn't stopped crying since. As the sound of purposeful footsteps approached, she moaned, "Nononono," and tried to curl up and disappear into her corner.

With no hint of sympathy, Mary snarled, "Quit yer whinin' kid. Take it like a woman."

Abused in various ways most of her life, kidnapped at fourteen, sold into slavery, now eighteen and still alive, Mary had earned her hard attitude.

Kelly, sixteen, was a pretty Korean girl with black hair to her ass. She'd arrived the same day as Rose, half pissed off as much as scared. "Give her a break. Her perfect life is probably going to be shitty from now on so let her cry if she has to."

"What do you know about anything, little miss perfect?"

"I've heard your story, I've heard Rose's story. I read. My grandparents were enslaved by the Japanese. They lived through it. I plan on living through it, too."

Rose and Kelly were friends. Their mattresses were side by side. At night they talked low, faces inches apart, sometimes holding hands. They told their stories, wondered about their families, discussed escaping, drew strength from

each other. Just two friends bullshitting, as Rose's brother used to say.

The fifth girl, a fifteen year old blonde, blue-eyed Scandinavian brought in three days before, hadn't spoken since she arrived. She sat mute in a corner regarding the others as if they were readying to attack. They ignored her.

As the footsteps approached all of the girls stared at the door. This was not normal. One of the five girls was going to be taken away. Rose's heart pounded with indecision—did she want to stay in the stifling room, relatively safe, or get out and take her chances?

They listened to the bars sliding out of place, the bolts being shot. Mary jumped up and with the others, fixed her eyes on the door. Rose noticed Mary's hands shaking. Sitting cross-legged on their mattresses, she and Kelly squeezed hands.

The door swung open, banging against the wall. They all jumped. Two pale men came through, one white, one black, wearing work boots, dark slacks and windbreakers. Their faces were blank slates, masks with not one bit of emotion on them. Each carried a .45 semi-auto handgun with a silencer at his side. Behind them walked a thick white guy, with long hair and an unkempt beard. He, too, carried a weapon.

They surveyed the room, dead eyes never connecting.

"A waste," one said.

Their faces began to change. Their jaws seemed to unhinge, elongate, open wider than a normal human's, two canines extending. Then they started shooting.

The black guy shot Mary twice, chest and head, splattering brains, blood and guts against the wall, and on Rose.

The white guy shot the mute girl. Her insides spilled out into her corner.

The black guy shot Carly, still huddled and crying, eyes closed.

Behind the shooters, a black hand grabbed the thick white man's hair and pulled his head back. A machete blade swung around and sliced through his neck, sending a blood spray across the ceiling.

The black shooter targeted Rose.

"No!" A black man, shorter than the others, muscles stretching his black T-shirt and jaws extended, jumped through the door and with one strike, cut off the hand holding the gun. The arm hung by a fleshy thread for a second before dropping. Before it hit the floor, the attacker whipped his blade through the black man's neck.

The white shooter had swung to Kelly next. Distracted by the attack on his partner, his gun swung to Rose. He fired, as Kelly pushed Rose aside. The bullet bored through Kelly's forearm, tugging her backward. That was his last shot. In a blur his head joined the other, hitting the floor with a dull thump.

Blood on the Bayou

Blood surrounded Rose, splattering her face and arm. A crimson stained chunk of brain lay inches from her eyes. The deaths of the three girls flashed before her, again and again.

"Rose. Rose." An insistent, familiar voice called her. Strong hands lifted her. "Rose, we got to get out of here."

She focused on the face in front of her. Round, ebony with scarlet streaks, bright, concerned eyes, thin lips that usually tried to smile. But they weren't smiling now. Sim. "Sim? What...what's happening?"

"We have to go now, Rose. We have to run. Are you hurt?"

She studied the blood on her. "No. I don't think so. Kelly."

Kelly sat against the wall, head down, holding her arm. She raised her head. "Sim? What the hell?"

Sim shook Rose by the shoulders, made her focus. "Get her up. We're leaving." Seeming to move instantly across the room, he pulled the jackets and shirts off the shooters and gathered up their guns. "The police are coming here." He wrapped one shirt around Kelly's wound then made them put on the jackets to hide the blood.

"But Sim, Kelly and I want the police, don't we?"

"Not if you want to live."

With the guns wrapped in the other shirt, he hustled them down the stairs and out the front door. "In that truck." He pointed to a white pick-up truck with a dirty white camper. It had Louisiana license plates JRT—.



The pickup faded as it moved away. Teresa swayed on her feet until a swirl of dizziness cleared, replaced by the solidity of a dark dingy street. How the hell did she get there? She leaned over, out of breath. Spells like that took a lot of energy, and the ache in her legs meant she'd been running. She wasn't in as good a shape as she used to be. Shit—someone broke the building's warding. She spun about. Justine and Simone stood behind her, hands on weapons. "The ward has been broken."

"Nobody but us came through that door," Justine said, drawing her gun.

As Teresa said, "The back door," four men burst out through the front door.

"Vamps," Simone said, drawing her machete.

"Shit. We forgot Tee couldn't do two things at once."

The four vamps, two white guys and a Hispanic male and female, arranged themselves in a row across the sidewalk, their smirks

announcing their confidence they could handle two female vamps and a mortal.

"What you doing in that building, *chicas*?" The hunky, tattooed Latino asked.

"We heard there was a vacancy. Thought we might rent a room," Justine said.

"You can sleep in my bed, baby," the youngest white guy said. He was probably nineteen when changed, and his brain stayed that age. "Though you won't get much sleep, day or night."

"You wish, kid. Grow up first."

"I ain't no kid. I'm twenty-five, old lady."

His buddies, all well past twenty-five, smiled and laughed at him.

"At least I'm old enough to know a man from a boy," Justine said.

His face bunched with ire. "I'll show you a man."

He darted at Justine, his blade held high to slice her head off. His anger turned to surprise when Simone's blade stopped his mid-swing and Justine's hand gripped the back of his neck. The tip of her machete drew a drop of blood from his neck.

All the humor on the men's faces shifted to danger.

"You were in that room. Why?" the lanky white guy with tattoos down his arm asked.

"We're tourists. All that blood lured us here. We'll leave now."

"No. Now you tell us why you are here, or we kill your mortal friend."

Justine and Simone spun around. Two vampires and two mortals stood behind Teresa. A six foot plus, brawny vamp held a knife to her neck. As one, Simone and Justine pushed the kid away, drew their guns, and put two slugs in the head of the vamp holding Teresa.

One of the men drew his gun to fire back. Teresa knocked his hand down and gripped his arm. Eyes wide open, she mumbled a few words. The vamp vibrated as if shocked, and crumpled to the sidewalk. Another vampire smacked her with his elbow, dropping her to her knees.

"*Aye muchachos*, just put the bitches down," the Hispanic guy ordered.

"Fin will want to know why," the Latina woman said, not one bit intimidated.

"Shut up, Gliss. Fin has other things to deal with besides some strange vamps. Make them dust. I have things to do."

"Did you say Fin?" Simone asked.

"Won't matter to you in three seconds, *chica*" the lead vampire said. He went for Simone, confident he'd slice her up and take her head so he

could go do the things he had to do. But Simone had over three hundred and seventy years of survival experience. Quicker and stronger, she sidestepped and blocked his charge. In seconds she sliced his leg, his arm and finally his neck.

A short-lived melee erupted after that.

“Don’t kill them,” Gliss shouted.

Nobody listened, until Gliss yanked her people back. “Take them alive. Surround them.”

They listened that time, forming a circle at blade’s length. Justine’s gun lay on the concrete. Simone’s gun hand would take five minutes before it was useful again. They stood back to back, circling, searching for an opening, a weakness.

The Kid stepped forward and poked his machete at Justine. “Who’s the man now, grandma?”

Justine shot him a not-you look. A minor distraction, but enough. She froze as she felt a gun pressed to her ear.

“I know you’re fast, but you’re not bullet fast. Drop the blade,” Gliss said.

Justine turned enough to see another gun held against Simone’s head. A sharp blade touched her neck. Without a word she dropped her weapon, as did Simone.

Forgotten in the free-for-all, still on her knees at the edge of the sidewalk, Teresa summoned her energy, trying to remember the spell to render vampires unconscious. She held one arm up and back, ready to throw the spell. A second before it happened, a mortal came up fast behind her and grabbed her upraised arm. He yanked her onto her back and kicked her ribs.

Teresa was no diminutive damsel in distress. As a nurse she’d learned to handle drugged, angry, and plain crazy patients. Hooking up with Justine and Simone had provided additional experience and confidence that made her, she was proud to know, one tough broad.

She grabbed the mortal’s leg, flipped onto her back, and jerked the paunchy, forty something man to her. She attempted to jam a foot in his crotch, but he twisted away. Without thinking, she thrust her palm at him. Though there was no physical contact, he landed in the middle of the road. With a shake of his head, he got up and staggered a step toward her.

A Jeep Cherokee knocked him aside before he took a second step. The Jeep screeched to a halt. “Get in!”

Teresa jerked back when she recognized the driver. She glanced at Justine.

Justine nodded, "Go!" and went crazy. She head butted one guy, and swept the feet from under the kid. Simone kicked a guy in the balls, then kicked another one in the chest, driving him into the street. They twisted and kicked and struggled, drawing attention away from Teresa diving into the Jeep.

Cyrus St. Paul stomped the gas.

One vampire, wiry and long-legged, gave chase. He latched on to the open window and stuck his hawk nose inside.

Teresa grabbed St. Paul's semi-automatic .38 stuck between the seats and shot the vampire between the eyes. He fell away, rolling like a floppy stuffed animal as the Jeep squealed around a corner.

"Shit! You just killed that guy," St. Paul shouted.

Spent, Teresa lay her head back. "Second time's the charm."