

*BETWEEN DREAMS AND DARKNESS*

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***BETWEEN DREAMS AND DARKNESS***  
***CLAIRE MICHAELS***

This book is dedicated to the city of New Orleans. A city built on hopes and would-be pipe dreams. A city for sharing of your vision, love, and spirit with this eccentric outcast. But most of all, a city that showed the world what it truly means to look bravely into the eye of a storm and somehow remain standing.

## Chapter 1

She looked down at the pictures scattered across her grandmother's antique cherry-wood dining table. Photos of a different place, a different time. Had it only been four months? It seemed like a lifetime ago.

Fresh from a blissfully cool shower, Gabrielle James gazed at a picture of herself wrapped in the arms of a man. Wyatt, the one she'd hoped would be the love of her life. Now he was a picture. Just like the rest of them. All just pictures. Pictures of the life she'd left behind in New York. Images and memories so distant from where she was now. From whom she was now.

Amazing how one phone call can change your entire life. Her fingers lingered on the photo of the ebony-haired woman sitting casually against a tree, camera in hand, as always. Smiling, happy, relaxed. Missy James, her grandmother, who'd raised her from the age of twelve.

Missy James had been a talented photographer. She had been one of the few female photographer's who were allowed in Vietnam during the war. She had also stood in the crossfire at Tiananmen Square, and hung upside-down from a parapet to get a Pulitzer Prize winning picture as the Berlin wall came down.

Talk about intimidating footsteps to follow.

The trips to exciting locales and political hot-spots had all ended for Missy when she'd received the phone call telling her that her beloved only child and his family had been involved in a horrible car accident on their way back from White Plains to their home in Greenwich Village. Gabrielle was fine, but her son and his adoring wife were gone. Missy, as she preferred to be called, even by her granddaughter, had done everything she could to make up for the fact that Gabrielle had a huge hole in her life now.

Gabi became her grandmother's whole life. Missy had even moved from New Orleans to New York so as not to uproot the child, leaving the home she'd shared with her husband before he was killed in the Vietnam War, to be the only parent her granddaughter would know. When Gabrielle turned eighteen and was ready to be on her own, Missy had moved back home.

"Gotta get back to my roots, Gabi, and I ain't talking about my natural hair color!" the sassy woman had informed her.

Though Gabrielle had begged and pleaded for her to stay, in the end Missy did just as Missy wanted. As she had done her whole life. That was just the kind of person Missy had been.

Missy had also been the kind of person who let you know exactly what she thought. No punches pulled and no holds barred, Missy said what she thought whether you liked it

or not. When Gabrielle announced her engagement to Wyatt, Missy was thrilled. Until she met him.

It wasn't that he was a conservative or believed in the war America was currently fighting in the Middle East, even though he would have probably run at the first sound of gunfire. And it wasn't the way he turned up his nose as they drove through Brooklyn. All of this Missy could excuse. It was the way he held Gabrielle.

"Gabi, he holds you like you're a possession. There's no passion in the man; no fire. No adoration. A girl needs a bit of adoration."

They'd fought for weeks about the subject. Gabrielle thought her grandmother was being harsh and judgmental. So what if Gabrielle had given up her friends, her dreams of becoming a photographer just like her grandmother, her wants, her desires.

Wyatt's friends were nice, just a bit different than the Greenwich Village folks Missy had surrounded her with. Okay, so the women didn't talk about world events or have heated debates about gender roles. Who cared if they were more concerned about hairstyles and the latest fall fashions? These were the kind of women she was going to be around if she married a stockbroker.

"You're not a goddamn commodity, Gabi!" Missy had screamed during one of their more heated phone conversations.

Finally, Missy had conceded defeat.

Why?

"I love you more than anything in this world. Even more than that damn Pulitzer Prize everyone gawks at in the foyer. I just want you to be happy."

As always the two James women ended the argument by saying they loved each other to the moon and back before they hung up the phone.

Then came another devastating phone call for the James Family. This time it was from Bootsie, her grandmother's oldest friend. Her voice lacking any of the sass that usually rivalled Gabi's grandmother's. Missy was gone. Died in her sleep. Such a quiet passing for a woman who had set the world on fire.

Wyatt had, of course, accompanied Gabrielle down to New Orleans; staying at her side while friends, acquaintances, and admirers of the great Missy James paid their respects. He held her hand as they placed her grandmother's body in the family tomb with her grandfather and her parents. As a final private joke, Gabrielle did something she knew would have incited a flurry of profanity from Missy. She placed the Pulitzer Prize in the coffin with her grandmother. Just because she knew it would piss the old broad off.

Something Gabrielle could do like no other.

Why?

Because Missy had loved Gabrielle more than anything else in the world.

Wyatt left the night of the wake, but Gabrielle was still too numb to process the thoughtlessness of such a gesture. Nothing really registered with her until he made a point of coming back down for the reading of the will. He sat beside Gabi, his eyes shifting around the room assessing everyone else present, trying to gauge their importance to Missy.

Sam Bondurant had been Missy's lawyer since he'd first hung out his shingle. All of her affairs were perfectly in order and the divisions of property were going calmly. A few trinkets here and there, sizable donations to the different charities and causes her grandmother believed in so passionately. The bulk of her sizeable fortune was left to Gabrielle. Wyatt was smugly pleased until the lawyers got to Bootsie. Betty, or as the world knew her Bootsie, LeMay Bondurant had been her grandmother's oldest and dearest friend. When her grandmother's lawyer announced that Missy had left Bootsie her classic Hershey National First Prize winning, 1962 candy-apple red Cadillac Convertible it came as no shock to Gabrielle.

It was the car her grandmother had scrimped and saved for during her teenage years. The car that had taken Bootsie, Missy and Gabi's father, Charlie Jr. to Woodstock. The car the two women were standing by during Mardi Gras on the night they'd met their future husbands; best friends Samuel Bondurant and Charles James. Bootsie had driven Missy to and from the burial of Gabrielle's grandfather in that car. It was in mint condition and had received countless offers from collectors around the world.

No one in the world would understand the importance of that vehicle better than Bootsie.

Bootsie wasn't as emotional as Missy. She was made of tough stuff. But, in her husband Sam's office, Bootsie finally cried.

"Damn that old broad, she finally got me," she choked.

Leaning over and hugging Bootsie tightly, Gabi kept hold of Wyatt's hand until she realized he'd loosened his grip.

"Awfully generous of Missy to leave her friend such a gift, don't you think? That car is one of a kind."

*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

Gabrielle felt a chill race down her spine. What did Wyatt care? His family came from money, and the amount of money her grandmother had left her pretty much ensured she would never have to work again if she didn't want to.

Later she slipped off by herself to sit on the porch of her grandparent's home to take stock of her life. She closed her eyes, trying to remember all of the sage and not so sage advice Missy had given her over the years. For some reason the one conversation that ran through her mind was an argument they'd had.

"When your grandfather..." Missy's voice became soft in spite of her tears. "When Charlie held me in his arms, I felt so loved, safe and cherished. All the man had to do was look into my eyes and I swear I was no better than those ditzy debutants Bootsie and I used to torment. Blushing and swooning like a damned idiot. Is that what it feels like when Wyatt holds you, Gabi? Because if it ain't that way, you're missing out and there are just some things in life you can't afford to miss out on."

Tears slid down Gabi's cheeks as she stared at her grandmother's roses. Roses Charlie had planted for her when they'd first married, even though the man didn't know a thing about gardening. When he'd planted them, they weren't blooming fast enough for him, so he'd brought one home every day to make up for the fact that the ones in the garden weren't pretty enough for her yet. It was a tradition he'd continued even after the bushes began to produce. Charlie had never come home without a rose for Missy. It was his thing. Gabi found herself wondering if Wyatt would ever do anything that sweet for her.

Almost on cue the balcony doors creaked open. Wyatt reached out for her and for a moment she felt foolish for ever doubting their love. But, only for a moment. He guided her into the house and showed her the papers he'd had drawn up. Papers authorizing the sale of the townhouse and various other properties in New Orleans that her grandmother owned, including the small art gallery on Magazine Street in the Garden District and the small flat over Bourbon Street that was primarily her grandmother's studio and dark room.

Everything.

"I figured we should get this squared away. Now that Missy is gone, I know we won't be spending any time here."

She didn't sign the papers right away. Wyatt didn't push, but he gently reminded Gabrielle that they were due back in Manhattan for a very important cocktail party.

It wasn't until she was actually back in New York and standing in the midst of said cocktail party that everything hit her. Holding a flute of champagne, she looked down at her Versace party dress and laughed. She laughed so loud she drew curious stares.

Gabrielle put down her glass and walked out the door. She didn't stop to say goodbye to her fiancée or any of her new friends, she just walked out.

Once she got home, she stubbornly ignored both phones, packed what she could into her little Chrysler Sebring and left Manhattan. It wasn't until she was crossing the state line that she realized she'd forgotten to change her outfit. She laughed again, realizing how ridiculous she must have looked pumping gas in a designer cocktail gown. She laughed so loud it echoed in the night and for a moment - just a moment - Gabi thought she heard Missy laugh as well.

When she arrived in New Orleans, the first thing Gabrielle did was send the rather ostentatious engagement ring back to Wyatt with a short note that said,

*I'm not selling anything.*

She waited for weeks to see if he would reply. Sat on the porch thinking he would come up the walk, but he never did. When she got his postcard, she knew it was finally over. That chapter of her life was done. Wyatt was marrying someone else four months after she'd left. So she slowly rebuilt her life. Instead of selling any of the property in New Orleans, she sold everything in New York and decided never to go back.

Gabrielle gathered up all the pictures of her life with Wyatt into a small box and placed the post card on top. With a bounce in her step she walked out the back door. The night was hot and humid, but then again, it was the middle of the summer in New Orleans so what did she expect? She walked down the stairs in her bare feet, made her way to the incinerator and dumped the box of pictures inside.

On her way back up the steps, she unwound the towel from her hair and gave it a good shake. Her long ebony locks clung to her face and neck, making them hotter than they already were. Once inside, she tightened the belt of her short silk robe and walked upstairs.

Her grandmother never spent much time in the house on Coliseum. She'd spent most of her time at the apartment on Bourbon Street. The house was opened up for the historical tours that were given every once in a while. It was a beautiful home and had been in the James family for nearly a century. Gabrielle had been staying in the flat until about a week ago. She'd decided to move shortly after witnessing a rather nasty mugging from the balcony of her grandmother's studio. Granted the house was only five minutes away, but still it was in a quiet neighbourhood, or as quiet as a neighbourhood could be that close to Party Central, USA.

Gabrielle walked over to the balcony, grabbing her hairbrush along the way. Leaning against the rail she listened to the sounds of soft jazz from the nearby, world-renowned street. It was comforting. Everything about New Orleans was comforting to her.

She finally understood what her grandmother meant. Sometimes a girl just needed her roots.

Sipping on a glass of sweet tea, Gabrielle went back inside and closed the balcony doors. She walked over to her grandmother's record player and pulled out one of the old vinyl records. Careful not to scratch it, she dropped it onto the spindle and lowered the needle. Lavern Baker poured from the speakers. She'd always been one of Missy's favourites.

Gabrielle lay down on her bed, staring up at the ceiling, and told herself that somehow she would acclimate herself to this heat. Slowly, she drifted off to the sounds of Lavern singing *Soul on Fire*.

As she was drifting off, just as her eyes had gotten heavy and she was about to succumb to sleep, Gabi felt a cold breeze. So grateful was she for the moment of relief from the intense heat that she didn't question the oddness of it. She didn't think of anything at all.

Until she felt it. The grazing coolness of ghostly fingertips, followed by another cool breeze. Her eyes popped open as she heard it - the whisper of a male voice in the wind.

"*Ellie...*"

## **Chapter 2**

"Oh, sod it all," he muttered.

Trey Fairfax took a white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped off his wire rimmed glasses and then the back of his neck. He could swear he heard a hiss from the contact of the cotton material against his sweat-drenched skin.

It was eight o'clock in the evening, for Christ sakes! Still, it felt as if he was sitting in the middle on an oven, cooking until the meat fell off his bloody bones. And to top it off, he stood in a sea of Bermuda shorts and tacky souvenir Bourbon Street t-shirts. Wide eyed idiots getting their cameras ready, certain that they were going to catch some odd thing in the night sky that they could go home and tell their gullible friends about. Trey did a quick head count, smirking at the group of gothic-looking teenagers holding their *supplies* ready to greet their *kindred spirits*, as he had heard many of them say in the past.

He hated this. Every damned moment of it.

Still, it paid the bills. And he had many of them. It had nearly caused his father to have a stroke to find out that after all the strings he had pulled to get his son into the best universities Trey had decided to major in paranormal studies.



*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

At the risk of sounding a bit too much like Fox Mulder from the X-files, *there was something out there*. Since Trey was a child he'd been able to feel it. He heard voices in the wind, saw shadows when no one else did. He could walk into a house and feel the cold spots. Only, he'd been never sure if it was a sixth sense or just a childhood fancy.

It wasn't until he was seventeen that his suspicions became belief and conviction. He'd been staying at a friend's house just outside of the dodgy part of Chelsea. His friend and his girlfriend were in the bedroom having a good snog when he heard it. Footsteps approaching the couch. He opened his eyes, but saw nothing. A cold breeze washed over him even though he knew the window was firmly shut. A chill rippled down his spine. However, Trey was not afraid. Not one bit. Instead of running away, he willed himself to relax and took a few deep breaths.

"Hello?" he whispered

He opened his eyes to find an older woman standing over him, looking at him curiously. Trey fought the urge to leap from the sofa as she reached out a hand to rest on his forehead. Just as she was about to touch him, his friend came out of his room.

"Got a condom, mate?"

The old woman disappeared.

Trey bit his bottom lip in an effort to not let loose the tirade-to-end-all-tirades. He found a condom in his wallet and handed it to his friend.

Once his friend left the room, Trey tried again to reach out to the old woman. He even turned off the lights hoping it would be less intimidating to the ghostly matron. Nothing.

"Sorry about that, ma'am. He's a bit crude, but at least he is trying to be safe," Trey whispered, doing his best to sound sincere, suddenly embarrassed about the fact that a grandmotherly ghostly figure might be watching his friend's shagging.

He lay there staring at the ceiling for hours before finally giving in to slumber. Just as he was drifting off, a cool breeze wafted through the air and the blanket hanging over the couch mysteriously moved over his body.

The next morning, Trey went to the Chelsea library and found all the information he could about the flat and its past residents. After about four hours he found it. His mate's flat had been refurbished after a fire. An elderly woman by the name of Henrietta Ashley had woken up in the midst of the flames and gone searching for her husband. What she didn't know was that her husband had fallen down the stairs trying to get to her and broken his neck. They had both perished in the fire.

*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

Was it instinct? Trey wasn't sure, but something told him the ghost was still there searching out her husband. He felt compelled to help the old lady who had been so kind to make sure he stayed warm throughout the night.

Trey went to his friend's house the next night, not knowing if he was doing the right thing.

He placed a copy of the news article about the fire and of the Ashleys' demise on the coffee table.

When his friend retired for the evening, Trey sat on the couch and waited for the flat to become completely still. When nothing creaked or moved about, Trey took a deep breath and spoke, "Mrs. Ashley, I've left something for you."

Shortly after that, he left.

The next morning, Trey called his friend and inquired about the news clipping.

"Nothing here, mate."

Trey smiled. Something had changed, shifted. He wasn't crazy. He knew that as sure as he knew what he was meant to do with his life.

"You're going to be a Ghostbuster like that God-awful American movie? Really Trey you come from a long line of Oxford-educated barristers. Think of your family," his father had pleaded.

His family? A mum who had left the bulk of his nurturing to a string of nannies, a father who was hardly ever around, and two older brothers with their noses stuck so far up in the air that they never saw their astonishingly expensive leather loafers. Trey didn't have much of a family. It was as if he was invisible.

Which was why when the Henrietta incident had occurred, he didn't want his father to know anything about it. It was too exciting; he felt too alive. He didn't want his father to take that away from him.

He let his father know that he was taking Psychology, which seemed all right to the man. It wasn't until a concerned acquaintance informed Trey's father that he was spending an incredible amount of time with the more bizarre students that Trey's father had found out he was failing all but his paranormal studies class. Trey knew it was time to make a stand.

He tried explaining to his father how he felt, but knew it was a lost cause when he watched the elder Fairfax's face contort in abject horror.

He'd quickly dismissed his son, telling him that he was going through a phase and that it would pass. It wasn't until he'd graduated and he told his father his intent to move to the States and get his masters in the subject that Owen Fairfax put his foot down.

"That is enough, Trevor; you will stop this foolishness at once."

Trey had flinched. He hated it when his father used his Christian name.

"You will follow the family tradition, or you will find yourself cut off."

Trey had felt empowered and free when he walked out of his father's office, but he knew the old man would be as good his word. The next morning, all of Trey's finances had been frozen.

His brother Alfred, had given him a bit of help with a stern lecture. "Really, Trevor, how are you ever going to make a living doing such things?"

But he was determined. He had moved to the States. Tulane University was one of the only colleges in the world where one could get a master's in paranormal psychology. With the help of student loans and work-study programs, Trey had completed his studies and set out to prove his family wrong.

However, unless one wanted to work for a two-bit psychic hustler or one of those *Geraldo Rivera-like, talk to the ghost of Al Capone-telly-specials*, there weren't many jobs to be had.

It was his dream to return to England and research some of the ancient castles. Maybe solve a few of their mysteries or see what secrets were hidden within. But for now, New Orleans was not too bad. It was a hot spot for paranormal activity. His beliefs were not ridiculed as much, because everyone around here seemed to see ghosts, demons, or vampires. Had any of them really seen them? One never knew.

As for women and dates, it seemed that every halfway interesting bird flew away when he revealed what he did for a living and what his life's passion was. The only girls he seemed to attract were wannabe witches and goth-like women obsessed with sampling his blood. He liked his blood exactly where it was - beneath his skin the way that God intended.

He was a Brit; born and bred, and this heat was unnatural to his now-tanned skin. For the first time in his life he wished he was blond instead of brown-haired, for no other reason than it deflected the sunlight. His head always felt like it was about to burst into flames. He hated the heat, hated his bloody job, and hated the fact that his book on *Paranormal Activities in the French Quarter* only had three paragraphs written. He hated that he could only make rent by taking on these bloody degrading tours.

He didn't mind the ghost tour so much, since it was a subject he was passionate about, but the vampire and demon tours could suck the life out of a man. His boss was a fair bloke, even if he did make him wear his wire-rimmed glasses while he worked because he said it made him more believable. He gathered his English accent made him sound a bit more distinguished than the rest of the guides, but were the Yanks that daft? Man throws on a pair of spectacles and suddenly he is a bit more intelligent?

They paid the bills however and the gratuity from each obnoxious tourist at least ensured he ate. He needed the extra money. His computer was on its last leg and if he had any hope at all of fixing it he had to take on the extra work, even if he hated every bleedin' minute of it, especially these novelty night tours.

Taking a head count again, he sighed, resigning himself to his fate.

"Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen," he announced with practiced bravado. His driver cued the cheesy horror movie music, smirking at his obvious irritation.

A flurry of flashes bounced off his glasses. Closing his eyes for a moment, he lowered his head and lifted the back of his black cape, causing it to billow in the air for a moment. Then he smiled to show off his ridiculous plastic fangs.

"Welcome to the only authentic Vampire Tour in New Orleans. I hope you all ate well before you came. The vamps love healthy, strapping humans."

The crowd laughed loudly, more flashes.

*Oh, sod it all.*

### **Chapter 3**

Gabrielle sat back in her seat and sighed. Her eyes were burning. What did she expect? She'd been hunched over her desk for the last five hours going over proofs with her grandmother's favorite photographer's loupe. She stretched for a moment and then walked over to the table, flicking a switch and allowing light to illuminate the small magnifying box. She rolled her chair over and began to pull out a small slide when she heard someone clearing their throat. Gabi swiveled in her chair, smiling.

Bootsie Bondurant crossed her arms and shook her head.

"You know, for a minute I thought I was looking at Missy."

Gabrielle smiled. Everyone always said that from behind they looked exactly alike. Same tall frame, long black tresses. However, the rest of Gabrielle's features favored her mother. Underneath the Louisiana sun her skin had taken on an olive tone whereas

most of the James women remained pale. Her eyes slanted a bit, reflecting her mother's distant Eurasian heritage, but the smoky, kelly green color of her iris's was from the James side of the family. She had the eyes of her father and grandfather. Missy had often told her that when Gabrielle was truly happy it was as if she was looking into Charlie's eyes once again.

"I get that a lot Boots, especially here. Maybe it was a mistake to take over Missy's gallery. I feel like I'm letting everyone down. I don't have Missy's talent."

Gabrielle reached over to her grandmother's favorite loupe and toyed with the rim.

"Missy hardly ever used this thing. She always said she could tell a good photo with one look. That the good ones drew her in and made her feel they should be hung somewhere."

Bootsie walked over to Gabi and hugged her from behind. She kissed the top of her head and sighed. "She opened this place for you, did you know that?"

Gabi's eyes widened and she shook her head slowly.

"Said she knew you would come to your senses eventually," Bootsie told her gently.

Gabrielle looked down at her grandmother's work desk, moved to tears by Bootsie's words.

Bootsie clapped her hands loudly. "I didn't come all the way here just so you can get all mopey with me. You, my dear, are taking this old broad to lunch."

Gabrielle laughed and stood up, stretching her arms. She ignored the ache in her neck and shoulders as she bent down to grab her purse. Arm in arm, the two women left the office and walked out into the large showroom.

The James Collection was a small, intimate gallery. It had a strong following and was often rented out for small cocktail gatherings and such. The collection itself was carefully chosen and well respected. Very few purchases were made throughout the year, but two or three were all they needed to keep the gallery running. That was because of Missy's innate ability to pick a winning photo. Now the task of choosing the works that would adorn the walls had been left up to the only living James descendant.

The whole thing was more than a little overwhelming.

One great upside to all of this was that because of the photographs the gallery had to stay at a consistently cool temperature. After four months the New Orleans humidity was still a bit hard for Gabi to bear.

On the way out, Gabrielle caught sight of a small photo of the James Townhouse. She walked over to it and stood looking at it curiously.

“Got to tell you, Gabi, Missy would be right proud that you moved home. And back into the family digs. Missy didn’t spend much time there. Regretted it, but she was always on the go. That house needs a lot of TLC. You got your work cut out for you.”

Gabi smiled again.

“Trust me, I know.” Gabrielle turned to Bootsie with the intention of asking her if she knew anything about the house itself. Instantly she felt foolish, for as eccentric as Bootsie was, disembodied voices seemed a bit of a far stretch.

Gabrielle reached out and brushed the edge of the frame with her fingers. A small smile crept across her face. “I think Missy knew I would come back eventually, Boots. I am a James, after all.”

“Yes darlin’ you are and don’t you forget it.”

Gabrielle cocked her eyebrow and then pointed up at the sign above the huge black marble counter.

“Couldn’t if I wanted to Boots.”

“Smart ass, just like your grandmother.”

Bootsie grabbed the girl by her hand and dragged her outside. It took Gabi a moment to catch her breath as the warm air filled her lungs. She felt as if she was in an inferno.

Why did it always have to be so hot?

Magazine Street was famous for its many antique shops and shops that dealt in reproductions of them. There were a few clothing shops, a famous bed and breakfast, an equally famous second-hand bookstore, and a small coffee shop or two. This had been a Monday afternoon tradition for Missy and Bootsie; to grab a few sandwiches and sweet tea from the Secret Gardens Tea Room and Café and then walk over to a nearby park bench and talk trash about the locals and tourists as they waved at them.

It was obviously a tradition that Bootsie fully expected Gabrielle to keep up with in Missy’s place. Not that she minded. Having Bootsie around was like having Missy around, and she didn’t feel so alone.

Bootsie plopped down, opening her container before reaching over to Gabi to do the same. The old lady still had a problem remembering that Gabi was twenty-five years old and more than capable of setting up her own lunch.

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Gabrielle took a look around watching all the activity around her. Tourists and street vendors, the smoke billowing in the air from the BBQ sandwich cart that only the tourists seemed to flock around. A woman standing happily in the sun waved at Bootsie. Bootsie gave her a tight smile.

“Lord, I cannot stand that woman,” Bootsie said underneath her breath. In a much louder voice she called a greeting to the other woman. “Afternoon, Helen! Just look at you. Soon there won’t be anything left of you.”

The lady smiled and waved back.

“That’s right, wave. Wave away all the hundreds of thousands of dollars your husband spends on liposuction.”

Gabi choked on her sandwich and hurried to drink some of her tea.

“Boots!” she exclaimed.

Bootsie gave her a wide smile. “I’m old. It’s what we do,” she explained taking a nibble at her sandwich. “We talk trash and butt our noses into everyone’s lives, especially old broads like me. I’m married to a lawyer from Savannah. Did you expect me not to be off-color? You know I’m the only hussy that could keep up with that grandmother of yours.”

Gabrielle laughed. “I know.” She leaned back relaxing against the hard bench.

“All right, so who are we going to talk trash about next?”

“I said that’s what old broads do. You’re too young to be harsh and cynical without coming off as a bitch. Which brings me to my next point. From what I understand, the only person anyone ever sees you with is yours truly. That ain’t right and it’s certainly not healthy.”

“Ah, this is the ‘butting your nose into everyone’s life’ thing isn’t it?”

Bootsie sipped on her sweet tea. “Told you, this is what us old broads do.”

Gabi laughed looking down at her feet. “My engagement only ended a few months ago. Give a girl some time.”

Bootsie snorted. “You know as well as your grandmother and I did, that wasn’t real. That was a truly spectacular girl trying to fit into a life that was beneath her. Round pegs don’t fit in square holes, Gabi.”

“Not all of us can be like you and Missy. The two of you found your soul mates. Do you know how rare that is? That’s the kind of stuff fairytales are made out of. Real life is complicated. People change.” Gabrielle sighed.

Bootsie gently grasped Gabrielle's hand. "Love ain't as complicated as you think, Gabi. You just have to learn to fall, and then have faith that someone will be there to catch you."

Gabi began to pick at her sandwich. "Maybe one day, Boots."

Bootsie Bondurant chuckled.

"You're lucky I don't have the energy I used to have, or else I would drag some poor fool to that exhibit you are hosting tonight."

Gabrielle gasped.

"Let me guess. No dress for tonight?"

Gabrielle shook her head so vigorously Bootsie was sure it was going to snap right off her neck.

"That's the other thing us old broads are good for. Shopping." Bootsie grabbed Gabi's hand and smiled.

"Let's go see Helen. Lord, I hate that woman!"

~

Gabrielle eyed her reflection critically as she stood in front of her grandmother's full length mirror. She chose to wear her long black hair down in spite of its weight and the annoying humidity that caused it to curl wildly. She kept breaking into a very un-ladylike sweat every time she attempted to do something with it. At least Bootsie had the foresight to insist Gabrielle choose the silk frock she was wearing at the moment. It matched the gray flecks in her eyes almost perfectly making Gabrielle feel a bit more alluring. It was strapless and clung to her body in all the right places before it fell to the floor loosely. All in all, she was quite happy with the image she was presenting.

Gabrielle walked over to her small bedside table gathering the various items she would need to put in her cocktail purse before slipping on a pair of sandals. She admired her small feet in the delicate shoes, grateful for the fact that she had gotten a pedicure. It was far too hot for any kind of hose. She honestly had no idea how the women down here seemed to never leave the house without lycra strangling their poor legs.

She looked into the freestanding antique mirror, examining her appearance one last time. So much was riding on tonight. Everyone would be watching her. Could she really fill her grandmother's shoes?



"All right Gabs, you better make this look good," she muttered to herself, trying to calm her rising anxiety.

Suddenly, she felt the same cool breeze she had felt the night before. She jumped as a loud snap reverberated around the room. Jerking her head toward the vanity Gabrielle watched as a small dust cloud appeared and then dispersed in the air. She stood frozen to the spot staring at a small hidden drawer that had popped open.

Gabrielle blinked twice in disbelief. Her heart began to pound in her chest. She took a deep breath, slowly walking over to the antique table. Something inside the hidden compartment seemed to glitter and glow. She looked around the room again trying to assess if she had somehow caused the drawer to open by something she'd done while standing at the mirror. However, nothing indicated such a thing. The temperature of the room continued to cause a chill to roll down Gabrielle's spine.

Her instinct told her to run, get out of the room, get out of the house. However, she continued to draw closer as if the object within was calling to her.

Tilting her head to one side in confusion, she stepped forward and peered into the tiny compartment. She'd never suspected one was hidden there in the carved rose molding. Inside nestled a small dusty black bag slightly open, whatever was within teasing her with its glint. Picking it up, she opened the drawstring and held it upside down to allow the contents to spill into her palm.

She gasped and quickly sat down, eyes wide as she stared at the delicate diamond choker with its square-cut emerald settled in the center. The necklace sparkled brightly, no signs of dust or tarnish marring it. Placing the choker on the table she held up a pair of matching earrings, each a row of dangling diamonds with more square-cut emeralds at the bottom.

Moving almost instinctively, she placed the earrings in her ears and then wrapped the necklace around her neck. Her eyes widened at the sight of herself in the mirror. The jewelry seemed to transform her from a nervous insecure girl to a sophisticated, self-confident, powerful woman.

She continued to stare into the mirror for another moment before her eyes drifted up. A scream caught in her throat when she saw a dark haired man standing behind her, his large hands moving towards her bare shoulders. With a frightened cry, Gabrielle turned to lash out at him.

No one was there.

She stood up hastily and grabbed her purse. Practically tripping on the hem of her dress, she bolted out the door down the stairs. Once inside in the relative safety of her car, she did her best to calm down.

"It's just nerves," she muttered, putting the key in the ignition with shaky hands.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, she started the engine and threw the car into reverse. She pulled out of the driveway, stopping for a moment to look up at her bedroom window. Seeing nothing there, she put the car in drive and drove calmly down the dark street.

"Just nerves," she repeated

## Chapter 4

Trey pulled at the collar of his starched black dress shirt. He didn't even know why he was going to this bloody event. *A favor to a friend, right?* Would he even call Joshua a friend? He'd been his roommate for most of his years at Tulane, but he was a bit of a bastard. Never did his own papers, cocky, and seemed to thrive on teasing the shit out of Trey at every turn. Still, he'd got him the job at his father's tour company, so Trey felt obliged.

He usually avoided parties like this. It reminded him too much of the parties his parents had made him go to back home. A room full of people with their noses in the air talking about everything under the sun, trying in vain not to be the pseudo intellectuals they were. All of it grated on his nerves. Joshua, on the other hand, lived for shit like this. Anything to distance himself from the stock he came from. It was only by accident that Trey had found out his room mate was the son of the man who ran the most popular novelty tour company in all of New Orleans. Sometimes Trey thought he'd got him the job just to shut him up.

"So we just make an appearance and go right?" Trey asked.

Joshua laughed. An event like this could make or break the career of the young lawyer.

"What, it's a good night for ghost sightings? Come on Trey, relax. My boss's wife is a good friend of the gallery owner. Besides, I've been dying to meet the elusive Gabrielle James. Her grandmother was a Pulitzer Prize winning photographer."

"As you have said to me about seven times now."

Joshua pulled into a parking space. "Famous and wealthy. Gabrielle's family is well respected here. Perfect wife for a lawyer don't you think?" he said, winking.

Trey laughed shaking his head. "You haven't even met the chit and you're already sending out wedding invitations. What if she looks like a dog?"

Joshua shrugged. "I guess we will have to wait and see."

When they entered the gallery, it was all Trey could do not to cry with relief. The place was cooled to Icelandic temperatures. He took a look around. Free champagne, decent food, comfy temperature. He may never bloody well leave.

Taking a flute of champagne, he looked around the room. The collection left him feeling more than a little impressed. No obscure pictures on these walls. Every piece had a story, made a statement. There were names he recognized as well as a few he had never heard of before, but was sure he would in the future. Some were tasteful with a touch of elegance, some were a bit more gritty and harsh, but all incited emotions within him.

A woman passed by holding a tray of cheese and crackers. Trey took a few and stood munching idly in front of a picture of an older woman laughing. The photographer had managed to capture the very essence of her joy. He read the title. "Sharing Charlie." Odd title.

"Trey!" he heard.

Trey did his best not to roll his eyes as he stuffed a cheese cube into his mouth and turned around. Joshua walked up to him accompanied by an older couple.

"Bootsie, Sam; this is my friend, Trey Fairfax. Trey, this is my boss Sam Bondurant and his ravishing wife, Bootsie. Trey is an old friend of mine from Tulane. He comes from a family of lawyers as well."

Bootsie smiled at the young man. "Well, I am sure you have other redeeming qualities that I won't hold against you," she said playfully hitting Sam on his arm.

Sam smiled down at his wife and kissed her cheek. "You married, Trey?" his rich accent causing him to draw out the vowel in Trey's name.

"No, sir," he said swallowing his cheese.

"Well good for you. You still know what joy and bliss truly mean." Bootsie pushed her husband, acting as if she was perfectly indignant.

Trey laughed. It was refreshing to see people in the upper echelon of society act so normal.

Bootsie turned back to the two younger men.

"Tell me, boys, what do you think of the exhibit so far?"

"Bootsie Bondurant, will you please stop asking everyone that question? I swear she has hounded everyone for their opinion. Everyone from the critic here reviewing for The

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Times-Picayune to the little lady serving hors d'oeuvre. You would think this was her exhibit," Sam teased.

Bootsie pouted at him until her attention was drawn to the door. Instantly her eyes lit up.

"Excuse me, gentleman."

Sam shared a smile with the two younger men. "Missy James was our oldest and dearest friend. This place means a lot to her and so does Gabrielle," he explained. "I must ask you to excuse me as well."

Trey watched a small crowd gather around a lone figure who had barely made it across the threshold before Bootsie smothered her in a delighted embrace. Sam followed suit, hovering over her a bit.

When Joshua let out a small whistle, Trey looked up. His mouth suddenly went dry and the delicate glass flute slipped from his hand. He caught it before it hit the floor, thanking whatever higher power was up there watching for the fact that the glass was empty. How bloody embarrassing would that have been?

He couldn't be held responsible for his actions, however. How could he? Look at her. His cheeks reddened for a moment when he realized he was openly gawking. She was enthralling: long ebony hair, wide, sparkling eyes. Normally Trey hated the trappings of society, but the way she looked in her elegant dress... The way it made the gray in her eyes sparkle. The champagne must have gone to his head, because there was no way she was that bloody gorgeous.

"Get a load of the ice around her neck," Joshua hissed.

Trey leaned against the wall, depositing the empty glass on a tray that floated by.

"If the only thing you can see is her damn necklace than you need a bloody eye exam," Trey said through clenched teeth.

Joshua shrugged his shoulders. "She's a bit of a looker. I've seen better."

"Where?" Trey snorted in disbelief. He tried his best to look away and found it impossible. His eyes refused to leave the beauty walking around the room, greeting everyone as she passed.

Joshua looked up at his friend. "Looks like someone is smitten! Hands off, buddy, she's mine."

Trey knew Joshua must be saying something, but he really wasn't listening. He was too entranced. He watched Gabrielle shake hands with a few people and then grab a glass of champagne while laughing at something Bootsie said. She sipped her champagne,

her palm nervously pressed to her stomach as if she was trying to calm herself. Putting her glass down, she turned around and looked right into Trey's eyes.

~

Gabrielle was positive she would never make it through the door. Something would happen. She would trip and fall, or be greeted by a chorus of boos over her astonishingly bad taste in what was being exhibited.

But instead they applauded her. Several people congratulated her, making flattering comparisons between her and her grandmother. The man at The Times-Picayune even told her she had an excellent eye for talent.

Everything was going wonderfully. On top of all that she saw a handsome man out of the corner of her eye, watching her, transfixed, following her every move. Every time she tried to get a good look at him, someone else came up to her to talk to her. Gabi smiled and answered their questions as patiently as she could, trying in vain to get a better glimpse of the man who had his eyes trained on her. She wasn't quite sure what it was about him, but something drew her attention.

Bootsie grabbed her by her elbow. "Run, I'll cause a distraction. Damned hoity toity vultures," she mumbled.

Gabrielle laughed, making her way through the crowd.

Yet another person stopped her. Mr. Anderson was an old friend of Missy's. "Missy would have been so very proud."

Gabrielle's eyes began to tear up at the mention of her grandmother's name. Her presence seemed to be everywhere, and while she had expected it, she was still feeling emotional.

Slowly making her way through the crowd, she finished off a second glass of champagne. She realized belatedly that she was at last alone; no crowds of people hovering over her. No questions from adoring fans about her grandmother's work. Just her, by herself, with none of the strict, social impediments. She was finally free to take a closer look at her intriguing observer. She put her glass down and turned to find him.

He had heard all the clichés before about two people seeing each other across a crowded room, their eyes locking for that one perfect moment. Hearts pounding, Puccini symphonies in their heads. A dizzy, dancing feeling, and all that rubbish. It wasn't exactly like that, but it came bloody well close. The sound in the room actually faded away when her eyes locked with his. His knees turned to jelly as she graced him with a small smile, the faintest curve of her crimson lips. He bowed his head lightly and took a deep breath, preparing himself to make an approach.

Taking that first step, the magical moment was broken by the loud voice of his friend.

“Isn’t that right, Trey? You’re a real live Ghostbuster.”

Gabrielle watched the man across the room squeeze his eyes shut tightly and take a labored breath. Something had gotten to him. He turned around to face the group and they erupted into laughter at a comment that he made. She watched his body stiffen as they laughed. Clearly, whatever they found amusing was something that was causing the man with the bluest eyes she had ever seen serious discomfort.

She tried to look casual as she quietly made her way over to hear what was going on.

“Paranormal Psychology is a field that has never been taken seriously. However, it does extend beyond just ‘ghostbusting’ as Joshua so astutely put it.”

Gabrielle’s heart jumped as she stood almost directly behind him. British. His refined accent actually sent delicious chills down her spine.

“Yes, they also hunt for aliens and Big Foot.” The mouthy gentleman standing next to him wasn’t bothering to hide his mirth.

“You do things like that too, Mr. Fairfax?” a lady inquired, unable to hide the amusement in her voice.

“No, ma’am I don’t.”

The man standing next to him hit him on his shoulders. “It’s nothing but hunting ghosts for my buddy, here.”

Gabrielle frowned, gazing unseeingly up at a picture. The whole scene made her stomach turn. Poor guy. At the same time, it instantly reminded her of her supposed supernatural experience just an hour ago. Feeling as if she could use a breath of fresh air, she walked away.

*Rugby*, Trey thought.

Joshua in a scrummage with the biggest and nastiest blokes that Trey could visualize. Yes, that would do quite nicely. Why had he done this to him? He must have seen Gabrielle James looking at him. Cut down the competition, knock him out of play. It was an old trick, Trey had thought he was doing fine, trying to hold his hostility and anger. He was not even really embarrassed until he saw her walk over.

Oh, bollocks.

She was standing right behind him as he lamely tried to justify his choice of profession to the skeptical crowd. His heart pounded. If he took one small step back he would be

close enough to touch her, feel her hair against the back of his dress shirt. Inhale her scent, reach out and feel her satiny skin. Just a small step, but he couldn't. The Big Foot comment did him in. He felt a slight breeze as she walked away.

Finally, he extricated himself from the group. Sighing with relief, he calculated just how long it would be before he could turn tail and run. He found himself standing in front of a picture. A familiar one. A man with his hand pressed against the Berlin wall, weeping as a child's hand reached through the tiny hole he had just created with the mallet that hung limply in his hands. It was an image seen by everyone around the world. He looked down at the photographer's name.

Missy James.

Taking a closer look, his eyes widened.

"It's the original," a melodic voice said behind him.

Trey turned and found himself standing face to face with his enchantress.

*Open your mouth and say something, you git!* he raged at himself.

Oblivious to his plight, the beautiful lady glided up to the picture.

"She hung upside down to get this shot. Can you believe she didn't like it? Said the lighting was off," she said wistfully. She turned to him and smiled before extending one small, perfectly manicured hand. "Gabrielle James. Missy was my grandmother."

"Forgive me, I didn't know, until just now, that she took this picture, although I have seen it many times," Trey confessed. If she was going to write him off for not knowing such a widely known fact in this crowd, she may as well do it now, before he had time to actually formulate a plan to sneak back to Tulane to take a photography class to impress the girl in front of him. Subterfuge was never a good thing in cases like this.

Gabrielle laughed. "It's actually quite refreshing. When your grandmother is world renowned, life can be very difficult." She walked over to the photo he was admiring earlier.

"This is Missy."

"Yes. *Sharing Charlie*. I was looking at it before. She looks very happy. The photographer has a good eye," he said.

"The photographer is flattered by your compliment," Gabrielle said blushing madly.

Trey's eyes widened. "You shot this?" he asked, his voice tinged with admiration.

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“Missy was telling me the story of how she met my grandfather, Charlie. I took the shot just as she got to the part about how he fell into a puddle of mud while trying to save her from the same fate. She always said it was her favorite picture of herself.”

“Thus the title. Sharing Charlie,” Trey finished for her.

She nodded slowly finding herself getting lost in his eyes again.

Trey smiled and then gasped, feeling like a total prat. “How rude of me! My name is Trey, Trey...”

“Fairfax. I caught a little of that earlier discussion.”

Trey looked down, suddenly embarrassed.

“You know why they do that, don’t you?” Gabrielle said.

He looked up at her, still wishing desperately for the stylish marble floor to open up and swallow him.

“It’s because secretly they are all fascinated, but just too scared to admit it. Everyone thinks they’ve seen a ghost, but no one will come out right and say it.”

“Still, it must seem silly to a lot of people,” Trey said.

“No. Silly is a course on how to administer collagen injections, and I bet most of the women standing in that circle helped many a technician pay off that part of their student loans.”

She smiled up at him. His blue eyes widened in shock, then awe. Finally, they seemed to darken for just a moment in a way that made Gabrielle’s heart pound.

Trey was never the aggressive sort. It was something his father had browbeat him about more often than not. He was easy going for the most part. It was that something about her again, the way her eyes danced, her quick wit, the way her shiny crimson lips quivered a bit when she spoke of her grandmother. It all served to make him bold.

He took a step forward, taking her soft hand in his.

“Would you care to dance with me?” he asked.

It sounded to Gabrielle like more of a demand. No. A need. She swallowed hard, her breath catching in her throat. She stepped into his arms, looked up in his eyes, and whispered, “More than anything.”



## Chapter 5

Soft hands.

She had the softest hands he'd ever held. Everything about her made him feel as if he was drunk, high, every imaginable mind-altering state he had ever been in. Everything about her felt right, more true and real than anything in this world. The way her hand clutched to his. Walking so close that their arms were pressed completely against the other's. His eyes locked with hers. People moved out of their way wordlessly as they made their way to the dance floor. He stopped and turned to face her. Without a moment's hesitation she stepped completely into him, pressing her body against his. He wrapped his arms around her, resting them on the small of her back and gently rubbing his fingers against the soft gray silk. He bit his lip, fighting the urge to ask the ponciest of questions - *do you believe in fate?*

Gabrielle smiled, causing him to take a sharp, labored breath. He pressed his cheek to hers, closing his eyes in an effort to regain his senses. She smelled like heaven.

"What's on your mind, Mr. Fairfax?" she whispered into his ear.

Trey pulled back a bit, gazing into her eyes.

"I can say with all conviction, Ms. James, that I'm at a complete loss for words," he said with a soft laugh.

"You seemed seriously amused."

"No. I just feel like a bit of a nancy-boy ponce. You aren't quite what I expected." Trey flinched. *Good show, mate, now she thinks you're a complete idiot!*

Suddenly, the soft music playing in the background changed. Gabrielle's eyes widened with pleased surprise.

Trey tilted his head, listening to the song that filled the air around them with its distinctive bluesy notes. It was familiar to him, but he couldn't put his finger on the song's title or the artist.

"Lavern Baker, *Soul of Fire*," Gabrielle said quietly.

Trey nodded, watching as her green eyes became slightly misty.

"It was my grandmother's favorite. The first time she ever danced with my grandfather, it was to this song. It was also their wedding song," she said quietly.

Trey tried to tell himself not to read too much into this. Not to be so swept away by her beauty, her scent, and the song that seemed to have such significance to her, but the moment seemed completely magical.

He tried to think of anything. His schedule at work for the next week, how much money he had in his bank account, how much he hated the shirt he was wearing. Anything to keep him from asking the one question that raced through his mind.

He could not help but think it. It swirled around in his head, taunting and teasing him. He had to know. He had to ask. How could one be so certain that a feeling was shared by two people, yet feel so alone at the same time?

Gabrielle searched his face for a moment and then took a deep breath. She pressed her cheek against his once again and whispered in his ear, "Do you believe in fate, Mr. Fairfax?"

*Oh, bollocks.*

Trey opened his mouth to answer her question but nothing came out. His voice tangled in his throat. His vocal cords seemed temporarily severed. Doing the only thing he could in answer to her question, he leaned forward, slowly lowering his lips to hers. He watched as she closed her eyes in anticipation.

He swallowed hard and moistened his lips, telling himself that he was about to deliver the kiss of his life to the woman who had turned his entire world on its ear in the span of a short dance.

Suddenly, he felt a tap on his shoulder. He told himself to ignore it, but his body reacted, jerking backwards.

Gabrielle eyes snapped open and she took a startled step back.

The intruder took advantage of the space created between Gabrielle and Trey. He stepped in between them, sweeping Gabrielle in his arms.

"Shouldn't be so greedy, Trey. Give everyone a chance to dance with our beautiful hostess," Joshua said with a wink, whisking Gabrielle across the dance floor and away from him.

Trey stood there in complete disbelief as his long-time rival and supposed friend did his best to charm Gabrielle. He looked down, his arms suddenly feeling painfully empty.

Trey turned and walked from the dance floor. It was just a dance, he told himself, and the way she kept searching him out gave him complete confidence that she ached for the answer to her question. He wasn't a patient man, never had been, but for this he would bide his time and stand in the corner. He could give Joshua his moment.

He grabbed another flute of champagne and sipped it, watching her float across the floor, so entranced by the sight of her that he did not even notice when Sam Bondurant walked up to him.

“Mr. Fairfax,” he greeted without preamble. “While you were dominating Gabrielle’s attention, Joshua and I were having a very interesting conversation.”

Trey felt a sick, sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. This couldn’t be good.

“I hope you know, Mr. Fairfax, that my wife and I treasure Gabrielle as the daughter we were never fortunate enough to have. She was the light of Missy’s life and we are more than aware how much of a prize she is both physically and financially. Tell me, Mr. Fairfax, how much money does a Ghostbuster make these days?” Sam asked as he smiled at Gabrielle.

“Mr. Bondurant, I am not after Gabrielle’s money,” Trey said tightly.

Sam laughed. “Well, that’s a relief. Although there’s still some concern that one might go after her for her more obvious attributes. She’s hardly what you young people call ‘a dog’ right?”

Trey shut his eyes with a faint groan. ‘*Fuck!*’ he screamed in his head. Why had he made that comment to the one human being that would find a way to use it against him?

Sam stepped in front of Trey. “I think it would be best for you to leave, Mr. Fairfax. I haven’t had a chance to share that conversation with my wife yet. And trust me, you don’t want to see her claws come out.”

Trey placed his glass on a nearby table. He watched Joshua whisper something into Gabrielle’s ear that caused her eyes to darken for just a moment. She looked around seeking out Trey. He could only imagine what Joshua might have said to her. Trey couldn’t bear to see the look of betrayal in her eyes. He couldn’t even begin to think of the excuses he would have to make for Joshua’s stories. Not with Sam Bondurant standing right there ready to tear him apart. He turned to go, practically running out of the room.

*Fuck Joshua!* He could find his own way home. Trey needed to get to a bar and drown his sorrows in some really bad bourbon. Forget the way she looked, the way she smelled, and how she had felt in his arms. Forget that for a moment he had believed in fate.

~

Gabrielle’s cheeks ached from the plastic smile plastered across her face. She caught Trey walking out the door, wondering what had caused him to leave so abruptly.

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Between Dreams and Darkness

Joshua, the man who'd interrupted one of the best moments of her life, whispered in her ear that Trey would probably have to make it an early night due to prior commitments. Prior commitments?

"However, some of us did not make other plans for the evening." He winked.

Oh, a date. Of course. Of course someone like Trey had a date. If he undid her with a single look, then his black book probably resembled the white pages.

Gabrielle successfully shooed away the very annoying Joshua, doing her best not to look as forlorn as she felt.

"What's got you at sixes and sevens, Gabi?" Bootsie asked.

Gabi knew better than tried to hide how she felt from Bootsie. "Just a bit disappointed."

Bootsie laughed. "Why, because my silly twit of a husband drove away that perfectly delicious looking fella?"

Gabrielle turned with a frown, giving Bootsie her full attention. "What do you mean?"

"That Joshua character fed my husband a line of bullshit a mile long. Sam went all nutty protective. You know how he can get."

Gabrielle sighed. "He had a date."

"Maybe so, maybe not. I could always find out."

Gabrielle laughed.

"It's all right, Boots. Maybe it was a sign or something. Anyway, I'm tuckered. I think I will call it a night."

Bootsie smiled touching her cheek. "And it was a helluva night, Gabs. Missy would have been very proud."

Gabrielle could not help but smile. "Yes, she would."

~

Gabrielle had changed into her night gown and was brushing her hair before the memory of her ghostly experience came rushing back. By that time, she was too exhausted and too disappointed to really care.

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She sat quietly, brushing out her long black hair. It was just a dance, but she felt more disappointment at the fact that it was interrupted than she had the day she received that postcard from Wyatt.

Placing her silver brush on the antique vanity, she looked in the mirror at the spot where her ghostly intruder had appeared. Nothing. No chills. No creepy feeling. She stood and went over to the beat-up record player and placed the needle on the vinyl. Her grandparent's song. The song she had danced to with Trey. Covering her face with her hands, she groaned.

"Do you believe in fate? What the hell was I thinking?" she muttered.

Gabrielle walked over to her bed and plopped down, staring up at the ceiling.

"All right, whatever you are! I'm very tired, so play your reindeer games some other night," she demanded, turning down her bed. It wasn't long before she drifted into an exhausted slumber.

How much time had passed she had no idea. All she knew was that it was hot. Hot and sticky. She was not quite asleep, but still not awake enough to bother with walking downstairs to turn on the air conditioning. She mentally kicked herself for not doing it before. Rolling onto her side, she prayed to whoever would listen that she would just pass out again.

Just as she was falling back to sleep, she felt a cool breeze again. She tried to move but couldn't, the icy sensation gave her too much relief.

"*Ellie.*" It was the faintest whisper in the humid air of the bedroom.

Before she could open her eyes, she felt something brush against the back of her neck, cool fingertips playing in her hair. She moaned, trying to move again but to no avail. Something slid behind her, dipping the bed and engulfing her in a cold embrace. Gabrielle didn't know what was happening; her body was so overheated that all she could feel from the icy sensation was relief. The ghostly fingertips that were stroking her hair skimmed down her neck.

Her eyes flew open in shock as soft, cool kisses rained down the back of her neck. What felt like a strong arm wrapped around her body, holding her against another.

"*So beautiful,*" the airy, but definitely male, voice whispered.

She knew she should try to break free. Needed to get away and run out into the night. But her body refused to move. Gabrielle opened her mouth to scream, but before she could get a sound out, she felt a cool hand cover it. Frantically, she looked down trying to see what was causing her immobility, but there was nothing there. Just the impression of a hand against her mouth. She felt her hair being pulled back again and

her eyes rolled back as the kisses against her neck became harder and more passionate.

Before she knew it, she was pushing herself back against the invisible form, completely at its mercy.

She gasped as a hand palmed her breast, kneading it with a firm touch. She felt soft kisses on her shoulders as a voice whispered, *"Give in to me."*

Gabrielle whimpered as the hand trailed down her stomach and pulled her nightgown up. She hissed as the cool digits slid into her core, gently caressing her warmth. Spreading her wet folds, the ghostly fingers unerringly found the throbbing nubbin of her clitoris and stroked and pinched it expertly.

Finally, the other hand released its hold on her mouth. Gabrielle flung her head back, keening in ecstasy. All logic and reason left her as she felt herself nearing her release.

"Oh, God!" she cried out, her voice harsh in the stillness.

*"Let go,"* the voice commanded.

The hand that had covered her mouth found its way to her breasts, tweaking and tugging the rosy peaks through the thin silk material of her gown.

She bit her bottom lip, her body shamelessly riding the hand working her clit.

She screamed as the cool digits entered her. Suddenly she was on her back, her hips rising demandingly into the air as her head thrashed back and forth. A scream ripped from her as she found her release.

And then the icy coolness was gone.

Panting and wild-eyed with terror, she shot up in her bed, frantically looking around the room. The air around her was humid once more.

She looked down, the evidence of her orgasm apparent. She squeezed her eyes closed as she hugged her knees. Rocking back and forth, she began to mutter to herself, "This can't be real, it's just a dream, just a dream..."

## **Chapter 6**

A week had passed since the night of the exhibit. Everywhere Trey turned, he saw her. Walking down the street, sitting in a café. He even thought he saw her sitting on one of his tour buses. It wasn't her, though. It never was. Just flights of fancy and daydreams.

He often thought about going down to the gallery and pretending he was there just to browse or buy something. That it was a likely excuse. Even if he saved for a bloody year, he could never afford anything hanging on those walls. When he finally got the nerve to just go down there and talk to her, Joshua's father announced that his son had started dating a girl he'd met the night of the gallery reception.

Just like that, his hopes were dashed.

Trey needed to go to a bar. Any bar. He had enough tips in his pocket from the extra tours he'd picked up to get sufficiently sloshed. Maybe this time the cheap bourbon he slammed down his throat would permanently erase her from his memory.

Trey decided he would go home and grab a shower. He needed to cool down from this maddening heat and then find some watering hole to drown his pathetic sorrows in. Honestly, it was just a moment out of time. Just a dance, but here he was acting like the world was ending. His heart actually ached for a girl who had spent maybe three minutes in his arms. All right... three minutes and three seconds. He had even downloaded the song off the bloody internet. Yeah, he was pathetic.

He walked into his rather modest flat near the dodgy part of the Lower Garden District and immediately saw the blinking red light.

At first he was going to ignore it, but he decided it might be important. After listening to it, he groaned.

He hated when Professor Mann called. It always unsettled him. He greatly admired the man, but he could be fanatical. He saw paranormal activity everywhere. A part of Trey thought he was one of those people who believed those damned Men in Black lurked in every corner, but he was a good man and Trey had learned a lot from him. Every once in a while he would call Trey to ask him to consult on a sighting. Not once had his investigations been validated. Mostly older widows needing company and making up stories or, in some cases, truly deranged individuals who believed they were part of some paranormal experience.

Still, he went every time. What if once, just once, a sighting was genuine? It could be the start of his book and give him the credibility he needed.

After a shower and a change of clothes, he walked down to a posh area of the French Quarter. He immediately rolled his eyes. Old widow. Lonely. He was so going to regret this. The only thing he was thankful for at this point was that he hadn't brought any of his equipment. The bag itself weighed a bloody ton. He came only armed with a notepad and pencil, ready to take notes and have tea, mint juleps, or whatever else the lonely widow might want to share.

Finding the address Professor Mann had given him, Trey bounded up the steep front steps of the residence of Miss Camille Monroe. Taking a deep breath, he pressed the

doorbell, chuckling as he listened to the snippet of the Dixieland tune that lingered in the air in the form of chimes. At least the old bint had a sense of humor.

He waited, listening to the door's creaky locks twist open. He plastered on a fake smile, ready to indulge poor widow Monroe.

His eyes widened in shock and the woman gasped.

"Bloody Hell!" he muttered. "Ms. James?"

This was just perfect; Gabrielle thought, her face turning beet red. Since the night of the party she had purposely stayed away from the townhouse, choosing to sleep at her grandmother's studio once more. The problem was that even there she did not feel safe or sane at this point. It was beyond insane to think what had happened to her had actually happened. Then, one sleepless night while checking the gallery e-mail list, she found herself looking up ghost stories and paranormal occurrences.

Some of them she knew better than to take seriously. Others seemed to be genuine. Pictures and other things that seemed authentic. Other pictures that were clearly doctored or could be explained away, especially by someone like her, someone with serious skills in the field of photography.

After clicking on a series of hyperlinks she found herself at the webpage of Tulane University, right here in New Orleans. She read an article by a Professor Mann on paranormal manifestations and before she knew it she found herself dialing his number. He was intrigued to say the least. Almost too intrigued for Gabrielle's taste. He eagerly offered to send an associate for a formal interview.

She immediately regretted calling, so much in fact that she gave him a false name.

In spite of herself, her thoughts were never far from Trey. This was his area of expertise. She should just find a way to contact him, but how desperate and made up would that look?

*'Hi! Remember me? I'm the silly woman you danced with at the gallery that asked you that cheesy question. Anyway, I think there's a ghost in my house... What? No! Of course I'm not making it up as an excuse to see you. Are you free for dinner?'*

She decided this was her best course of action, although she still wished she could see him.

Well, apparently someone up there chose that particular moment to hear her.

She could just die.

Gabrielle opened the door wider, trying to will away the red in her cheeks.



“He-hello, Mr. Fairfax. Won’t you please come in?” she stammered.

Trey walked into the town house. Every light was on, even though it was barely dark. The back door was wide open.

“You’re back door is open. You may want to close it. Air conditioning bills and all?” Trey said trying to lighten the mood.

Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders. “I... Well, actually I was waiting outside. The truth of the matter is that I haven’t been back here since...”

Gabrielle took a deep breath, trying to control her rising panic. Stealing a look at him, she chuckled. “I gather you’ve come to realize that there is no Camille Monroe. It was my mother’s name combined with Missy’s maiden name. I just felt silly calling and... Well, I mean it is a bit off-color, don’t you think?”

Instantly, Gabrielle regretted her words remembering this was the man’s profession.

“I’m not saying what you do is a farce, it’s just that...” Gabrielle shut her eyes in frustration, trying to find a way to explain herself.

If it was anyone else, Trey might have been offended, but he wasn’t. Honestly, the woman was just too bloody adorable. Standing there, her face as red as the tiny tank top she wore, stumbling and stammering. It was all he could do not to laugh, not at her embarrassment but with complete glee. Granted, a thousand questions raced in his mind, but who the hell cared? She was here with him.

Trey put both his hands up, trying to give her a reassuring smile. “It’s alright. Why don’t we have a seat and you can tell me what’s going on.” He began to pull out his notepad before he noticed the change in her body language.

She immediately stiffened. Her eyes darted all around the room and then up the stairs. Her face turned completely white. The radical change in her body temperature must have been too much for her since she swayed a bit. Trey grabbed her, preventing her from falling. She was shaking like a leaf!

“I’m so sorry,” she gasped softly.

Trey continued to hold her, his eyes searching hers as they filled with tears. Never in his life did he have a stronger urged to protect and comfort a single creature.

She trembled vulnerably in his arms trying her bloody damndest to be brave.

“You’re terrified,” he stated with a mixture of shock and concern.

"I...I don't think I can talk about this. Not here." she replied her voice getting fainter by the second.

Trey looked around the room. Of course every single light in the house was on. She'd stated previously that she was waiting outside. He'd been so caught up in seeing her again he nearly forgot she'd placed the call for a reason. Whatever had happened to her, whatever put her in such a state of turmoil, must have occurred here.

Trey watched a stray lock of her ebony hair fall forward onto her face. Taking it and gently tucking it behind her ear, he smiled. "No worries. Let's go somewhere else and see if we can get to the bottom of this."

Gabrielle smiled and released the breath she was unconsciously holding as he wrapped a protective arm around her and began to walk her out the door. "I'll drive," he offered.

"Thank you."

Pulling her closer to him, he held onto her tightly. He had no idea what was going on, and as much as he worried about her, a part of him felt guilty. Here she was trembling in his arms and all he could do was thank the stars above that he had bothered to check his messages.

~

Court Of Two Sisters was a restaurant in the French Quarter named after two sisters by the name of Emma and Bertha Camors who ran a curio shop in the Quarter. Some of the most prestigious people in New Orleans were their clients. They were admired and revered for their close and loving relationship. They were so close, in fact, that they died within two months of each other and had arranged to be buried next to each other in St Louis Cemetery #3. Their story, like many others, added to the mystery of New Orleans. The restaurant was famous for its daily jazz brunch and its intimate setting. In the back was a quiet outdoor patio renowned for being a place for the most romantic of dates.

Another time perhaps, and under less strained circumstances, Trey could have thought of a million different ways to use all this to his advantage, however, now all he could do was watch Gabrielle James with a look of deep concern. They had been seated at their table for a good twenty minutes and still she was having trouble composing herself.

Taking a sip of her wine, she began to tell Trey the events of the last two weeks. First, the whispered name in the air, the finding of the necklace and earrings, the ghostly appearance in her mirror, and finally her nocturnal visit. She wanted to tell him all that had occurred that night but she couldn't work up the nerve. It was too humiliating and shameful. She gave him a brief synopsis, carefully omitting the more explicit details.

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She watched Trey carefully as he scribbled a few notes here and there. He asked questions, mindful about keeping his voice low. She couldn't help but smile at how considerate he was being.

"You must have a lot of experience in these interviews," Gabi said.

He looked up, tilting his head to the side. "Why do you say that?"

She pointed at his note pad. "You're very discreet. Your questions are very vague, almost as if you are trying to keep the subject obscure. You know, in case anyone might be listening. It's very nice of you. If people knew what we were talking about they might think I'm a few monkeys short of a barrel."

Trey leaned back giving her the oddest of looks.

"It's an Americanism. Means they would think I was crazy."

Trey laughed. "I know that, pet, I just never got that saying. It's a strange one you have to admit."

Gabi bit her bottom lip. Pet. She liked that. She shrugged taking another sip of her wine.

"I guess you are right, but then again, this whole conversation is odd, don't you think? I mean, it's not exactly the way I envisioned our next meeting."

Trey smiled not catching her slip up at first.

Next meeting?

His pen stopped. Trey closed his notebook, completely intrigued. "You were envisioning a next meeting?"

Gabi looked down. "This keeps getting better by the second." She muttered.

Trey reached for one of her hands. Still soft. "Ms. James, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hoping to see you again. And you're right, this isn't what I had in mind when I thought about seeing you again, either. Before you ask; yes, I have been thinking about it. Far too much, in fact."

Trey released her hand and cleared his throat. "How is Joshua?" he asked, trying to find something to zap him back into reality.

"Joshua?" she questioned with a puzzled frown.

"Yes, I heard that you and he have been seeing each other," Trey said, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

Gabrielle leaned back in her chair, laughing loudly. "You mean that annoying guy who works for Sam? The one who ended up going home with my receptionist?"

"Your receptionist?" Trey asked.

Gabi nodded. "He saw me talking to her. I guess he figured she was someone important, so he asked me about her. I told him she was invaluable to the art community."

Trey crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow at her.

"Well, she is! I mean, she's invaluable to me. Am I not part of the art community?"

Trey shrugged his shoulders. "I guess when you put it that way, then your statement lacked any true deception."

Gabi smiled at him smugly.

"I don't think he knows, though. Which is fine, because Janine isn't taking him seriously. Besides, the man needs a lesson in tact, not to mention he's as shallow as they come."

Trey began to laugh softly. He would love to be a fly on the wall when Joshua got that bit of news.

Gabi sat back in her seat. "I have been Missy James's granddaughter for twenty-five years of my life, Mr. Fairfax. I know an opportunist when I see one. I even made the mistake of nearly marrying one. I had your friend's number from the moment he walked through the door."

"Nearly married one, you say?"

Gabi hoped she could slide that one right past him. "A different story for a different time."

Trey nodded, conceding her point. "Still, he works for Mr. Bondurant," he said quietly.

This time Gabrielle reached for his hand. "Sam has always been a little over-protective. He can go overboard, but Bootsie keeps him in line."

"Bootsie. She's a character."

"Yes, she is, and I love her for it," Gabrielle stated proudly.

Trey opened his note pad once more. "Have you talked to her about this?" he asked.

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She looked down, running a fingertip around the rim of her wine glass. "No, not yet. I just wanted to make sure I wasn't losing my mind." She cleared her throat.

"So what's the verdict? Should I seek immediate counseling?"

Trey chuckled. "I wouldn't go that far. There could be a wide variety of things going on here. I would have to investigate. Maybe set up a few things in the house..."

He felt her hand stiffen in his. He placed his other hand over hers, stroking it lightly. "When you're ready, of course."

Gabrielle closed her eyes. "So you believe me?"

Trey weighed his options carefully. He could say something to appease her and milk the situation to his advantage, and if he were Joshua or a lesser man, he would. But he wasn't built that way, damn his morals and convictions. Besides that, the girl was truly terrified and he couldn't do that to her.

"Ms. James, whatever has occurred has frightened you to the point that you won't step foot into your house. That alone makes me want to take a further look. I don't have enough information to declare whether or not this is a bona fide haunting. I will promise though, to look into it."

Gabrielle nodded. "You say there are a wide variety of things that might be happening. Are any of them more reasonable than a ghost waking me up in the middle of the night?"

"Have you ever heard of being in a hypnopompic state?"

Gabrielle shook her head, mystified.

"It's a semi-conscious state somewhere in between being asleep and awake. At times it can cause hallucinations. Waking dreams. A person can think they are fully awake but in reality they are still asleep. Sometimes the shifts are so subtle the person cannot really differentiate."

"Like when you dream you have woken up and are taking a shower or driving to work when in reality your still lying in bed?"

"Precisely."

"You think that is what might have happened to me? It sounds reasonable. Actually it sounds downright relieving, even a bit cynical."

"In my field it pays to be a cynic, Ms. James. I've learned the hard way that you have to side with logic and reason before delving into the paranormal. It's just safer that way. If I

don't, hoards of people would be following me around humming that bloody Ghostbusters theme."

Gabrielle laughed so hard she actually began to cry. She held her side tightly as Trey joined in.

"God!" she snickered. "Thank you, I really needed that. I didn't realize how tense I was until I went back to the house today. You were wonderful, by the way."

Trey squeezed her hand. "We'll suss this out. I promise."

We? She liked that. "As much as I am enjoying myself, I have an early day at the gallery," she announced.

"I have to be up early as well. For my tour." He flinched. *Nice one, idiot*, he thought.

"Tour?" she asked.

Bloody hell, now he had to tell her. "Stuff like this," he motioned with his notepad. "Well... It doesn't exactly pay the rent," he said.

Gabrielle smiled. "That's right, you work for Joshua's father."

"How did you know that?"

Gabrielle turned red again. She seemed to do that a lot with him. "I... Well, I asked."

*There is a God!* Trey thought. He could poke and prod, but he wouldn't. Not tonight.

"Well then, I'll give you a call tomorrow and we'll set up a meeting to talk a bit more," he said, trying not to sound too desperate.

Gabrielle's eyes sparkled. "I would love that."

Trey stood up, taking her hand in his while she picked up the bill.

"No, let me," he protested.

Gabrielle looked as if she was going to argue with him, but then she relented, handing him the bill.

"Fine, but the next dinner is on me," she announced.

"You got a deal, pet."

He took the bill, smiling like an idiot and not caring for one minute that he would have to pay for the fifty dollar meal with the wad of dollar bills tucked in his front pocket. He'd forgotten to change out his tips from the tour. Normally, this scenario would have embarrassed him completely. In this city, paying with dollar bills meant you did one of two things, worked a job that catered to tourists or stripped at a club. For some reason, he always got looks that made him feel as if people thought he headlined at one of the more deviant clubs in the city. It always made him feel uncomfortable. Tonight, he didn't feel any of that. It didn't matter, because the next meal was on her.

There was going to be a next time.

## **Chapter 7**

Trey tapped lightly against the wooden clip board. Looking down the list of people for his afternoon tour. Normally he would have been irritated at Susie, the flighty, gothic-looking tour guide, for calling in sick and sticking him with her tour, but for some reason today, he didn't mind so much. It gave him something to do. If he hadn't taken the tour he would have run home, paced by the phone like a twit and found a reason to call Gabrielle James. Besides it was a bit of extra money. Not that he felt it was necessary to wine and dine Gabrielle, she came from a lot of money, everyone in New Orleans knew that. And what he did for a living didn't seem to bother her. He just wanted to feel confident that if they did go out he could pay for their meal.

Trey chuckled to himself. *Settle down, mate. Putting the cart a bit before the horse don't you think?*

It was one meal, an interview at that and he was practically picking out bloody china patterns. Wasn't the female supposed to be the rash and impulsive one? One dance, one meal, a few conversations and Trey already felt completely lost. Leaning back against the railing of the steps to the bus he crossed his arms. He needed to slow down, take a step back. Gabrielle was confused and scared, he couldn't forget that. He needed to take care of this for her. Find out what was going on. Help give her some peace. The rest could be dealt with later.

Trey saw the door open as Phil, one of his favorite drivers, climbed into the bus and took his seat. He started the engine.

Phil looked at Trey suspiciously.

"No muttering and irritated moans? Who are you and what have you done with Trey?"

Trey laughed.

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"What can I say mate? I'm in a good mood. Besides, it's the ghost tour, not so bad, right?" Trey said flipping through the master list.

He whistled.

"Thirty-two people. Tips are going to be damned decent."

Phil nodded.

"Let's get this show on the road," he said, taking the latch and swinging the door open.

Trey helped the ladies in and greeted the gentleman. Everyone gathered taking whatever seat they could find.

He reached up checking to make sure the headset was working. Then did a head count. He frowned.

"Thirty-one." he said to Phil.

"I guess that would make me thirty-two," they both heard.

Trey turned around and his mouth hung open in complete shock.

"Hello, Mr. Fairfax," Gabrielle said, barely able to contain the giggle she was suppressing.

"Ms. James, what are you doing here?" Trey asked in a low voice.

"I think you can call me Gabrielle or Gabi now. Whichever you would prefer."

Trey smiled.

"As long as you call me Trey."

Gabi nodded.

They stared at each other.

"Gabi, not that I am not thrilled to see you..."

Gabi hopped up on the bus.

"I got off work early and suddenly had the urge to take a tour. See haunted New Orleans."



Gabrielle took a few more steps up, looking at Trey's master list. She pointed at a name and smiled at him.

"Right there, plain as day."

Trey shook his head. There was no way she was on this list and he wouldn't have caught her name right away. Run to the wash room to look less like he'd been sweating all day. Run home and change, or something. So there was no way her name had made his list.

Still Gabi insisted tapping down on a name.

Trey looked down and chuckled. Yes it was there as plain as day.

C. Monroe.

"Suddenly I feel rather self-conscious, thank God it wasn't the bloody vampire tour."

"Well, I called and checked. I specifically wanted to go on this tour."

"Why?" Trey asked.

"Fair is fair don't you think? You've seen me in my element, the gallery of course. I wanted to see you in yours. Ghosts are your specialty right?" Gabi replied winking at him.

Gabrielle laughed and tilted her head to the side in that way that Trey found adorable. She reached up, adjusting the frames sitting on his face.

"Sorry, a bit of part I have to play for the job."

"Well, I like them. The make you look more.."

"Intelligent?"

"I was actually going to say distinguished, but in a totally adorable kind of way," Gabi teased.

What was it Trey had told himself about not rushing this? For the life of him right now he could not remember. They continued to look at each other for a long moment before hearing Phil clear his throat.

"All right then. I think you should have a seat, the natives are getting restless."

Gabrielle looked around the bus and saw a lone seat next to a man with several cameras. She began to walk over when a hand stopped her. She looked up and saw

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that it was Trey. He pointed to the very front seat, moving his duffle bag aside and making a small space for her to sit. Gabi nodded again and slipped into the seat.

Trey turned around smiling like a Cheshire Cat.

Phil laughed.

“Now, I know why you don’t seem so pissed about this whole last minute switch up thing. Are you sure you ain’t tired? I can ask Jerry to pull someone else in. Maybe Tommy or one of the other guys.”

Trey wrapped his head set around his head.

“Reach for the radio and your life’s over old man.” Trey muttered.

Phil chuckled.

Trey turned to the crowd.

“Good Afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen. My name is Trey, this is Phil. Welcome to the only Authentic Ghost Tour in New Orleans.”

The cameras flashed and people clapped. This time he didn’t flinch, grimace or groan. He just bowed his head and smiled at the crowd, his eyes darting to a very amused looking Gabrielle.

The tour was one of the more dignified ones. Still it attracted the usual weirdos. One who had decided that Gabrielle would be his tour buddy.

Trey did his best to hide his irritation as the man ushered her away from him when they got to the National Guard Armory at Jackson Barracks. The home of the famous New Orleans Armory Ghost.

The man was showing a polite Gabrielle his super high-tech ghost-catching camera.

Honestly, the lot of them gave the true paranormal psychologist bad names. Trey smiled at the crowd relaying the legend of the poor armory guard who had committed suicide in the barracks shortly after finding out that the 21 horses in his charge were to be destroyed because they were too old to be in military service.

He answered all their questions and gave them a few moments to walk around and take a few pictures.

He saw Gabrielle standing by the tour bus. She was leaning against it, her hands tucked into her tiny khaki shorts. Her feet encased in a pair of comfortable light-weight white Keds. A khaki newsboy hat protected her already olive face from the sun. Her black

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locks hung down her back providing a bit of shielding to her exposed shoulders. She was wearing a matching tank top. She seemed to wear them a lot.

Not that Trey had any objections. She looked as beautiful as she had the night of the party. Trey decided the woman could be wearing sackcloth and still take his breath away. He tried to look as casual as possible as he strolled up to her.

“You look as if you are about to wilt.” Trey teased.

Gabi sighed.

“Still not used to the weather down here. It’s so hot. I feel like I am in...”

“An oven?” Trey supplied.

“Yes! I never want to cook a turkey again. Suddenly, I feel as if I would be a hypocrite.”

“Well, in all fairness, the bird is dead. It doesn’t feel the heat.”

“Still, it’s cruel and unusual.”

They both laughed.

Gabrielle frowned watching her tour buddy approach.

Trey grabbed her hand, opened the door quickly and shoved her inside. He slammed it shut before the man could get to them.

Gabi looked at him questioningly.

“Now, Ms. James. You should really sit down. Heat exhaustion is not something to be taken lightly. Here have some water, we’ll turn on the air conditioning and I will inform your companion of your illness. “

Gabrielle stifled her laugh.

“All right, but remember, call me Gabi.”

Trey looked down trying his best not to look like a smitten school boy. Bollocks to that, she had him. Even if she did not know it yet.

~

They went through the streets of New Orleans pointing out a few more haunts. The Lalaurie House on Royal Street, home of the infamous Creole woman who killed and

tortured her servants in such a vicious manner that it was believed their spirits still roam the halls completely tormented.

Trey was engaging and entertaining, making a bit more of an effort than normal. Mostly because of the beautiful girl who somehow always found a way to stay in his immediate proximity. He pointed out various landmarks as they walked down the street - more supposed haunted places in the city.

He told them the story about The Octoroon Mistress. A courtesan to a Frenchman so deeply in love that she stood naked in the rain on the roof of a four story walk up on Royal all night to prove her love to the man who'd refused to marry her. He later found her lying there dead, apparently of heartache. Her spirit was known to wander the halls weeping for her lost love.

They got to the La Prete house, also known as the Sultan's Palace, the sight of one of the more gruesome crimes to ever have occurred in New Orleans. Blood had actually seeped out of the front door. The Turk that lived there was found badly beaten and buried alive in his backyard. Legend said he was the brother of a Sultan and he had stolen a great fortune and fled to America. The rumor was that his brother found him and killed his entire staff then buried his brother alive in vengeance for his crime. The spirits of the servants were known to appear dressed in elaborate oriental costumes at the windows of the home to passersby on the street.

It was a story Gabi had heard before but the way Trey relayed it sent shivers up her spine. As he walked by, Trey brushed his hand over her forearm winking at her, trying to reassure her it was just another ghost story.

Trey's demeanor changed slightly when they got to the Le Petite theater.

His conversations seemed more lively. Even his commentary seemed a bit more in-depth. He went into detail about Caroline the ghost known to haunt the attic finding things for people and setting them in the center of the room after their searches had come up empty. The spirit of a Captain so in love with an actress who performed there, he never missed a performance. His spirit was known to watch rehearsals from his balcony seat, sitting there much like he had when he was corporeal. After Trey told the story about Sigmund, a departed stage carpenter, Gabrielle pulled him aside. She made sure everyone was still enthralled taking pictures and talking amongst themselves when she whispered in his ear.

"You really believe this place is haunted."

Trey pulled back, surprised, nodding slowly.

Gabrielle smiled.

"I could tell by the way you were acting. Why this place and not the others?" Gabi asked.

Trey took a deep breath.

"The first time I walked in here I felt hot spots. It's somewhat of a psychic term. Means places where things feel odd. The energy seems off."

"So are you psychic?" Gabrielle asked.

Trey shrugged his shoulders.

"No more than you or anyone else. I guess I just pay attention more. When I stepped into the theater I could feel that something else was here. After talking to some of the staff, doing a bit of research I feel confident that there are ghostly residents here. Nothing sinister or dark, just spirits. They seem content here. Although I'm not quite sure what they would do if the theater was ever torn down."

Gabi nodded slowly.

"Are you having fun yet?" he asked.

Gabi smiled.

"Very much so."

An hour later the tour ended. Everyone began to exit the bus and thank Phil and Trey, handing them their gratuity. Gabrielle lagged behind handing a grateful Phil a twenty.

Phil thanked her then discretely left the bus.

"I think you just made Phil's week. It's not often that a beautiful woman hands him a fat tip. He may write home about it."

Gabrielle laughed.

"Well, I'm glad. It does leave me with one problem." Gabrielle said, her face suddenly darkening.

"What?" Trey asked.

"That's all I had. I don't have any more cash. Not a penny to tip my very informative guide."

Trey cocked his head to the side, enjoying the flirtatious glint in her eyes.

"I'm sure you can find a way to make it up to said tour guide."

"I do have an idea... Dinner tonight?" she said shyly.

What was it he'd said about waiting?... *Well sod that.*

"Dinner sounds lovely."

## Chapter 8

"Dinner, it's just dinner," Gabrielle thought. She looked at herself in the mirror, fidgeting with the tie on her white crochet tank-top dress. Casual, this was casual right? She frowned staring at her reflection. Was she underdressed? Over dressed? Why the hell was she acting like a high school teenager?

She sat down on the edge of her bed in her grandmother's studio, sighing. Who was she trying to kid? She was a bundle of nerves. For a moment she regretted her bold invitation. He would expect the same confident woman he had spent the day with. Flirty, a bit seductive. Right now all she felt like was an insecure wall-flower.

She lay down staring at the ceiling, indulging in what was rapidly becoming one of her favorite pastimes. The "*What was it about Trey?*" game she had played in her mind. What was it about him that sent her whole world spinning? His indigo eyes? The sultry sound of his British accent, his devil-may-care attitude? The way his face always contorted in concern when she felt afraid or insecure? She wasn't sure what attracted her the most about him. All she knew was that she seemed unable to be away from him. She'd even blown off an important client to go on his tour.

Something she was still too embarrassed to admit. That and the other things her ghostly intruder had done to her the night of the exhibit. He would probably think she was an absolute nut. The whole hypnopompic state theory truly made sense to her. It was the other occurrences that ate away at her. The voice in the wind, the necklace and the image in the mirror. Those were the things concerning her the most. Those were the instances that made what had happened to her seem so much more real.

She sighed again then stood up to brush her hair one more time. She checked her makeup, taking care to look as natural as possible. Just as her nerves began to settle she heard a knock on the door. Suddenly, her heart jumped into her throat.

"So much for calm, cool and collected," she muttered, closing the short distance between the bed and the door.

She took a deep breath and opened the door.

~

Trey did what he could to stop his jaw from dropping at the sight of her, a somewhat annoying habit he had developed every time she opened a door and presented herself to him. Would she ever stop being completely mesmerizing? He felt a bit ashamed that she stood looking like an earthbound angel and all he'd managed to scrounge together was a pair of clean blue jeans and a white t-shirt.

"I feel humbled. You look like you floated in on a cloud and I look like a stable hand," he said.

Gabrielle shook her head slowly. He could not have been more wrong. She openly gawked at him. He looked perfect, clean shaven, a tinge of spice lingered in the air from his aftershave. His brown hair, still a bit damp and spiky from a recent shower. It was all she could do to not drag him into the tiny studio and say forget dinner. Nothing could have been more perfect than the sight before her, or so she thought.

"I figured since the lady was being so charitable as to grace a poor working stiff with her company at dinner, a token of gratitude should be offered."

Gabrielle nearly swooned when he produced a single red rose he had been hiding behind his back.

"Thank you," she choked out, taking it from him.

*She swallowed down her urge to scream out in glee as images of her grandmother and her grandfather flitted through her head. He had no idea how significant his gesture was.*

"No need to thank me. 'Sides, have you seen those flower vendors? Those chits can be down right vicious "

"Really?" Gabrielle said, ushering him inside into the small kitchen to find a glass to put the rose in.

"It's usually alright, I can wave them off, but when she asked if I was on my way to see a pretty lady, I could not lie. That's when she started to used guilt. I swear they must send those flower birds to a special school for stuff like this."

Gabrielle filled the glass with water and stared him straight in the eye.

"I see, so this is a guilt gift?"

Trey smiled shaking his head slowly.

"Absolutely not. She just made me see the error of my ways. The guilt part was the thought that I dared to come without thinking of it myself."

Gabrielle laughed.

“Are you always this flirty, Mr. Fairfax?”

Trey walked into the kitchen closing in on her until her back was against the counter. He trapped her between his arms by reaching out and grabbing the counter on either side of her.

“It’s Trey, and to answer your question no, never. I’m a bit surprised by my behavior. I don’t know what it is about you but I find myself saying the most outrageous things in an effort to woo and entertain you.”

Gabrielle gulped hard, trembling a bit. His lips were so close to hers that if she leaned in just a bit they would touch.

“Is it a problem, because I could try to stop myself. However, I cannot guarantee success,” he whispered.

Gabrielle shook her head, her eyes still fixed on his.

“Not a problem at all,” she replied.

They inched forward into the kiss then broke apart when they heard a scream from the streets below.

“Sorry.” Gabrielle said. “The dangers of living atop Party Central.”

Trey looked down at her, concerned.

“How do you get any rest?”

Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders.

“It’s a miracle what lattes can do for you.”

Trey frowned.

“Well, we’ll have none of that. Let’s get you something to eat, then go from there.”

He grabbed her hand and walked her out the door.

Gabrielle’s heart soared despite her having to snag her tiny purse, close and lock her door and walk down the steps. Trey never stopped holding her hand.

~



He sat next to Gabrielle on a park bench eating a hot link. He hadn't been sure what to expect. Secretly he feared that Gabrielle would try to take him to one of the posher restaurants in town. He knew he could blend in, he came from a well-cultured background. He was only apprehensive about putting on those airs again. It wasn't who he was. To his relief Gabrielle guided him through the packed Bourbon Street down to the French Market. She bought them both a hotlink encased in a French roll, fries and two canned sodas from a small booth manned by some bloke named François. Then pulled him to a nearby park bench on the outskirts of Jackson Square.

They sat in silence for a bit eating their dinner watching the activity all around.

"Was this bad?" Gabi asked. "I just didn't feel like being cooped up in a restaurant. And well, I have been craving one of these for awhile."

Trey took a sip of his soda.

"Actually, this is perfect. I've never really spent much time down here besides playing tour guide and even then you don't get to spend much time people-watching."

Trey finished his hotlink, which he had to admit was quite good. He wiped off his hands then tended to his garbage along with Gabi's. After finding a trashcan, he came back and grabbed her hand again.

Feeling bold, he raised it to his lips and kissed the top of it lightly.

"Thank you for dinner," he said.

Gabrielle felt her face go flush.

"I'm glad you liked it."

The two caught sight of a nearby street performer - a clown chasing some girl around with a balloon.

Gabrielle tilted her head.

"He does that, been doing it for years. The sweet thing about it is that he never picks drop dead gorgeous women. He always makes it a point to go for girls who aren't so obviously attractive. He makes a big show whistling at them, making them feel like they're a princess as he makes them a balloon animal, then he chases them around releasing the air."

Gabi laughed.

"I remember one time when I was down here with Wyatt, he bumped into him and he got furious."

Gabi stopped talking and closed her eyes.

Trey took a deep breath.

"Wyatt, was he..."

"My ex, the one I almost married."

"Was it a bad breakup?" he asked.

"Not really, it just ended."

Trey listened to her tale intently. He felt stupefied. The nerve of that greedy little bastard. Well, then again maybe he should send the bloke a thank you card. If he wasn't such a bloody idiot then Trey wouldn't be sitting next to her right now.

"So you just up and walked out?"

Gabrielle nodded.

"It was the best thing for him. He never quite fit in my world."

Trey shifted uncomfortably.

Gabrielle took his hand.

"Trey, he was Park Avenue, I'm Greenwich Village. Sure the James's come from old money but Missy broke the mold. She hated all that upper class, aristocratic bullshit. So did my father, so do I."

"I can relate except that my father revels in his status. It about kills him that his son chases after ghosts."

Gabrielle touched his cheek drawing his eyes to hers.

"You're father should be very proud. Don't ever put down what you do. It's very brave to choose a profession that backs up your beliefs. Not many people have that kind of courage."

"Some people would call it foolishness."

Gabrielle touched Trey's chin. She smiled, her fingers playing against his jaw.

"I'm not some people Trey. I'm Gabi, and like I said before, I think what you do is courageous. The world needs courageous people. To protect those of us who aren't so brave."

Trey expelled the breath he'd been unconsciously holding ever since Gabi trapped him her gaze.

"Something tells me Gabi, you don't need much protecting."

Gabi bit her lip and looked down.

"Maybe not but I just have this feeling..."

"Go on." Trey whispered inching closer his eyes darted from her full lips back to her mesmerizing eyes.

"I just feel if I needed... what I mean to say is that if somehow I needed you to protect me, I know you could, I mean I think you would, but I definitely know you could. God, I must sound like an idiot." Gabi muttered, her face turning beet red.

Trey felt his heart race; mimicking her movement he touched her face and drew her eyes to his.

"It seems every time I attempt this something distracts us, but not this time though," he vowed. "I'm going to kiss you now and nothing is going to stop me. I don't care if a bloody atomic bomb goes off. I'm going to kiss you."

Gabrielle closed her eyes, his determined words making her head spin just a tad. She felt his breath against her lips, the heat of his fingertips as he gently tipped her chin up. She felt him inhale then press his lips against hers.

Trey heard a soft whimper as she opened her mouth. Damn it, he was in trouble. He'd hoped all the failed attempts had somehow caused an irrational expectation in his eyes. That there would be a natural let down after the first kiss, because he had worked it up so much within his mind.

Alas, that was farthest from the reality. Kissing her, holding her, their tongues dancing against each other, it was all the better than he thought it would be. He tightened his grip around her, their kisses becoming more passionate, more needy. Fearing that this was going to go too far for such a public setting he released her.

As he pulled away Gabrielle leaned forward, not wanting to lose contact with his touch.

Trey reached behind her neck drawing their foreheads together.

"If we keep kissing like that I am going to end up in a holding cell for attacking a girl in public," Trey announced, his voice raspy.

Gabrielle chuckled.

"Then perhaps we should take this to a more private setting?"

Trey pulled back searching her eyes, making sure she wanted this as much as he did.

"Please," she whispered.

Trey stood up lifting her to her feet. He grabbed her hand and began to walk her through the crowd of people, a bit shocked that he managed not to bump into a single soul. He was not looking where he was going after all, he just could not seem to tear his eyes away from hers.

~

Trey looked around the room for a moment watching Gabrielle carefully. He'd asked her multiple times if she was sure she wanted to come back here.

The party down on Bourbon Street seemed extra loud that night and Trey had seemed a bit reluctant to take her back to his dingy apartment. But when she'd instructed him to drive back to the Townhouse he'd vehemently objected.

They'd argued for a moment then kissed for longer than that. Pretty soon, Trey folded and gave in to the beauty smiling in the passenger seat next to him.

Gabrielle stood in front of him pulling his shirt over his head. Her fingertips danced lightly on his shoulders brushing down his arms. She took his hands in hers placing tiny kisses on his neck.

Trey's eyes rolled back.

"Are you sure Gabi. I don't want you to be afraid," Trey whispered, no longer knowing if he was talking about the would-be spirits or their present predicament.

Gabrielle looked up, her eyes sparkling a bit.

"I'm not, besides, you're here. I'm not alone."

Trey released her hands, wrapping his arms around her back. He kissed the top of her head.

"No Gabi, you're not alone."

He bent his head capturing her lips with his, drawing them back toward the bed. When his knees hit the mattress he sat down still holding her in front of him.

Gabrielle looked down at his adoring eyes. Pressing her even more firmly against him he took her hand and kissed along her arm. His hands coasted up her back and around to her shoulders finding the straps of her dress and delicately pulling them down.

Gabrielle took a nervous breath as her dress fell down to her waist. She looked down expecting to find him looking at her now completely exposed torso; instead his eyes were fixed on hers. The sight of him staring at her in awe nearly brought tears to her eyes.

Trey pulled the dress all the way down to the floor then grabbed Gabrielle by the waist and tugged her down on the bed. He hovered over her as he nipped at her lips, silently begging for her to allow him yet another sweet kiss. She parted her lips with a needy sigh and granted him his unspoken request as their mouths caressed once more. They stayed like that for a while. Enjoying the slide of their tongues against the other's. Stoking their desire. Trey pulled away, then began to nip at her neck reverently, leaving soft moist pecks in his wake. Unable to resist it one minute more, he tasted her breasts, sucking them softly as a low pleased moan escaped his throat.

Gabrielle's eyes widened in surprise. She had been with men before, but never like this. Trey was acting as if he wanted to devour her, sample every bit of her. As if he was trying to get drunk off the taste of her. Her heart pounded, she felt as if she was about to crawl completely out of her skin. She was so lost in the sensation of his mouth licking and sucking on her breast that when his fingers dipped lower and began to stroke at her sex she let out a scream.

Trey pulled back making sure she was all right. Gabrielle pulled him back against her holding onto his neck riding out her sudden release.

Trey watched the breathtaking sight before him. She was clinging to him, her head reared back, her eyes watering from the intense pleasure he was bestowing on her. He peppered her face with his kisses.

"Let it happen, Gabi. Does it feel good?" he asked.

Gabi let out another moan, biting her lip.

She released her grip on him and did her best to work the buttons of his jeans. Her hands were shaky as she finally accomplished her task.

Trey pulled down his pants kicking them off.

He stooped to retrieve something from his back pocket.

Gabrielle stopped him.

"It's okay. I trust you," she said softly.

"Gabi, I haven't been..."

Gabrielle cut him off with another drugging kiss.

"Neither have I. Like I said, I trust you."

Trey let go of his wallet, a part of him relieved. It had been so damned long he couldn't guarantee the condom inside was still any good.

"Are you sure Gabi, we don't have to."

"Do you have any idea how many times you've asked me that question?"

Trey smiled, positioning himself over her. He took her hands in his once more and placed them over her head. The fingers interlaced around the other's.

Trey shift his hips and sunk into her. They both threw their heads back in shock.

"Oh, God," he groaned.

Gabrielle lifted her head and licked the side of his neck.

"Going to ask me again if I'm sure?" she asked playfully, swiveling her hips.

Trey surged into her, kissing her roughly. He continued to thrust in and out of her. Worshipping her face with tiny wet kisses, sucking gently on her neck, nibbling lightly on her ear.

Gabrielle moaned, her head thrashing from side to side when he angled himself to hit the extra sensitive spot within.

Trey pulled back watching her tremble in ecstasy. Gabrielle looked up catching his gaze.

Trey kissed her forehead, still pummeling into her. He was nearly undone by the mere expression on her face. It was as if she was drifting between awe and ecstasy. She bit down on her bottom lip as he surged into her. He was hovering above her, framing her face with his propped up elbows. He gently brushed away the damp hair clinging to her countenance. Trey kissed her eyes, cocking his head to the side watching her succumb to him. Feeling it, her head snapped back, her eyes closed in fierce concentration before drifting open again in shock.

“Damn you’re beautiful,” he whispered kissing her lips more again.

She responded for only a moment before her head jerked back grinding against the pillow. The air in Gabrielle’s lungs dragged out of her as she let out a loud gasp. Her head reared up as she climaxed. She reached out wrapping her arms around his shoulders blindly and frantically thrusting upward toward him.

“Oh God,” she muttered. “You feel...”

That was it. All he could take. The feeling of her walls convulsing all around him, the burning heat of her orgasm enveloping him caused him to buck and empty himself inside of her. He rested his head against his shoulder valiantly trying not to crush her with his weight. Finally, finding the strength, he rolled off her and gathered her in his arms.

Once sanity had been restored, Trey kissed the top of Gabi’s head, still reeling from what had just occurred.

“Gabi, it’s never been like... what I mean to say...”

Gabi pulled herself up from his chest and hovered over Trey for just a moment. She smiled bestowing a light kiss on his lips.

“I know. Me neither,” she whispered.

Trey smiled at her and raised his head to give her a kiss in response.

Within moments they both found sleep.

Later that night Trey woke up and found Gabrielle standing in front of the bed.

He smiled up at her and began to reach out his arms beckoning her back to bed when he felt an impediment against his chest. He looked down and gasped. Lying there, her arms tightly wound around him, was a sleeping Gabrielle.

He shook his head making sure he was indeed awake.

After assuring himself he was, he looked at the foot of the bed again. Still she stood there. The near-spitting image of Gabrielle, except for her eyes. While Gabrielle’s eyes were green, the woman’s eyes were nearly black.

Trey instinctively tightened his grip around Gabrielle. Only to cause her to stir.

“*Stop him...*,” the lady at the foot of the bed begged.

Suddenly, the bedroom door swung open, violently crashing into the wall. The women gasped then dissipated. Gabrielle shot up from her slumber. She looked at the door then back at Trey. Instantly she knew what had happened. The look on Trey's face told her all she needed to know.

She began to shake again until Trey gathered her in his arms. He touched her face.

"Get dressed," he said quietly. "We'll stay at my place."

## **Chapter 9**

Gabi leaned against her car and looked up at her home. The James's Townhouse had been in her family for nearly eighty years. It symbolized their bond, their connection, everything that made them James's but now all Gabi felt when she looked at it was fear. As much as it comforted her to find solace in Trey's arms she still felt the lingering terror deep within of the night they'd left the townhouse. They'd dressed quickly after she'd bolted awake and driven away in the middle of the night. She'd shaken for a good hour and allowed Trey to rock her to sleep.

Trey's insistence that they leave twisted her insides. Something had been there that night with him. Confirming her deepest fear that what had happened to her the night of the party wasn't a dream or hallucination, it was real. She wanted to tell him all of it, but every time she tried her voice fell short. She was too afraid. Afraid of what he might think of her. It may have been cowardly, but right now she couldn't deal with a confession, not on top of everything else. Not when she felt so safe in his arms. He was her only sanctuary from all of the fear and uncertainty so for now she would keep it to herself and not confide in the one person who would understand.

~

Trey, for his part, remained vague as well. Gabrielle didn't ask what his feminine apparition looked like. Secretly he sighed with relief when she didn't press. She was already petrified, without him revealing that the woman who'd presented herself to him was her mirror image.

Except for her dark eyes. For the brief moment she'd gazed at him all he'd felt was pain and despair. At times Trey felt that the look of horror that had swept across her face when the door slammed open had scared him more than her ghostly image. There was something dark and sinister in that house. He felt it and he could tell by the way Gabi had reacted that she felt it too.

The advantage of living in the lower Garden district was that it did not take long for Gabi to get to the gallery every morning. At the same time it ensured that Gabi spent every night with him, which distressed Trey. Not because he didn't want her to, far from that.



*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

He silently worried how the bloody hell he would be able to go back to sleeping without her. He loved the feel of her heated skin against his chest, the faint scent of peaches from her shampoo and lotion. The way she scrunched up her nose right before she fell into a deep slumber. Every night for the past four nights he'd felt as if he was in heaven, but guilt always accompanied it. She was here because she was afraid. She was counting on him to help her. Trey knew he had fallen, and hard. He just hadn't figured out a way to tell her. Maybe it wasn't time, they had other matters to attend to.

He was walking toward the back door of the townhouse when he saw Gabrielle just standing there, stuck to the spot.

Trey dropped his heavy duffle bag and stood in front of her, encircling her in his arms.

"I told you Gabi, you don't have to go in. I'm just going to run a few tests, set up some surveillance equipment and get out."

Gabrielle buried her face against his chest.

"No, I'll be fine," she said in a muffled voice,

Taking a deep breath she grabbed his hand and walked toward the house.

She stood in front of the door for a moment then inserted the key into the lock. The door clicked and creaked open. A gush of cool refreshing air promptly blew through the door and out into the hot Louisianan dusk.

"Don't envy you, your power bill, pet," Trey said, trying to lighten to mood.

Gabrielle groaned.

"This has been on non-stop for four days," she said, walking over to the air-conditioning box.

Trey chuckled and deposited his duffle bag on the table. Gabrielle sat on the white leather couch completely fascinated, watching him pull out a few things. Trey inspected his gadgets, carefully pulling them out and placing them on the table. He looked up and saw Gabi staring.

He smiled and pulled out a small white box with a bunch of digital numbers.

"We'll start with the basics. This is a Hygro Thermometer Clock, it records the time, temperature and humidity."

Gabi took it in her hands.

*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

"I'm going to set up a few down here and upstairs. You said that you felt a cool breeze both times you had occurrences, right?"

Gabi nodded.

"What this will do is record any strange drops in room temperature. Maybe we could establish a pattern or a certain place where activity is strongest."

"Pattern?" Gabrielle asked.

Trey nodded. "Sometimes in cases like this certain apparitions get locked into a pattern because they aren't aware that they don't exist on this plane any more. Kind of sad really, they keep doing what they were doing right before they passed. Like say an older woman had a heart attack brushing her hair. She's completely unaware she's died. So when people see her ghost they see her sitting there brushing her hair."

"Wow, that is sad. It's almost like they are stuck on repeat."

Trey stood up, busied himself putting fresh batteries into the device, then placed it on its small stand. He walked back over to the table and took three more out. He took Gabi's hand and walked her into the kitchen placing one of the devices inside, then led her to the couch again.

Next, Trey pulled out a small hand-held thermometer, holding it by its pistol grip.

"It's an infrared thermometer. Once we set up the stationary stuff I'm going to walk through the house to see if there are any cold spots."

Gabrielle cocked her head to the side.

"I thought you felt things like that?"

"Well, yeah, but the mind is a tricky thing, Gabi. It's amazing what a person can talk themselves into believing. Did you know a man once got locked into a freezer and froze to death. However, when they opened the door they found out the refrigeration unit was never on. He was just so sure it was going to happen that he let his mind convince him it would." Trey held up the thermometer.

"Sometimes people can make themselves believe something is happening when it's not. Say for instance, I want to believe I feel a cold spot when in fact there isn't one. This confirms it in a very scientific manner."

Gabi laughed.

"Ever the cynic."

Trey stood up giving her a wink.

“Got a few others things in here. An air ion counter. It will measure positive and negative ions separately because sometimes apparitions can cause the air around them to ionize.

He pulled out an instrument with a small needle and a few knobs.

“This is the ghost busting classic. A Natural EM Meter it detects changes in electric and magnetic fields.”

Trey pointed the instrument at Gabi and watched as it buzzed loudly.

“So it literally detects forms.”

“In some way or another. If you get it too close to a radio or a microwave it might go a bit crazy as well.”

“It’s all so scientific,” Gabrielle said.

Trey smirked.

“Did you expect a medium named Lola and a crystal ball?”

Gabi playfully smacked him.

“No, I just wasn’t expecting the study to be so simple, so logical. “

Trey shrugged his shoulders.

“Most people don’t. It comes with the territory.”

Placing the infrared thermometer in his pocket and grabbing the two clocks he reached out his hand to Gabi.

Gabi breathed deeply, and took it.

“Take the EM meter with us, pet,” he instructed.

Gabi gripped the small device in her hand.

“I’m going to set up a few more things. A video camera for one. Professor Mann let me borrow a few more toys, but I want to see if there’s a way we could pinpoint a place of high activity. Contrary to popular belief, the last thing I want to do is run around a house chasing ghosts.”

*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

Slowly, they made their way up the stairs. They got up to Gabi's room. She softly pushed the door open.

Trey sat her down on a chair and walked over to the corner of the room.

He placed one of the clocks there, then pulled her down the hall and placed another one by the top of the stairs.

Trey frowned.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I need another clock," he said.

Trey grabbed her hand and began to walk them down the stairs. He felt Gabi resist.

"Go, I can see you from here," she said.

"You sure?" He asked.

Gabi nodded.

Trey smiled and kissed the top of her head. Quickly, he ran down the stairs and began to rifle through his bag.

Gabi leaned against the wall watching him. She loved the fact that he was so considerate. So mindful. So protective. She found herself attracted to everything about him. His demeanor, his playful banter, his shamelessly flirtatious manner. Most importantly, he made her laugh. Missy always told her the key to a woman's heart was a man who could make her laugh. Trey always did. Gabi couldn't believe that in all this insanity she had found a bit of happiness.

The sound of the small device in her room beeping caught her attention.

"Trey I think something is wrong with the clock in my bedroom."

Trey ran up the stairs. He listened for a moment and his face darkened.

"Hell, we need to go," he said, grabbing her hand.

Gabi looked at him, confused.

"I thought you said you needed to put a clock somewhere else?"

*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

Gabi looked down and saw the little machine in her hand was suddenly going nuts. Trey stepped away to make sure it was not being caused by his presence. Still the machine's needle went all the way over.

"Gabi, let's go," Trey commanded, pulling her down the stairs.

She let him lead her. The sound of their hurried footsteps echoed in the air.

Trey held onto her hand tightly grabbing his bag and running them out the door.

Just as they passed the staircase again, Gabrielle heard it.

"Ellie."

She immediately froze.

"Did you hear that?"

Trey shook his head slowly.

"No, not a thing. Still, I would feel better if we left," he said.

Gabrielle looked over her shoulder and another chill ran up her spine. Again she felt paralyzed, her legs felt nailed to the ground.

"Gabi, what's wrong?"

He stood there watching her. Gabi's entire body stiffened as she stared over her shoulder at the staircase. She seemed locked in some sort of trance.

"Gab," Trey screamed trying to pull at her. Still nothing.

She stood there swaying on her feet. Gabrielle watched a shadow descended from the stairs. Then she gasped and suddenly everything went black.

Trey watched as all the olive in her skin seemed to turn almost gray, the hand holding on so fiercely to his went slack and then turned cold as ice.

Trey threw his bag out the open back door then lifted Gabi into his arms and carried her outside. He kicked the door shut looking down at an almost ash white Gabrielle.

He carried her over to the car and sank to the ground.

"Come on, Sweetheart. Open your eyes," he pleaded stroking her cheek.

Suddenly, her eyes shot open. With a gasp, the color started returning to her face.

“Wh...what happened? ” she whispered.

Trey held her close trying to warm her ice-cold form.

“You froze. Not only figuratively but literally, pet. You’re a bloody icicle.”

Gabi shook her head and coughed.

“I just heard something, and then I saw something come toward me. The next thing I knew...”

Gabrielle gripped onto his arm.

“Trey, what’s happening to me?”

Trey held her in his arms and kissed the top of her head.

“I don’t know, but I swear I’ll find out.”

~

Trey watched Gabrielle sleeping, carefully tucking a sheet up over her shoulders.

She’d fallen asleep in the car after insisting she was fine. When they got to his apartment, Trey didn’t have the heart to wake her. He just gently lifted her from the passenger seat and carried her up the stairs.

She awoke for just a moment, thanking him again for watching over her, then fell back into an exhausted sleep.

This was getting weird. A paranormal phenomenon was one thing, but this? Even this was too much for Trey to comprehend. A ghost that seemed to be the spitting image of his lover, a house that seemed to attack its owner, an immediate showing by an apparition, Christ he had not even put up the preliminaries and the activity was more than he’d ever encountered.

Trey buried his face in his hands. He would need to consult Professor Mann, which meant this was on its way to becoming a three ring circus. Cameras rolling, huge bulky equipment, probably even a medium by the name of Lola. He dreaded making the phone call. All he wanted to do was lie here, wrap Gabi in his arms and make sure she was safe.

The phone rang breaking him from his thoughts.

Trey cursed himself for not turning the ringer off. He grabbed the phone and walked into his living room.

“Fairfax,” he said as quietly as he could.

“Trevor.”

Trey’s eyes widened.

“Father?” he asked, shocked.

“Hello son, I’m in town.”

Trey closed his eyes.

Just brilliant.

## **Chapter 10**

Trey Fairfax walked across the lobby of the St. Louis Hotel. He fought the urge to pull off the perfectly knotted tie around his neck. The only reason he didn’t was the care Gabrielle had taken when she’d placed it on him. She’d been startled awake by the string of profanities Trey had let loose after getting off the phone with his father. Something he regretted instantly once he saw the look of fright on her face.

After explaining that it was his father on the phone, Gabi relaxed, listened to him intently and did her best to soothe him.

“I’m to meet him for dinner. The man didn’t even bother to ask, just told me where and when to meet him.”

Gabrielle stroked his back tenderly.

“You need to go. It must be important if he’s come all this way,” she argued.

Trey shook his head.

“He was in New York on business. Decided to come down on the spur of the moment. The man does nothing spur of the moment. Something is going on and I don’t think I’m going to like it.”

Gabrielle hugged him tightly.

“It won’t be that bad. You need to go. Now where is he staying?”

“The St. Louis Hotel, in the Quarter.”

Gabrielle nodded.

“Wants you to meet him at Louis XVI ?”

Trey nodded. “Nothing but the best,” he spat out.

Gabrielle took his hand and led him toward the bathroom. She turned on the water making sure it was lukewarm. The night was hot enough as it was. Gabrielle smiled mischievously pulling his shirt over his head then unbuttoning his pants. She took a step back and threw off her t-shirt and jeans.

Trey took a labored breath as he watched her step into the shower. She bent back her head allowing the water to drench her face. He gazed in fascination as the water ran down her neck and swirled around her hardened nipples. She smiled seductively, gesturing with her index finger for him step into the tub.

Trey chuckled and got into the shower with her, his tension and anger disappearing with each gentle caress.

He tried to file away the pleasant memory of the best shower he’d ever had somewhere in his mind where it would be still close enough to retrieve if he needed to drift away at some off-color comment or long drawn-out lecture he might be receiving from his dear old dad.

He really wanted Gabrielle there with him, but ultimately agreed it would be best if he went alone. Whatever his father needed to tell him might be confidential. Not something he might want to say in front of a new girlfriend.

Girlfriend?

Was that what Gabrielle was? They had not made any statements about where either one of them thought this was going. Both parties seemed content to live in the here and now. That, or they were too bloody afraid to admit their feelings.

Breaking away from his reverie once again, Trey arrived at the lobby of the prestigious restaurant in the middle of the hotel. He scanned the room. It was everything his father was with its white linen cloths, high, red velvet chairs, elaborate place settings with every conceivable piece of silverware. Silk napkins folded neatly in the center. There was a beautiful view of Lake Ponchartrain in the background. The courtyard itself was quite romantic. Ideal for lovers. Again he filed it away in his mind’s *Gabrielle* folder.

God, he wished she was here.



“Trevor.”

Trey turned and saw his father standing behind him.

“Father.”

Owen looked Trey up and down as if he was examining him. Trey despised him when he did that. He despised even more that he was in the suit. His black Armani one. The one his parents had bought him in an effort to make him look more *appropriate*.

“You look good son,” Owen said, reaching out to shake his son’s hand.

Five years since he had seen him and all he got was a handshake?

Trey smiled, reaching out for his father’s hand and shaking it.

“I’m famished and I hear the food here is quite excellent.”

Trey let his father walk in front of him and tried his best to not roll his eyes.

Dinner conversation was light. They spoke of the fact that his brother Alfred was about to make him an Uncle. His other brother was making the rounds in London’s society scene; bringing further prestige to the Fairfax name. They talked about his mother and her various charity functions, and his father’s new position as legal council for a well known international trading company. Trey began to relax as much as he could in his monkey suit when his father dropped the bomb. The real reason he had come to visit.

“How are things, Trey?” Owen asked.

Trey took a sip of his scotch.

“Good.”

“Is there anything I should know about?” Owen asked.

Trey cocked his eyebrow up.

“Something tells me you think there is.”

Owen laughed.

“Your mother and brothers were just worried. I came here to assure them you would eventually come to your senses. I am pleased to see that I was correct.”

“What makes you say that?” Trey asked.

Owen pulled out a newspaper clipping.

Trey unfolded it.

His eyes widened.

An image of Gabrielle and Trey dancing at the exhibit graced the society page.

"I see," Trey said, his teeth clinched together.

"The James family is very well respected and Gabrielle is quite breathtaking." Owen commented.

Trey pushed the clipping across the table back to his father.

"Yes, she is, but I don't see what this has to do with my life choices."

Owen leaned back in his seat.

"I was hoping this meant you were settling down or at the very least coming to your senses."

Trey crossed his arms.

"Whatever is going on between myself and Ms. James is none of your business."

Owen chuckled haughtily.

"Really, it's no small feat to make the society page, son. And from the way you two are looking at each other I would venture to guess this is very serious."

Trey cleared his throat. He would not deny his feelings for Gabrielle, but at the same time he hated his father's innuendo.

"If that's so what makes you think she won't support my line of work?"

A scowl crossed Owen's face.

"Even if that is so Trevor, I would hate to think you were that irresponsible. The girl has a duty to her family and their name. If you are taking this seriously, think of the ramifications. I know you do not care about what we think, but what of her? How is she going to continue to keep her legacy if the man she is involved with insists on acting like an imbecile? You think people in the art world will take her opinion seriously?"

Trey took another sip of his drink. His father's words cut through his very soul as they always had. Granted, somewhere deep inside he'd had the same fears. However, he

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had somehow managed to bury them deep away. He was too caught up in their romance, not thinking of the consequences. Of what it might mean to her.

He wanted to argue with his father. Tell him about the circumstances that had brought them together. However, he just couldn't say it. He didn't want his father to judge her the way he was being judged and stoke his fears a bit harder.

He just couldn't say it.

Trey stood up.

"I think you have said enough." The words were clipped.

With that he walked away.

He wanted to go back to his apartment, crawl into bed, wrap himself in Gabi's arms.

Trey couldn't bring himself to, not now, not just yet. His father's words pounded in his head. He needed to take a moment. Regroup.

Find a bar.

Get smashed.

~

Gabrielle groaned and turned Trey's computer off for the sixth time. He really needed to get a new one. She looked at her cell phone wanting to call him to see how things were going, then decided against it.

The building shook as heavy rain began to pour down.

After a few minutes, her cell phone rang.

She looked and saw the number recognizing it instantly.

"Hi, Boots," Gabrielle said.

"Hey, Gabs, it's raining pretty hard. Are you at home?" she asked.

"No, I'm out." Gabrielle announced trying to sound as aloof as possible.

"Well, the shutters are down on the hothouse in the back right?" Boots asked.

Gabi jumped to her feet.

The roses, Missy's prize roses. The same roses she had shipped from Europe.

"Oh, Boots, I've got to go!" she screamed, clicking off the phone and running out the door.

~

Gabrielle got all the way to the house and closed the hothouse before she realized what she had done.

That she was alone.

The rain had stopped and much to her relief none of the flowers were damaged.

She quickly walked to her car wanting to get as far away from the townhouse as possible. Running quickly to her Sebring she pulled out her keys. She told herself not to look, not to go near the house, but before she could get to the car she saw him standing there. In the window was a man in a dark blue suit. His hazel eyes bore into her, locking her in his gaze.

A gust of wind blew around her and in the wind she heard his voice.

*"Ellie."*

Gabrielle's eyes remained riveted on him. She dropped her keys to the ground and began to walk slowly toward the house. When she reached the stairs the door opened and she hesitated for a moment.

*"Ellie,"* she heard again.

Gabrielle swayed for a moment. As she stepped inside the door shut softly behind her.

## **Chapter 11**

The click of the door broke Gabrielle out of her dazed condition. She gasped, jumping a bit when she felt her back against the door. How did she end up in here? Why was she not moving? The echo of tiny beeps filled the air. Gabrielle's eyes darted to the Hygro Thermometer Clock not four feet away from her. A small red light blinked rapidly as Gabrielle watched the digital display of the room temperature drop steadily. Yet for some reason, Gabrielle did not feel the cold.

Closing her eyes she began to turn around. Then stopped abruptly. From the living room she heard the sounds of laughter and music. Involuntarily her feet led her into the room.

A party was in full swing. People standing around dancing, laughing. All dressed in elegant gowns. Most of the women were wearing elaborate feather hats to match their silk flapper garments. The men stood around smoking cigars in lively discussion.

Gabrielle scanned the room. Gone was her grandmother's white leather furniture. In its place was blue velvet. The walls that displayed Missy's prize winning and personal photos were now covered by garish gold-foiled wallpaper.

Before Gabrielle could formulate any real thoughts, a woman dressed in a rather skimpy blue dress came up to her and smiled.

"Elysia, you've done it again. I swear you throw the best shindigs," she gushed.

Gabrielle looked at her confused.

Elysia?

"That dress is to die for," the woman said winking at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle looked down, her eyes widening.

She was dressed in a blood-red, silk gown that looked as if it had been poured onto her. The dress went all the way to the floor with a long slit down the side of her leg. Gabrielle looked down at her hands. On her ring finger was an enormous diamond while an equally large blood-red ruby graced her other hand. Around her wrist was a large diamond cuff. She ran her hands down the gown in disbelief.

What was going on?

"*Ellie*," she heard again.

Gabrielle looked up and saw him standing there at the top of the stairs. The same man she had seen through the window.

He was leaning against the wall, arms crossed in front of him. Staring at her with lust-filled eyes.

Gabrielle gazed hurriedly about the room. Everyone seemed to be too preoccupied to notice the man calling to her.

"*I need you*," she heard.

Gabrielle turned and began to walk up the stairs. The woman standing next to her winked, nudging at Gabrielle.

“You know how he hates to be kept waiting. Don’t worry, I’ll come and get you if your...talk gets to long,” the woman said with a laugh as she walked away. The ragtime music faded into the background. She continued her ascent staring into his amused eyes. When she was about five steps from the top; the man pushed off the wall and began to walk down the hall. A couple came out of another room laughing as they ran passed him.

“Hey Ellie,” the woman said walking down the stairs and giggling madly as her companion caught her around the waist. He lifted her up off her feet and carried her down the rest of the way.

Gabrielle paused and watched the young couple at play.

“*Ellie*,” she heard the man say.

Helpless, Gabrielle continued up the stairs.

The man opened the door and entered Gabrielle’s room.

Gabrielle followed him in.

She looked around. Everything was different. Save one piece of furniture. The small vanity table still sat in the same spot as it did in the present day.

She stared at the mirror for a moment gazing at her reflection in confusion.

Gone was the red gown. She was once again dressed in the white-crochet tank top dress she was wearing when she’d run out of Trey’s house to save her grandmother’s flowers.

She had begun to walk toward the vanity table when she felt two hands grab her shoulders and pull her back.

From behind the man attacked her neck covering it with wet, passionate kisses.

“My God Elysia, you’ve been driving me insane all night,” he growled.

Gabrielle’s eyes drifted shut as his hand cupped her breasts, kneading them gently.

“You love it though don’t you? Knowing I’m going crazy. Watching you flirt with every man and woman in that fucking room. You knew what it would do to me didn’t you?” he moaned.

Gabrielle’s breath hitched.

“Jarek,” she heard herself say.

The man's hand brushed down her gown and found the slit of her dress.

She felt him smile against her neck.

"Naughty girl," he teased.

Gabrielle's eyes rolled back. "Jarek, I have guests."

His hand moved from teasing her nipple to her hair. He yanked her head back, forcing her to look him in his eyes.

Gabrielle found herself holding her breath. His hazel eyes burned into her. She reached up and stroked his pale, flawless face and then slowly found rest in his sleek black hair.

He pulled her hair a bit harder, kissing her roughly. Finally, he released her lips.

"Don't play that game with me. You know as well as I do, they are all just here for good measure. We both know what you really want, what you really need," he said, his voice lulling her resistance.

His fingers ghosted up her inner thigh and found its way to her center.

She knees buckled as she felt his fingers on her nether lips.

"No under-garments, such a bad little girl."

Gabrielle tried to break free but his words, his touch, his kisses, his insistent need was too overwhelming.

Gabrielle felt a wicked smile creep across her face. Her body twitched for a moment then she swayed.

She looked at the man once again.

"They would have just gotten in the way," she said breathlessly.

He blinked, then gazed into her eyes and smiled too.

"There you are, I was wondering when you would show up," he said stroking her cheek, encouraging her words and actions.

Gabrielle felt herself drifting away slowly. The feel of him under her fingertips becoming fainter and fainter. As if something else, someone else had taken over for her. She tried to gain control once more only to feel it push her back. It was as if she was watching the scene unfold in a movie.

Gabrielle turned herself in his arms to kiss him soundly.

He pushed her back up against the wall lifting her in the air. He kissed her again, his hands pulling down on the straps of her gown until her breasts were free. He took one rosy nipple in his mouth sucking on it mercilessly.

She opened her mouth to scream only to have one of his hands cover it.

Her dress fell to the ground as she felt him working on the buttons of his trousers.

He lifted her up and without preamble entered her inciting another muffled scream.

“You must be quiet Elysia. I know how much you love it when I make you scream but you have guests,” he teased, pumping into her brutally.

She felt the telltale signs of her completion, her body quivering with the aching need for release.

She looked down at him.

“Jarek,” she whimpered again.

“You’re mine, Elysia.”

Gabrielle bit her lips giving herself over to him.

She felt him shudder. After a moment his bruising grip relaxed.

Her feet found the ground again only to be lifted into his arms. He gently laid her on the bed.

“Rest,” he commanded.

Gabrielle closed her eyes. Somewhere in the back of her mind she heard her voice screaming to get out, run away. Yet, the voice was too faint, too far away. So distant that within a few moments the sounds of the music and laughter drowned out her internal cries.

~

Trey woke up on his couch. He bolted upright and growled. His head was pounding. For as much of a cliché as it was, he really did feel like a Mac Truck had hit him. He groaned, stumbled to the kitchen and grabbed a glass of water. He reached for a small bottle of aspirin and took a few out. He winced as he reared back his head. Not the



most brilliant move in the world as it caused a sharp pain to run through his spine and up to his pounding head.

*Christ how much had he drunk?*

He remembered having several drinks at a local dive, vaguely remembered the cab ride, most certainly remembered falling into his apartment and crawling to the couch.

He must have looked like a bloody idiot.

He leaned back against the counter trying to think of the right words to say to Gabrielle.

Had she heard him come in? Did she try to talk to him?

He closed his eyes tightly trying in vain to recall anything of what might have transpired upon his drunken arrival back to his apartment.

Nothing.

Trey, ignored the pounding in his head and walked into his bedroom.

He frowned.

The bed looked exactly as it had before he left to meet his father.

He walked to the phone belatedly feeling his keys in his pants pocket.

There was no way in his condition that he'd managed to open both locks on his front door.

Trey picked up the phone and dialed Gabrielle's cell phone getting more worried as it automatically went to voice mail. The next place he called was the studio. The phone rang four times and then went to her answering machine. Trey thought about calling the townhouse, but he knew she would never think of going there.

He sat down trying to control the unreasonable panic setting within. He walked over to the phone book and thumbed through it. He squinted trying to control his double vision as he punched in the number to The James Collection.

"The James Collection, this is Janine."

"Hello Janine, is Gabrielle in please?" he said, his voice still rough.

The woman on the phone paused.

"May I ask who is speaking?" Janine said, sounding just a bit too professional.

“Janine, this is Trey.” He replied even more confused. Albeit, Trey and Gabrielle had only been dating a few days, but Janine always seemed to recognize his voice when he’d called before. They’d even engaged in some harmless flirting. Now, she was acting like he was a solicitor or a virtual stranger.

“Yes, Trey, Gabrielle left for New York this morning,” Janine announced.

“New York?” he said, jumping to his feet.

“Yes, she will be there for the next three days.”

Trey held his head and began pacing the floor.

“Is there a number where she could be reached?” he asked.

Janine paused.

“Not that I am allowed to give out.”

Trey sat back down.

“Three days you say?” he said softly.

“Yes.”

“Business or personal?” Trey asked knowing he was crossing a line.

“Personal,” Janine answered.

“Thank you,” he said, clicking off the phone.

He hung his head.

New York. She just up and went to New York. Why New York? There was no one in New York except...

Trey made a mad dash for the bathroom and fell to his knees dry heaving into the toilet. He sat on the floor remembering every word his father had said, every drink he had slammed down in an effort to drown out the voices in his head.

Trey remembered the few occasions when he’d hit the bottle and blacked out, and even worse, the fights he’d got into after one too many. It reminded him why he no longer got this drunk. Did something like that happen last night? What had he done? Did he come back and act like a fool? Had they argued? Did he do something to hurt his girl? Hurt her so much that she’d fled to a place she said she would never go back to in order to

regroup? He held his head in his hands shaking and praying to whoever would listen to help him remember.

~

Gabrielle sat in front of the vanity table; her eyes were dazed, unfocused as she stared into the mirror. She heard the phone ring behind her.

After a few rings she heard the answering machine.

“Gabs, it’s Janine. I just wanted you to know I rescheduled all of your appointments like you requested. See you in a few days. Oh, and Trey called, he sounded really worried, but you wanted me to tell anyone who called that you were in New York on personal business, right? I know I shouldn’t stick my nose in this, but did you two have a fight? Anyways, feel better, get some rest. Call me if you need anything.”

The phone clicked off, still Gabrielle stared straight ahead.

Another hidden drawer in the vanity opened on its own.

Gabrielle reached inside, her green eyes never leaving the mirror. She pulled out another pouch.

“*Open it,*” she heard in the wind.

Gabrielle worked the draw-string open and let the contents spill into her hands.

“*Very good,*” she heard.

Gabrielle closed her eyes when she felt two hands on her shoulders. One hand stroked the side of her neck for a moment. She opened her eyes again to look up at the man standing over her, lost in his touch. She gazed at her reflection once more, so entranced that it completely escaped her attention that the eyes staring back at her were nearly black.

## **Chapter 12**

Thirty hours later, Trey was crawling out of his skin. It had been only a day but thirty hours sounded like a lot more time. Maybe the sound of the double digits comforted him, made him feel less like a git? Maybe it made him sound like more of one? He was actually counting the hours since Gabrielle had left for New York. Shamelessly he’d called the gallery at least six times since his initial conversation with Janine. Maybe she had gotten his message? Maybe if he kept calling Janine would relay to Gabi just how

pathetic he was being and she would have mercy on such a sad sod and call him? Even if it was just to tell him to bugger off.

He placed his cell phone on the old wooden desk eyeing it for a moment. The only call he had gotten was to take over a cemetery tour which he did without hesitation. He needed something to do, something to occupy his time.

After the first twelve hours of torturing himself and ignoring his father's phone calls, Trey decided he'd do the only thing he could at the moment for Gabrielle. Research. Find out a bit about the house. Technically he was still helping her with her problem.

Trey chuckled, who the hell was he kidding? Knowledge is power. If he dug up some information, then that gave him a foot back through the door. He was a desperate man. What was that saying about desperate times and measures?

He sat back in his seat looking around the room. He loved the Milton Latter Library, it was not as big as the regional libraries but the place was unique. An old mansion once owned by Marguerite Clark Williams, a starlet of the 1930's, it was converted into a library sometime in the eighties. Yet, it still housed most of the original furnishings including an antique baby grand. The place served mostly children, parents and senior citizens because of its rather large children's reading room and sound-proofed music rooms. The library held an impressive collection of old phonographic records so senior citizens could come sit for as long as they wanted in the grand setting and for a brief amount of time be transported back to their younger years.

The house itself spoke of the past serving the present. What better setting for what he needed to accomplish.

The house film library and archives were also impressive, but his favorite feature of all?

Millicent Trotter.

Millie to the patrons of her beloved library. Not only did Millie know the history of the library like the back of her hand, but the woman had served as a librarian for Orleans County for forty of her sixty three years. She knew most of the town's history by memory and the things she didn't know? Well the darling woman knew just where to find it.

He sat in front of the microfiche reader, one eye still on his phone. Just one call...

"Trey?"

He turned around and saw Millie standing there with a small stack of microfiche.

"What do you have for me Millie?" he said with a smile.

Millie sat down next to him.

“It’s funny I never thought of the James Townhouse as anyone but the James’s, however it seems as if the house itself has a very interesting history.”

“What, did I actually find something to stump Ms. Millie?” he teased.

Millie gently swatted his arm.

“You be nice to an old lady or I’ll take everything I have found and hide it away.”

Trey chuckled.

“My deepest apologies Millie, may I see them?”

Millie pushed the box over to him.

Trey crossed his arms waiting.

Millie laughed.

“You know I love an intriguing story.”

“Of course you do Millie, that’s why you’re about to tell me what you found out.”

Millie took the microfiche out of the reader and stuck another one in its place.

“The James Townhouse original owners were the Rousseau family from Paris, France.”

“France?”

Millie nodded.

“They bought the land and the house for their only son Justin Rousseau. He came to the United States to study in Tulane, a fellow alumni.” Millie teased.

“Why here?” Trey asked.

Millie shrugged her shoulders.

“Best guess is being of French heritage he perhaps had relatives here in New Orleans. He was here to study medicine. About six months later he dropped out of school after he met a woman by the name of Elysia Whitney.”

Trey’s head snapped up.

Elysia.

Gabrielle had said she'd heard a man call the name Ellie – it was close enough to Elysia.

Millie sighed.

“This is where it gets a bit sketchy. It's not written anywhere how Justin's parents felt about the union, but they did build the house for the young couple.”

“Why do you think they would have objected?” Trey asked.

“According to Orleans County records. Justin was eighteen when they got married. Elysia was twenty six.”

“So she robbed the cradle a bit?”

Millie shook her head.

“Back then it was not so widely accepted. The other thing is, from what little information I could find, Elysia did not come from money. Granted there are several families with the surname of Whitney but none with a daughter or relative by the name of Elysia. The only known record of a girl born on the same day as Elysia's was a girl born in Sorrento fifty miles from here.”

“Swamp country?”

Millie nodded again.

“Not what you would call an aristocrat.”

Trey turned in his seat.

“But they bought the land and built the house”

“Right, the young couple lived in it for about a year then...”

Millie focused the film pointing at the headline blaring out at them for the blue screen.

Trey sat back in his seat. It shouldn't have shocked him, but still anytime he saw something like this it made his insides twist.

He looked at the headline again.

“Woman and man found dead in home.”

“They were killed,” he muttered.

Millie shook her head.

“That’s the intriguing part, look.”

Trey read the story carefully.

“Unidentified man? It wasn’t Justin?”

“Not according to this. No one knew who he was or exactly what happened. There were visible signs of a struggle. Both were found stabbed lying in a pool of blood. It was a pretty grizzly scene from what the paper describes.”

“What are the theories?” Trey asked.

“One is that the man was an intruder and Elysia died trying to fight him. However from the way he was dressed it would be unlikely.”

“How was he dressed?”

“According to the police records, a tailored suit.”

“What are the other scenarios?”

“The obvious is that the two were having an affair and it ended tragically. Maybe Elysia tried to end it, he became enraged and killed her.”

“What about Justin?” Trey asked looking at the article a bit more carefully.

“There’s the kicker, the man just disappeared. Like in thin air. No one knows exactly what happened to him or who the dead man in his house was.”

Trey smirked.

“I know my Millie, she senses a challenge.”

Millie laughed.

“I am already looking into it, Trey.”

Millie got up and gathered together the film.

Trey pouted, reaching out for her hand.

“You’re incorrigible, Trey. You know I am not allowed to leave all these here.”

Trey flashed her a dazzling smile.

“But you will because you know it would bring joy to my miserable existence.”

Millie sighed.

“All right,” she said standing up. “By the way, the James Family bought the house in 1930 and it has been in their family since then.”

Trey nodded.

“She’s beautiful by the way,” Millie said winking.

Trey cocked his head.

“Gabrielle James, come on Trey I do read recent papers as well as the ancient ones. You guys made the Time-Picayune, the Arts section.”

“Good God! Was there a paper that we didn’t make?” Trey asked.

“L.A. times, they are not too into the society scene.” Millie smirked.

“You got an hour before I come and pry this stuff away from you.”

Trey took Millie’s hand in his and kissed it. “You’re one of a kind, Millie.”

Millie walked away leaving Trey with the rather large stack of film. He decided to work his way backwards.

Immediately he found himself staring at a picture of Gabrielle. His heart broke for her. She was standing there, her head down, dark sunglasses walking out of the frame. It was Missy’s funeral. She looked completely broken. Trey reached out touching the screen. He sighed then frowned, unable to stop himself he zoomed in on the man standing next to her.

That must be Wyatt. Trey felt his gut twist again.

Would she see Wyatt when she was in New York? Was that the purpose of her visit? Had he acted like such a pillock that he’d driven her straight back into the ungrateful wanker’s arms? For the life of him Trey still could not remember what had transpired that night.

Not wanting to feel his despair again, he continued to look over the old newspaper clippings.



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Gabrielle's NYU graduation announcement, her cotillion, Lord she was even beautiful then, various interviews and articles about Missy and her illustrious career. The article detailing the death of Gabrielle's parents, her parents' marriage, Charlie James's death all the way back to his birth. Then a few tidbits about the James family and their society standing. Finally, he found himself reading again about the death of Elysia Rousseau.

Trey took a deep breath skimming through a few more articles and trying to find the one piece of the puzzle that had eluded him until now. He sat there, his heart pounding out of his chest, emotions betraying him. He wasn't sure if he indeed wanted to find the last tidbit.

His fingers stopped moving the reader through the chronicles when, at last, he found it.

Trey sat back in his seat and closed his eyes for a moment. Just as he thought and just as he'd feared. Leaning forward he read the caption.

*Justin and Elysia Rousseau to host Tulane University Charity Ball.*

Trey's eyes drifted up to the picture above the caption.

A man stood next to a woman sitting on a small stool, the merest hint of a smile on her face.

Trey gulped hard.

The woman smiling from the picture was the mirror image of Gabrielle.

~

Gabrielle lay in her bed. How long had she been here? How long had the party been going on? Why could she never seem to shake off the fatigue that had settled into her system? She needed to get up and out of this house. However every time she tried, she felt two arms wrap around her, lulling her back into slumber.

*"Elysia, never leave me, not again,"* the voice pleaded.

Gabrielle sighed.

The sound of the phone ringing pierced the silence.

"Gabrielle Melissa James! Pick up this phone before I drive Missy's Cadillac through your front door!" she heard a woman's voice bellow.

Gabrielle blinked.

"Bootsie?"

## Chapter 13

Gabrielle opened her eyes and tried to sit up. Something was stopping her - two strong arms around her. Holding her tightly, enveloping her in their embrace.

*"There's nothing out there for you. You're safe here with me, stay. You know you want to stay."*

Gabrielle shook her head.

"Let me go," she pleaded.

She heard a man laugh wickedly.

*"Never."*

He stroked her head, his fingers brushing her long black hair.

*"You know you don't want to go. You want to stay here with me. It feels good,"* he said his voice sounding so soothing, so hypnotic.

Gabrielle's mind began to play through memories. Some her own, others of another life, another time. People dressed in fancy gowns, laughing and dancing in their silk and satin. Smokey rooms, strange chanting. Another rush of memories played through her mind.

A crowded square. A clown chasing a woman around. A man looking down at her kissing her lips.

"Trey," she muttered.

She felt the man's embrace tighten around her.

*"You're mine. You've always been mine. You know it."*

Gabrielle's eyes closed. The music from below got louder penetrating her thoughts. She remembered Trey's arms encircling her, holding her close.

"No, Gabi you're not alone."

Gabrielle gulped.

"No, I don't belong here."

“Yes, *you do*,” he commanded.

She felt her eyes drift shut again. From below she heard the rattling of keys and the door slam. Wind rushed all around her as the sound of frantic, stomping footsteps echoed from the hallway.

“Gabrielle!”

She collapsed back down, panting.

The door swung open.

“Gabrielle Melissa James I am going to chop your hide!”

Gabrielle looked up and saw a very pissed off Bootsie standing above her. Her hands at her hips, eyes glaring.

She watched as Bootsie’s look of fury changed to a look of deep concern.

“Lord child, you are really ill,” Bootsie whispered.

Bootsie crossed the room and stooped to take Gabrielle in her arms.

“You’re as cold as ice. How long have you been sick?”

Gabrielle shook her head.

“Not sick.”

Bootsie groaned.

“Just as stubborn as Missy.”

Bootsie touched her forehead.

“And now you are burning up.”

Bootsie walked over to her closet, grabbing a tote bag.

“It was that storm wasn’t it? I should have just come here myself.”

Bootsie walked over to Gabrielle’s bureau.

“You’re coming with me. Sam is out of town for a few days. You’ll stay with me until you are better.”

Gabrielle's eyes darted around the room. She strained to hear the music that had been playing only moments before Bootsie had made her rather boisterous entrance. However, she heard nothing, only the sound of the wind in the air. No voices, no gripping hold on her. Just the sound of Bootsie packing of few of her things.

"Besides that the big Frank Highland exhibit is the day after tomorrow. You have to be there. Missy worked on getting him a show at the gallery for over a year."

Gabrielle sat up in her bed. Her throat felt scratchy. She wrapped her arms around herself feeling a fevered chill.

Bootsie zipped up her tote bag then looked at her again.

"Sick as a dog you are. Why didn't you call, Gabs?"

Gabrielle shook her head trying to find the words to articulate what had happened to her. But her voice came up short. Instead she pulled back her sheet and looked down at herself in confusion, realizing that she was wearing the same dress she'd been wearing when she first arrived at the house.

"Bootsie how long ago did you call me?"

Bootsie frowned.

"Gabi, that was nearly two days ago. Have you been lying in bed this the whole time? Janine said you called and said you were ill. Told me you told her to tell everyone you were in New York. Honestly Gabrielle, I don't know what was going through that head of yours. Just like your grandmother, sometimes you need people to take care of you. What if this was serious?"

Bootsie sat next to Gabrielle.

She touched her face, her bottom lip trembling a bit.

"Never had any children. Your father was the closest I ever had to one. You and Sam...you're all the family I have left now that Missy is gone. I would never forgive myself if something happened to you," she squeaked out.

Gabrielle rested her head on Bootsie's shoulder. She wanted to tell her everything. Crawl into the comforting embrace of the woman who had unwittingly broken her free of her paranormal imprisonment. But it sounded too odd, too insane.

"And where is the young man that has been occupying all your time for the last week?"

Bootsie felt Gabrielle shudder in her arms.

“Trey, he’ll never forgive me.”

“Forgive you for being sick?” Bootsie asked.

Gabi shook her head hanging it in despair. He would understand of course he would. If anyone could, Trey would.

It was the other part, the man, the voice, the things he did to her. Her lack of strength. Her ill thought-out decision to come to the house. How could he look at her? Be with her after....

“Honey, just tell the man you were sick.”

Gabi gulped thinking of a reasonable explanation for her outburst.

“No, it’s just that I had Janine tell everyone including him that I was in New York.”

“Now why would you go and do a thing like that?”

Gabi’s shrugged her shoulders lamely.

“Bootsie, I need to contact him, tell him where I am, but I can’t right now. I feel really dumb.”

Bootsie patted Gabi on the back. “Later, you’re in no state to worry about him at the moment.

“I can’t believe I let this happen.”

Bootsie hugged Gabrielle tightly.

“Oh, hush. Never you mind. Let’s get you up and home. Let a kooky old battleaxe smother you for a day or so.”

Gabrielle rose to her feet faltering for a moment. Bootsie caught her and swept her away.

“Come on, let’s get out of here.”

~

Yes, yes, yes!! All right! He was a pathetic, sorry sod. Trey debated for over an hour what his plan of action would be. He should have stayed in his apartment. Consulted Professor Mann, done some research, knitted a bloody sweater. Anything but what he

was currently doing. However, here he was rounding the corner of Coliseum Street walking toward the James Townhouse.

He had truly intended to stay at his apartment, working on his computer. Do some laundry, call for another tour gig, but he made the mistake of walking into the bathroom and seeing her peach-scented lotion resting on the sink. She had bought it the morning after their speedy retreat from the townhouse.

He thought she'd looked utterly adorable standing there fidgeting, wondering if she was over-stepping her bounds for buying a full array of her daily toiletries and setting them in his apartment. Secretly it thrilled him. It meant she was planning to be there with him for awhile. He had begun to clear out a dresser drawer for her but then second-thought the idea. Did not want to scare the girl.

He stopped a few houses down. Hell, her neighbor's must think he was a pervert or a lunatic. He'd walked around the block four times. Even turned around the third time, determined to go home. After about a half hour of sitting in his car around the corner, he'd got back out and walked down the street again.

He stopped abruptly.

Wait a tick, Gabrielle's car was gone...was she home? Had she left again? Was she possibly going to see him?

Trey turned and saw a black Lexus parked in the street, one that was not there before.

He walked up to the front door and took a deep breath. He rapped on the door lightly, waited a moment then knocked on it a bit harder.

To his amazement, the door opened with the force of his second round of knocking. The door creaked a bit more open.

Clearing his throat, Trey called out for Gabrielle.

"Gabi?"

Nothing.

He looked at the Hygro Thermometer Clock he'd set up, watching the digits carefully. The temperature was at actual room temperature so no visible signs of any activity.

Trey stood at the door waiting for a reply. He cocked his head and heard a faint sound above.

Crying.

He stepped inside as the sobs began to echo through the house. Panic stricken, he ran up the stairs. Trey ran into Gabrielle's room and saw her sitting there weeping on the floor. Her hands covering her face.

"Gabi!" Trey yelled, his heart going a mile a minute.

He bent down kneeling in front of her. "Gabi, what's wrong?"

She whimpered for a moment.

Trey heard the sound of the clock beeping indicating the drop of temperature. The hairs of the back of his head began to stand as she looked up.

Trey gasped, jumping to his feet.

As she raised her head, the eyes looking at him were not the warm, caring green eyes of his lover. Instead, they were nearly black as night.

## **Chapter 14**

This, of course, had not been the first time Trey had encountered an apparition. He'd seen Henrietta, glimpses of the shadows at the Le Petite Theater. Something like this should not shock him.

However, it was her eyes. Something about them, how tortured and unworldly they looked. He had seen them before when she'd stood over him and Gabi the night they were here. But now they looked truly terrified.

"He wants me. He says he'll never let me go," she whispered.

Trey looked at her again. Her image began to fade in and out. Even the sound of her voice in the air resembled that of a gust of wind. Everything about her seemed airy except her piercing black eyes. Her entire being floated around them, and Trey felt shivers racing along his skin.

"Elysia," he said simply.

The woman looked down and straightened out her black nightgown. She raised her hands palms up.

Trey choked down the scream in his throat as she displayed her blood soaked hands.

"The knife just kept coming down. I couldn't feel it after a while. Said we would be together forever," she whispered.

Trey took a step back. "Who?"

The woman looked out the door. "He's going to come soon. He's angry, said it's almost done."

Trey followed her gaze.

"What is almost done?"

"You can't save her," she whispered.

Trey's heart leaped out of his chest again. "Gabrielle."

Elysia drew her knees to her chest trying in vain to wipe away the blood. "He says it's time. This time forever, with no one to stop him," she muttered.

"Elysia, I don't understand." Trey took a step forward.

Elysia's head shot up. "You must go now," she begged. "Before it's too late. He's coming!"

Trey saw the look of horror across her ethereal countenance. "Please, you must leave now!" she yelled.

"I won't leave you."

Elysia jumped to her feet, floating up into the air. "You can't help me. You can't help her." She looked at the balcony doors, as they swung open violently. "Go! Please!"

Trey felt a rumbling beneath him. He debated for a moment, but then felt it in the air. It wasn't so much an eerie sensation, or even fear. Whatever was coming was evil, it felt more evil and vile than anything Trey had ever experienced. He truly didn't know whether to stand there and try to do something to help the tortured woman, or run.

Before he could make up his mind he felt himself being shoved against the wall.

Elysia was standing in front of him, her bloodstained hands outstretched. The door of the bedroom swung open just as the ones to balcony shut tight. Trey pressed his hand against the latch trying to pry them open again but to no avail. He leaned against them and frantically gathered his thoughts.

What did she mean? Her cryptic messages swarmed through his mind. He felt the bile rising in his throat as the pieces began to come together.



Gabrielle's uncanny likeness to the ghostly woman, the house and the evil within.

He'd heard stories, of course he had. It came with the territory. Paranormal attacks were well documented. But, as strange as it might have sounded coming from him, Trey had always viewed them as a bit of a farce.

There was just no way this was happening.

At last the doors gave and Trey flung himself over the balcony and quickly climbed down the small wooden trellis. He silently prayed no one was watching since the last thing he needed was for the police to come and arrest him.

How the bloody hell would he explain this to them?

Trey's knees slammed onto the ground. He lifted himself up, still feeling the stinging sensation coursing through his hands and legs. Gingerly he stood up shaking out the ache. He looked up at the balcony. The house was silent, deadly silent. Taking another look around he limped out the front, wrought-iron gate and to his car.

About half way there, his cell phone rang.

Trey looked at the number frowning for a moment. It did not look familiar. Almost on autopilot Trey pressed the talk button, wincing a bit as he brought the phone to his ear. In light of what had just transpired, perhaps it was not the best time to try to hold a telephone conversation. However, since he'd picked up....

"Fairfax," he managed to choke out.

"Mr. Fairfax, this is Bootsie Bondurant."

Trey stopped dead in his tracks.

"Mrs. Bondurant, how can I help you?"

"Actually Mr. Fairfax. I was hoping to help you. Gabrielle is with me."

Trey bolted into a near sprint.

"Where do you live, I need to see her."

"She does not want to see you, Mr. Fairfax."

Trey stopped in front of the door of his car. He shut his eyes tightly leaning against it.

"I see."

*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

"Maybe you can tell me what happened, Mr. Fairfax. She seems a bit off, ill even," Bootsie explained.

Trey fished out his keys trying to contain the heartache in his voice. "Perhaps it's just a bit of jet lag, Mrs. Bondurant?" he said quietly.

Trey listened to the long pause on the phone.

"That's just it, Mr. Fairfax, she would not have jet lag."

"I don't understand." Trey said.

"She did not go to New York. She was here the whole time."

Trey nearly dropped the phone.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Bondurant. I don't think I heard you right. Did you say she didn't go to New York?"

"I am not supposed to tell you this, but I thought you should know. She never went there. She was here the whole time. Sick as a dog. Found her curled up in her bed white as a sheet. Didn't even know what day it was, poor dear."

Trey tried to stop his hands from shaking. "So she has been here at the townhouse for two days now?"

"Yes."

Oh, God no...

"Tell me where you live, Mrs. Bondurant. I need to see Gabi now."

"She'd kill me if she knew I was calling you. She's out like a light anyways. Keeps waking up muttering the strangest things. Fever will do that to you."

"Mrs. Bondurant, I think I can convince her to talk to me. If I could just ..."

"I don't know what happened between the two of you." Bootsie interrupted, "but she seems right upset. I really don't think that would be a good idea."

Trey rested his head against his steering wheel. "Please," he whispered.

There was another hopeful pause.

"I'm sorry, I just can't."

Just like that all his hopes were dashed.

“However, there is an exhibit at the gallery in a few days. It’s not my fault if you read the paper. You like Frank Highland don’t you?” Bootsie asked slyly.

Trey smiled.

“Immensely.”

“I will make sure you get an invitation then.”

Trey let out the breath he had been unconsciously holding. “Mrs. Bondurant, you are an angel.”

Bootsie laughed. “And don’t you forget it.”

Trey clicked off the phone allowing himself to feel a bit light-hearted for a moment. He looked up the street to the townhouse and closed his eyes. He had work to do.

Trey drove down the street breaking nearly every traffic law. The tires screeched as he pulled into the parking lot of Tulane University. Jumping out of the car, he ran up the stairs of the Psychology building and into the back research room.

He waved at the clerk as he ran by and flung open the door to the Paranormal Studies archive room. He quickly walked down a few aisles scanning books and a few magazines. He stopped in front of a small shelf, panting with exertion. With a sigh he pulled out two or three books and walked over to the small table.

Calming himself he opened one of the books and began to write down a few notes. Behind him he heard the door opening and he tried to suppress an irritated moan.

Coming here was like playing Russian Roulette. Sometimes he would run into a serious psychologist like himself, other times he would have to endure some freaky bloke convinced that aliens had taken over the security posts in campus.

Trey looked up for a moment. Just as he feared, standing in front of him was a skinny man with an alien head shirt with *I come in peace* in neon slimy green letters blazing across his chest.

The nerdy student looked down at Trey’s books, rolling his eyes.

Trey fought the urge to punch the pillock across his jaw.

The man snickered.

“That subject is so done. Who the hell reads about possession anymore?”

~

Trey stood against a back wall hidden in the shadows. He didn't want to shock her right off the bat. Didn't want to scare her. He had spent the last two days finding out everything he could about the house, his theory, the history of Elysia Rousseau and her husband.

Millie even got into the fray. Doing whatever she could to find out how and why Justin disappeared.

Yet in all of it, the concern, the race against time, all Trey wanted at that moment was to see her.

He watched all the people circulating around the room trying not to give in to his overwhelming sense of guilt. He had seen her car there that night and he'd assumed she'd taken a cab to the airport. Maybe if he'd bothered to walk up to the house he would have found her and been able to rescue her.

Then again, he still didn't know what drove her to go back to the house. He still had no idea if they'd fought or if she just left on her own accord. Tonight though he would find out.

He heard the applause from the direction of the door. His heart stopped at the sight of her.

She was still gorgeous, breathtaking, alluring, all those things that had stupefied him before. But there was something in her eyes. Sadness, pain, fear. He watched as she clung to Bootsie's arm smiling at everyone.

She took a deep breath as she approached Frank Highland then drank a glass of champagne quickly. She sighed smoothing out her black cocktail dress, closing her eyes for a moment as if she was trying to regroup.

Trey swallowed down the tears threatening to spill. Two days. She had been alone with that evil for two days. At that moment, something broke in Trey. Stepping out of the shadows he stood there watching her.

Gabrielle looked up as if she'd sensed him. She turned and looked at him and took a few deep breaths before depositing her empty glass on the table next to her.

Trey's heart broke as her exhausted eyes glassed over. She looked so apprehensive yet so needy at the same time. He could only imagine what kind of monsters she'd fought in her head over the last few days. He watched as she cast her eyes down to the floor in shame. No longer being able to take her torment Trey ate up the distance between them.

Gabrielle watched him too, keeping her eyes fixed on his as he got closer and closer.

Finally, he stood right in front of her. Music filled the air, the soft sounds of a piano playing *Someone to Watch Over Me* sent a comforting vibe throughout the room. Without a word, Trey took her hand, guiding her to the dance floor.

Once they reached the center he held her close, careful not to hold her too tightly. She stiffened for a moment in his arms then relaxed. He swayed slowly letting her find their rhythm. After a moment she relaxed melting into his embrace. Sighing in the safety of his arms.

Trey closed his eyes and kissed the top of her head. There were so many things he wanted to say. So many reassurances he needed to convey but he decided it could wait, all of it could.

He would just hold her and try to chase the monsters away.

## **Chapter 15**

Trey worked the locks to his front door and pushed it open. He turned around reaching for Gabrielle's hand then stepped aside to usher her in.

Gabrielle took his offered comfort immediately, slipping her hand into his. She walked into his apartment then stood there for a moment waiting for him to close the door behind them. She heard him bolt the door shut and flinched when she heard the door bang against the frame a few times followed by a string of mumbled curses from Trey.

"Sorry, pet, the door has a bit of a kink. Sometimes the lock doesn't line up right, takes a few knocks to get it into place."

Gabrielle nodded then walked over to the couch. She sat there perfectly still staring straight ahead.

Trey threw his keys on the counter and watched her for a moment. She hadn't said much all night. She'd been social enough, her quietness only accentuated the elegant feel of the entire exhibit. None were the wiser that something was eating away at the James heiress. Only Trey and Bootsie seemed to notice the change in her.

She'd held onto him all night. They'd talked about a few of Highland's photos, mingled with some of her grandmother's friends and admirers. Gabrielle went out of her way to impress the reporter of the art section of the Times-Picayune. All in all, Gabrielle seemed to be handling herself okay. It was not until Trey tried to excuse himself to use

the restroom that Gabrielle seemed to panic. She grasped at his arm and shot him a look of apprehension.

“Be back in a tick. I promise, love.”

Still the look of despair stayed steady on her face. It wasn't until Trey kissed her forehead and motioned for Bootsie to join Gabrielle that she relaxed.

When Trey returned she took his arm again and didn't let him go for the rest of the night.

When the evening's festivities ended, Bootsie made the announcement that she too was calling it a night.

Trey had already intended to ask Gabrielle to come and stay with him, and there she was, pleading with her eyes in such a manner that all Trey wanted to do was pick her up, cradle her in his arms and carry her out of the gallery and all the way home.

Bootsie seemed to understand. She kissed Gabrielle goodnight and gave Trey a classic *Take care of her or I'll twist your head off* look.

Trey didn't mind, he would take care of her. Chase the monsters away. Hold her if she'd let him.

He looked at her again as she stared straight ahead. Slowly he walked to her and dropped to his knees before her trying to will her gaze away from the wall and into his eyes.

After a long moment she looked at him.

Trey smiled, and stroked her cheek.

Gabrielle turned to the side and cast her head down.

Trey's eyebrows furrowed. “Come on Gabrielle, please talk to me.”

“I...just...what I mean is... I should have called you. Told you. I'm sorry,” she said.

Trey brushed the tears away with his thumb. He placed two fingers underneath her chin and guided her back to his gaze.

“I don't blame you for anything that happened.”

Gabrielle's eyes widened, tears filling her green eyes again.

“You know?” she choked out.

Trey sat down next to her. He took her hands in his stroking her palms lightly.

“Not the details, but I know you were in the house for a few days on your own. I don’t know how or why you were there...”

Gabrielle stood up abruptly and walked to the window. She hugged herself rubbing at her arms as if she was chilled. In reality, it was a typical hot and sticky Louisiana night. The air was thick and heavy. Yet, Gabrielle shivered as if she was in the Antarctic.

Trey took off his coat and dropped it on the couch. He looked over at Gabrielle for a moment, then took off his dress shirt fumbling with the fastens that suddenly seemed to become somewhat foreign to him. Feeling a bit more relaxed he walked up behind Gabi placing his hands on her shoulders. He waited a beat before snaking his arms around her and resting the top of his head against the back of her neck.

“We don’t have to talk about that now,” he whispered.

Gabrielle closed her eyes and shook her head. “No, we have to. I want to.” Turning around, she looked down for a moment then took a deep breath. “Bootsie called me while you were having dinner with your father. She reminded me I’d left the shutters on the hothouse open. Missy’s roses... I went over there to make sure the rain wasn’t wrecking them. Everything was going fine until I looked up at the window.” Gabrielle began to shake.

Trey instinctively drew her closer letting her tuck her head under his chin.

She took another breath and continued.

“Before I knew it I was in the house, but everything was different. I can’t explain it. There was this man, he wouldn’t let me go. I couldn’t move, then suddenly Bootsie was there.”

“The man - was he the same man as before?”

Gabrielle nodded holding Trey tighter.

Trey held her for a moment longer trying to calm his own nerves.

“I don’t know why I didn’t tell you. I think I was ashamed. I think if I told you that somehow it would make everything that happened to me while I was at the house true. Because you would believe me. You would know I wasn’t crazy. A part of me wanted to dismiss it. But I can’t,” Gabrielle said softly. “I just don’t understand why.”

Trey took a step back and Gabrielle looked up at him obviously thinking she’d said the wrong thing.

Sensing her fear, Trey kissed her forehead then walked her back over to the couch. He sat her down and walked over to his computer desk. "I need to show you something," he said pulling out a file.

Trey pulled her to him wrapping an arm around her. Once she was comfortable against his chest he settled his hand on her waist while the other handed her the file. Gabrielle looked at the contents carefully reading about the murder and the young couple who had resided in her family's home before they'd purchased it.

Trey drew tiny circles on her shoulders. He stared at her watching her reaction, eventually she would find it. She would flip the page and see it.

Her eyes widened again as she gasped.

Trey held her tightly as her breathing became more labored. She released the paper in her hand staring wildly into the distance.

"How can it be? I don't understand," she muttered looking at the image in front of her.

Trey picked up the picture and handed it back to Gabrielle.

"Her name was Elysia Rousseau. That was her husband, Justin. As you just read, she was murdered in your house."

Gabrielle nodded.

"But Justin isn't right. His name is Jarek."

"Jarek?"

Gabrielle bit her bottom lip.

"Yes, his name is Jarek."

"He talked to you?"

"Yes, I mean he must have thought I was Elysia. He talked to me like he was talking to her. Like I was her."

Trey nodded. "He thinks you are, but Gabi, his name was Justin. Maybe it was a pet name she had for him or..."

"She was having an affair," Gabrielle said simply. She pulled away from Trey's embrace. "They were romantically involved. He wanted her to leave her husband. She



wouldn't, maybe that's why he kept me there. Why he wouldn't let me leave. I tried to leave, but...he was so strong."

Trey sat up talking her hands in his. "Don't do this to yourself, Gabi. You had no idea what was going on. This is my fault."

"How is this your fault?"

Trey sighed. "If I had just come home, saw you were gone. I would have figured it out. Instead I went out and got pissed. My father said some things. I reacted like a bloody eighteen-year-old spoiled brat. If only I'd just come back. Instead I woke up on the couch, thought I'd done something to make you mad. I thought you went to New York to get away from me."

Gabrielle pulled completely away staring at him incredulously.

Trey braced himself, waiting for her to yell, scream, slap him- something. Instead, Gabrielle began to giggle. Her giggles became laughs, her laughs became full body tremors. She laughed until she cried.

Trey watched carefully trying to suss out if she was genuinely amused or if she had just entered a fit of hysteria.

Wiping the tears from her eyes she finally calmed.

"So let me get this straight. We have not talked to each other for nearly a week because I thought you wouldn't understand; yet, you knew all along what was happening to me. And you thought I was angry because you got drunk and said something horrible to me even though I was not even here when you returned home?"

Trey blinked. Oh, bloody Hell! He chuckled. "Aren't we a pair?"

They shared another laugh before Gabrielle fell into his arms again.

He held her stroking the length of her back.

"What does he want with me? Jarek, that is."

Trey kissed her head.

"It's going to sound strange but he wants you. He wants to make you her. Somehow he's able to do it. I have to do some more research. Honestly, this is not my strong suit. Studying paranormal activity is one thing, but this is beyond me."

Gabrielle nodded trying to will back her tears.

Trey tipped her head to him then kissed her lips.

“But I swear to you, Gabi, I’ll find a way to help you. We’re in this together.”

Gabi felt the tears fall. She smiled at him then kissed him with trembling lips.

“Together?”

Trey nodded. “Was there ever any doubt?”

Gabrielle shook her head. “Maybe before, but no, not now, not with you right here.”

Trey sat up cupping Gabi’s face and kissed her again. First, slowly and deliberately. Then he pressed his lips against hers more firmly, coaxing her to open her mouth and allow him access. She only resisted for a moment, letting the soothing sensation of his tongue caress the inside of her mouth to overtake the rest of her emotions.

She snaked her arms around him holding him closer to her.

After a long while, he dragged her into his lap, his kisses steady, firm. With relative ease he rose from the couch, Gabrielle still tucked into his arms, and walked into the bedroom. He stood her on her feet and looked down at her. Reaching around her found the zipper of her dress. Watching her reaction he began to pull it down. Keeping his eyes fixed on hers he heard the dress hit the floor.

Taking a step back he pulled down the sheets of his bed, then spun them both around until she was sitting. He pushed her back until she was lying down then swung her legs up until she was resting full length on the mattress.

He pulled off his undershirt and took off his pants. He looked down at the vision in his bed. Gabrielle, beautiful. Clad only in her black lace brasserie and matching panties, staring up at him with questioning eyes.

He sat down on the bed then lay down next to her pulling her against his chest. Ignoring the feeling of her knee rubbing against his boxer shorts he kissed her again. “Just let me hold you for a little while,” he said.

Gabrielle nodded.

They lay there for a long time, neither of them moving, just reveling in the feel of being in each other’s arms again.

Gabrielle lifted her head kissing him, at first softly, then more insistently.

Trey debated whether or not to put a halt to her actions. Not that he didn’t want her because, Lord had he missed her. He wanted nothing more than to get lost in her again.

*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

It was killing him, this tender assault of her mouth against his. The feel of her near-naked form brushing his. All he wanted, all he had craved for the last week now lay there in his arms. He was coming undone. But he did not want her to feel as if she was obliged. He was here because he'd vowed to stay with her. That was what she needed most.

Just as he was deciding to retreat. Gabrielle pulled away from him.

"I want to feel as though I'm part of you," she pleaded.

That was all it took. Trey took her face in his hands, kissing her madly. He flipped her over on the bed and began to kiss her neck. His hands drifted to her bra, twisting the front clasp open. He cupped her breast in his hands then lowered his head, brushing his nose on the tip of her peak before sucking on it.

Gabrielle mewled arching her back a little, running her fingers through the hair on the back of Trey's head.

He released one breast then went for the other paying attention to both, his hand squeezing and caressing it carefully.

Trey looked up into her eyes as he bestowed kisses on her and descended down her body. He hooked his pinkies on the sides of her panties and pulled them down, his eyes never leaving hers.

Gabrielle began to pant.

Trey inhaled deeply letting out a small moan. He licked his lips and placed a hot, slow, open-mouthed kiss onto her clit.

She gasped, grasping at the pillow under her head.

He licked the length of her center delighting in the taste of her. Lapping up all she had to offer.

She moaned again as he suckled her nub, stroking her nether lips with his hand. Her hips bucked into the air as her head thrashed side to side. Trey continued to feast on her. Watching her reaction, watching her lose control as she surrendered to the excruciating ecstasy he was inciting within her.

Her eyes went wide as her whole body quaked. He slipped his finger inside and felt her inner walls spasm as she climaxed. Determined to see her completely sated, he found the spot inside that would drive her over the edge again and again.

Gabrielle bit her lip and let out a series of ragged breaths. Finally, he allowed her to find release once more, bringing her down as slowly and as tenderly as he'd taken her up.

He climbed the length of her, wrapping his hands underneath her shoulders.

She widened her legs to give him better access.

He looked lovingly into her eyes as he entered her. He watched them glaze over in pleasure for just a moment, then roll upwards.

“Trey.”

Trey kept up an undemanding pace, enjoying the feeling of Gabrielle in his arms again. Feeling her skin against his. Her lips kissing every available part of him she could reach from this angle.

“God, Gabi,” he mumbled. “Missed you so much.”

Gabrielle kissed him and just like that he was lost again. Drowning in her. The feel of her encasing him, warm, hot. All of it was doing him in.

Their climaxes crept up on them so suddenly, so quietly, yet with such force that they both threw their heads back in pleasure and amazement as they clung to each other trying to catch their breaths. Holding on as if their worlds had just spun out of control, acting as if the only way to still it was to cleave themselves to the other person.

Once it steadied, their lips found each other’s. Bestowing thanks and gratitude for what they had just shared.

They gave themselves to each other over and over again all throughout the night. Only when their fears were soothed, when their desperation had dissipated, did they lie quietly in each other’s arms once more. When they were secure in the knowledge that no one was going anywhere, at least not for a while.

Only then did they close their eyes and find some peace.

## **Chapter 16**

Gabrielle opened her eyes. The room she was standing in was smoky, humid. The sound of a scratchy version of *I Wanna Be Loved By You* played on a victrola in a dark corner. Gabrielle laid a hand on her stomach feeling the smooth silk resting against her skin. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Her hair was perfectly pulled back, curls covering her ears giving the appearance of a short bob cut when in actuality her long tresses were hidden in as intricate bun behind her head.

*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

Her makeup was flawless. Cherry red lips, perfect eyeliner, even a fake mole on her upper lip adding to the alluring package. It was hot as always. Gabrielle whisked the fan that appeared in her hands in front of her face trying to gain some relief from the relentless heat.

Gabrielle looked down at her gown. Dressed to the nines, yet again. A blue silk number with silver sequins scattered all around the dress causing her to shine as she moved. She loved the feel of it against her hot flesh. She watched the men in the room eye her with lust and want. Before she could control it, a devilish smile played across her face.

A woman walked up to her groaning in frustration.

“No matter what you do it’s like you’re in Hades,” she said.

Gabrielle found herself smiling.

“It’s New Orleans, what did you expect, great parties, great music, great booze. And air so hot it nearly chokes you.”

The woman laughed.

“Yet, you are still here Ellie. Why is that? You married into money, let that fabulous young husband of yours take you away from here.”

Gabrielle groaned.

“Justin would never leave here. Besides that, Mommy and Daddy already told their precious little boy if he tried to leave here they would cut him off,” Gabrielle spat out.

The woman laughed. “Already disenchanted with married life I see.”

Gabrielle sighed. “No, it’s just sometimes Justin acts so...old. He’s young, he should be out having a ball. But even now he is stuck at home working. Family business and responsibilities. That and his loyalty to that damn college.”

The girl patted Gabrielle on the back. “Poor Ellie. How did you slip away tonight?”

Gabrielle laughed wickedly. “I told him I was visiting a sick friend.”

The two women exchanged a discreet smile as mischief gleamed in their eyes.

“It’s good to see you out Ellie. A party just isn’t a party without you.”

Gabrielle smiled. “And you know how much I love a good party.”

*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

The woman standing next to her grabbed a glass off a tray floating by and handed it to her. "Just got this in. Shame for it to go waste," she said winking at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle sipped the martini she was holding, enjoying the burning sensation as it crawled down her throat. "Thank God, I needed that," she muttered.

The woman laughed. "There's that delicious Mr. Gavin," she said, motioning to a man entering the room. "I had better get my hooks into him before Dottie sees him."

Gabrielle laughed.

"Call me if you need reinforcements." Having said that, the woman walked away.

Gabrielle scanned the room watching the booze flow freely. Everyone seemed to be loosening up. Dropping their inhibitions. The alcohol enhanced the already riotous scene.

Still, Gabrielle stood there demurely nursing her drink. Fanning herself slowly. She smiled to herself, sensing him. Someone was watching her so intently she could feel the heat from his gaze. She loved this game, pretending as if she didn't know, couldn't feel their want, their desire.

Finishing her drink she placed it on a nearby table, picked up a cigarette holder and inserted a cigarette into it. She was about to go in search of a light when a small flame appeared in front of her face. Gabrielle smiled leaning forward, inhaling deeply, allowing the cigarette resting at the end to burn. She exhaled a small puff of smoke slowly.

"Thank you," she said softly without turning around to see who it was.

"You're welcome," she heard a man's voice.

"And you are?" she asked, still facing away from him.

She felt a body press firmly against her back. A cool hand skimmed her bare arm.

"I'm the man who's been devouring you with his eyes all night long."

Gabrielle felt herself shudder.

"A name would have done nicely," she replied.

The man chuckled. "What fun would that have been? Besides, you still haven't told me yours," he whispered into her ear, his hand snaking around her waist.

Gabrielle's eyes drifted shut. "Elysia," she heard herself say. She felt the man smile against her throat.

“Yes, you are.”

He kissed her throat causing her to whimper.

“My name is Jarek. And you, my dear, are going to be dangerous, I can already feel it.”

She felt him swing her around and take her hand. He pulled her to the dance floor smiling down at her. When they reached the center on the floor he yanked her to him with such force, such confidence that all Gabrielle could do was wrap her hands around his neck.

His fingers played up her arms and wrapped around her own. He cocked his head feeling her wedding set resting on her ring finger.

“Where is the lucky bastard?” he asked.

“Not here.”

Jarek sighed.

“Good thing. If he was I would have to kill him. How dare he think he could have my girl.”

Gabrielle laughed. “First off, I just met you so your argument is pretty weak; second of all, I am my own woman, I am no one’s girl.”

Jarek crushed her in his arms, grabbing her by the neck to place a bruising kiss on her lips. She reared back to fight him only to get lost in the sensation of his tongue plunging into her mouth. Teasing the inner crevices in such a way that she felt as if he was putting her in a trance. She melted against him, surrendering.

Finally, he pulled away leaving her panting with shock and want.

Jarek placed a series of soft wet kisses along her throat. “You see, you are mine,” he whispered.

Gabrielle looked up into his intense, dark eyes.

*“You’re mine.”*

She bolted up from her sleep covered in sweat, frantically looking around the room trying to regain her bearings. No longer was she in the smoky room trapped in Jarek’s possessive embrace.

*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

She was in a dark room, lying naked in bed. The music faded away and the small space filled with silence. She looked down and saw Trey sleeping peacefully next to her.

She closed her eyes trying to calm herself, praying to God that she didn't wake him. To her relief he stirred for only a moment then rolled over. She sat there perfectly still until finally her heart stopped pounding out of her chest. Carefully, she rose from the bed searching for something to wear.

She caught sight of Trey's T-shirt on the floor; pulling it on she padded across the floor and into the bathroom. Turning on the light, she ran the faucet and splashed cold water on her face trying to make sense of her dream.

She'd been there, felt every minute of it, but she wasn't there. It was Elysia's life, but somehow, again, she had stepped into the role. Everything collided in her mind. Her reality, Ellie's past, all of it swirled around inside her head trying desperately to mesh together. She gripped the sides of the sink until her knuckles turned white. She had to fight this. Not let this over take her life.

She opened her eyes, staring into the mirror.

She heard his voice in her head.

*"Good thing. If he was I would have to kill him."*

Gabrielle flinched. It should have sounded like a joke but there was a tone in his voice. A seriousness that frightened Gabrielle. Had he done just that?

*"You're mine."*

Gabrielle shook her head trying to will the voice out.

*"Ellie,"* she heard in the wind.

Gabrielle froze. She felt the air cool around her. She began to tremble as she looked in the mirror. There he was standing behind her smiling. "Jarek," she choked out.

"Come home," he demanded.

Gabrielle's gaze drifted to her own reflection. She gasped watching her eyes flicker from green to black for just a moment. She spun around so fast she knocked Trey's razor set off the sink top causing a loud clang to reverberate around the room.

Jarek stood there his hand stretched up to her.

"No," she cried sinking to the floor covering her ears, rocking back and forth.



"You're mine," he sneered.

"No!" she cried, louder now. She felt him move closer to her. Suddenly there was a bang on the door.

"Gabi?"

The door swung open and, just like that, Jarek was gone.

~

Trey awoke to the sound of something hitting the ground in the distance. As his eyes adjusted in the dark and he realized Gabi was not asleep next to him, he heard a thud from the bathroom as if someone had fallen to the floor. He jumped out of bed pausing for only a moment to throw on a pair of sweats. He ran to the bathroom.

Opening the door he found her there sitting on the floor in his shirt. Her hands covering her ears rocking and back forth, all the color drained from her yet again. Trey reached across the sink and grabbed a towel off the rack. He ran cold water on it then bent down and placed the cool rag on the back of her neck.

Gabrielle's head snapped up and she took a breath, ready to scream again. She stopped, her mouth still open and sobbed with relief.

"It's you," she whispered.

Trey pulled her to him trying his best to cradle her in his arms. "He was here."

Trey tilted her head toward him. "How?"

Gabrielle bit her lip. "I was dreaming about him, then he was here. I thought he could only... I'm not at the house. How could he be here? Trey, it's not the house, is it? It's me. He said I was his. What if he's-"

Trey silenced her with a kiss. Not like Jarek's rough caress, a gentle one. Full of comfort and reassurance.

"No, don't, Gabi," he whispered. Trey lifted her easily. He walked across his tiny apartment and placed her in bed.

Gabi stiffened.

"Don't worry, sleep."

Gabi shook her head. "I'll dream."

"I'll watch over you," he promised. "Nothing will happen to you."

Gabi shook her head again.

"Trust me."

That was all it took. Gabrielle went lax in his arms, burying her face against his chest, clutching him tightly.

He listened waiting for her breathing to slow down, her accelerated heart beat to find a more tranquil rhythm. Finally, she found sleep again.

He kissed the top of her head and stroked her back, rolling over so she rested on his chest. His mind ran a mile a minute. The people he would have to call in the morning, the research he needed to do. He had a tour to conduct, a few bills to pay on top of that. Tomorrow would be a long day. He needed his rest. He would manage somehow, he had to. True to his word, Trey lay there, holding her close to him. Standing guard over the most precious thing he was ever fortunate enough to hold in his arms.

## **Chapter 17**

He really should feel guilty. Blowing off his tours for the first time since he'd come to work for Joshua's father, paying off only a few of his bills and deciding the rest could wait for a bit longer. Avoiding Professor Mann and his over-enthusiastic willingness to be a consultant on this case study. He should have been responsible, let Gabi have a bit of normality, tell her she should go into the gallery and get some work done. However, when she batted her eyelashes at him and made her request he knew he was down for the count.

She was sitting there amongst the sticky red tables at Café du Monde trying to devour a beignet as demurely as one could with a layer of powdered sugar falling off the sides of it onto her hand and floating up her nose. Covering her mouth with her hand she chewed frantically trying to hide her obviously less-than-put-together state.

Trey would have none of that. He reached over, grabbed her wrist and yanked it down gently.

Gabrielle tried to lower her head again Trey would not allow for it. Gabrielle was always breathtaking to him. Asleep, awake. Dressed to the nines or in one of his old t-shirts. But the sight of her now...

Her head cocked to the side trying in vain to swallow the remnants of her beignet, her hair in the sunlight, her face still smothered in powdered sugar. It was like watching an angel at play.

The dress she wore only accentuated the effect. She looked like the picture-perfect southern belle. Suitably attired in a white cotton, ankle length dress with lace accents and spaghetti straps. While a large straw hat sitting off to the side gathering powder sugar completed the ensemble. All of it, everything, made Trey want to grab her, haul her onto his lap and assist in the most unconventional of ways to cleanse her face.

He had to be careful though, he knew it. She was still so fragile, so afraid. He couldn't fault her for that. Which is why he'd probably agreed so quickly to play hooky with her today. She needed the distraction and, if he was being honest with himself, so did he.

It was strange to him. Everything that he ever wanted professionally was dangling right in front of him. Hard evidence of a paranormal occurrence, the resource and know-how to make it credible, he could see his book writing itself.

Why was it then that he had no desire to delve into it and sit in front of a monitor, get a crew together to take over the James's townhouse like he had with the Le Petit Theater. Even though most of the so-called evidence he had gathered from there was mostly circumstantial. Here there was bona fide proof.

He hadn't run with it. Didn't want to. All he wanted to do was spend the day with the beautiful girl sitting across from him doing what ever he could to ensure that enchanting smile stayed on her face for as long as possible.

Finally, she swallowed the last of her beignet and coughed a bit, sipping on the world-famous chicory coffee in front of her.

Unable to resist any longer, Trey reached across the table wiping off the powdered sugar from around her cherry-red lips.

Gabrielle looked down at her dress wiping it down furiously. "These things are a bit messy."

Trey laughed. "I never saw the draw. Am I correct when I assume they are just donuts disguised with a fancy French title?"

Gabi laughed once more.

"What?" he asked.

"I just have never heard you sound more uptight and British than you did at that moment."

Trey frowned flinching a bit as if she'd slapped him across the face. With a look of determination he took the pastry from the plate and raised it up to and into his mouth. His eyes widened in shock as he tasted it. The dough practically melted in his mouth

and the powdered sugar just added to the effect. He opened his mouth to share his discovery with Gabrielle only to choke on the powdered sugar.

Gabi reached over handing him a glass of water making no attempt to hide her amusement about his plight.

Finally he stopped coughing and glared over at her.

“You knew that was going to happen.”

Gabi held her sides trying to subdue her delight.

“Yup.”

Trey coughed again.

“And may I say, you have never sounded so American as you did at that moment.”

Gabi batted her eyelashes making an attempt to look innocent and sweet.

Trey crossed his arms holding his ground.

“You’re right. And I just couldn’t resist. It happens to everyone the first time they eat one. Look.” Gabi said gesturing to the other tables.

Trey looked around. She was right, at three table people were gasping, coughing and reaching for water as they ate the world-famous confection.

“The locals love it,” Gabi beamed.

Trey shook his head.

“I just thought since you agreed to let me play tour guide to you for once, I would start you off with something fun,” Gabi explained.

This time Trey listened to his instincts. He reached across the table and took her by the hand. Gabrielle stood up knowing what Trey wanted. She was beside him in two steps sliding down sideways onto his lap and taking his face in her hands. Showing him the same courtesy that he gave her, she wiped off the powdered sugar from his mouth then leaned down to kiss him. She pulled away, but felt his hand on the back of her neck drawing her closer to him once more.

They kissed again, a lazy smooth kiss. Then held each other tightly. They stopped kissing and laughed, even though their lips still remained pressed to the others, as they heard another unsuspecting patron choke back powdered sugar.

~

They walked down the street, arms wrapped around each other as long as the humid weather made it bearable to do so. When the heat became too much they were contented in holding each other's hands.

Trey listened to her intently as she pointed out a few sights. He chuckled in surprise as she pointed up a walkway of a two-story building on Chartres at a clump of trees that turned out to be banana trees misplaced in this odd city.

They crossed Ursuline Street and stopped in front on an opening to peer into it.

"Do you smell that?" Gabi asked.

Trey took a deep breath. He looked at her in surprise.

"I smell this everywhere I go."

Gabrielle nodded. "There's a sweet olive tree in there as well as the floor being usually riddled with confederate jasmines. The two scents are everywhere in the city."

Gabrielle closed her eyes taking in the scent. Unable to resist he bent down and bestowed a kiss on her lips.

She paid the four dollar admission into the Beauregard House and talked a little about its history. Guided him back down Chartres to stare through two, wrought iron gates at the Ursuline Convent, the only structure to have survived two fires, affirming to the superstitious locals that the Ursuline Nuns, who had been in New Orleans since nearly the groundbreaking of the city, were truly blessed by God.

"They established an orphanage, a military hospital and the Ursuline Academy, the oldest all-girl's school in the country. Missy had a grant named after her there. The James family donates to them all the time."

"Something else close to your grandmother's heart?" Trey asked.

Gabi laughed. "No, that one was out of guilt. She and Bootsie met there."

"Guilt?"

Gabi bit her lip. "Missy and Bootsie were learning how to drive in the parking lot and crashed into the statue of St. Angela Merici."

"It sounds like something your grandmother would do," Trey said shaking his head.

Gabrielle stopped walking and gazed into his eyes.

"I'm sorry you never met her. I think she would have liked you."

"Is that so? And why do you think she would have approved?"

Gabrielle took a step forward and wrapped her arms around Trey. Without a moments hesitation he encircled her in his arms and kissed the top of her head. His hands rested around her holding her against him.

Gabrielle smiled feeling safe, warm, protected in his arms.

"Because of that."

~

They continued their walking tour of the town Gabrielle adored.

As they made their way down St. Peter's Street Trey cocked his eyebrow. "Uh, pet, I have been to the Le Petit Theater."

Gabi raised her eyebrows in response. "You really think I'm taking you there? Come on," she said pulling him down. They stood in front of a small building pointing up at a small apartment. "You know who lived up there?" Gabi asked.

Trey shook his head.

An artist by the name of William Spratling, he made that book of caricatures 'Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles.' His roommate had a fan-following as well."

"Who was his room mate?"

"William Faulkner, he wrote a Soldier's Pay in that room right there," Gabi said pointing into a small window.

Trey stood back, mystified.

Gabi stood in front of him leaning back on him a little. "Missy hated it that New Orleans had been reduced to Party Central. All anyone ever thinks about when they are here is Mardi Gras and the eerie things that have happened over the years...no offense."

Trey chuckled. "None taken."

"People don't know the real New Orleans. What made this city famous was the people, the things that occurred here. Do you know this was the only U.S. port ever to be protected by pirates? Real murdering, pillaging pirates. Why? Because the city was founded by dreamers and losers. People society forgot."

Trey smiled. "The end of wisdom is to dream high enough to lose the dream in the seeking it," he whispered, quoting Faulkner.

Gabi turned around. "The past is not dead, it's not even the past," she quipped back.

Trey kissed her forehead trying to shoo away the relevance the quote had on their present situation. He tightened his grip around her burying his nose into her hair.

"Thank you for sharing this with me. I would have never guessed. I grew up decidedly British, never thought anywhere in the States had real history. I have been pleasantly surprised."

Gabi chuckled. "As opposed to the unpleasant surprises you have had since walking into the Gallery that night."

Trey tipped her head staring into her eyes intently. "That was the surprise of my life. Came out of nowhere, you did. I would not trade that for anything in the world. Regardless of what happens next."

Tears formed around Gabi's eyes. "Neither would I."

They kissed again hearing the bells of St. Charles Cathedral chiming in the distance. Indicating to them it was getting close to being dusk.

Gabi pulled away, first resting her forehead against his. "Now it's time to see my favorite place."

~

Trey stared at the sights in front of him. Never had he seen anything like this - another hidden jewel in this strange, alluring city.

Gabrielle could barely contain her glee as they walked through the botanical gardens. She walked him down a small path that lead to a gate with a sign that read *Storyland*. They walked under a darkening sky through a series of fairytale statues telling each vignette, from Pinocchio to Mother Hubbard. She stopped in front of the large statue of Snow White lying on a bench, her eyes closed and hand stretched out clutching a bitten apple.

"Snow White was always my favorite."

"Really?"

*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

"When I was little and my father used to bring me here when we would visit Missy, I used to crawl on top of the statue. I would lie down and close my eyes, my father would find me and kiss me awake," Gabi said blushing.

Trey took a quick look around making sure no one was looking. He pulled Gabi toward the statue and made her sit.

"Lie down," he commanded.

"No I might break her."

"She seems pretty solid to me."

Gabi shook her head.

"Lie down and close your eyes."

She smiled, took a deep breath, and gave in to him.

After what seemed like an eternity, Gabrielle felt a small feathery kiss cross her lips.

"I don't know what it is about you, but I find myself acting like a complete ponce in my efforts to keep that lovely smile on your face."

Gabi opened her eyes and gazed at her lover adoringly. "I'm not complaining."

Trey stood up and reached down for her.

She walked them down one more road stopping in front of a building. Inside it looked as if there was a party going on. People were milling around the small room laughing and dancing.

Trey noticed the dreamy look that swept across Gabi's face. "That big building we passed on the way in, the one with all the lights? It's called the Pavilion of the Two Sisters. Missy and Charlie were married there. It was one of the grandest events of the year."

Gabrielle gestured to the tiny stained-glass building in front of her. "That's called the Carousel Gardens. Inside there is probably the loveliest Carousel in the country. This is where my parents were married. A lot quieter than Missy and Charlie's. My father didn't want people judging my mother."

"Judging?"

"She was pregnant with me when they finally decided to marry."



"What did Missy say?"

Gabi cocked her eyebrow.

"You're asking what the woman who drove with her best friend and her toddler son across the country to Woodstock thought?"

"Right."

Gabi sighed. "I really wish you could have met them. All of them."

Trey was rocked on his feet, the gravity of her words hitting him. She had said it before but he mistook it for wistfulness. Now standing here, in front of the place her parents had said their vows, started their life together, Trey understood.

Today wasn't just about sight-seeing. It was about seeing Gabrielle. All of her, the history of her town, her memories of her childhood and the people she loved. She was giving him a part of her. Willingly, in faith and trust. Perhaps, even.... "Gabi, I think there's something you should know."

Gabi turned to face him.

He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could speak he heard someone clear their throat.

They turned and saw a couple standing in front of them.

"Hello," Gabi said blushing. "We weren't trying to intrude. I was just showing my boyfriend the gardens."

Trey snaked his arm around Gabi, secretly jumping for joy. *Boyfriend*. It was the first time she had said it aloud.

The couple smiled at them.

"We didn't think you were intruding at all. In fact, we wanted to share some cake with you." The woman held out a small slice of cake in front of Gabi. Gabi took it from her handing one of the forks to Trey.

Trey took it hesitantly. "Trey is from England," she said as if to explain his confusion.

The man standing next to the woman nodded. "Bess and I were married today. It's said to be good luck to share your wedding cake with a loving couple you have just met on your wedding day. A bit of superstition. As you probably have figured out, we are a superstitious bunch down here."

Trey nodded. Taking a piece of cake, he raised his fork impulsively to Gabi indicating he wished to feed her. Gabi blushed a bit harder taking the cake from him and doing the same.

“Another, superstition. You two should be married within the year,” Bess gushed.

“Bess, don’t embarrass them,” the man said taking the plate. “Please stay as long as you want,” he urged pulling his new bride away from the flustered couple.

Bess smiled and allowed her husband to drag her away.

Gabi fidgeted a bit. “It’s just a silly superstition.”

Trey took her hand in his. “Believe it or not, us Brits have a few superstitions of our own. “

“Like what?”

“If you are the bride and you’re on your way to your wedding and a chimney sweep passes you by and kisses you, it’s good luck.”

“Being kissed by another man on your wedding day is considered good luck?”

Trey pulled her even closer to him. “We’re an odd bunch.”

“That works out well, because so are we.”

They stood there for a moment staring into each other’s eyes. Suddenly, in the background they heard the carousel start, a slow ragtime melody began to play.

“Dance with me?” Trey asked.

Gabi nodded. Laying her head on his shoulder, they swayed for a bit.

Trey tilted her head. “Are there any American superstitions or traditions about kissing your girl on someone else’s wedding day? I wouldn’t want to jinx our newly betrothed couple in there,” he teased.

“Not that I could think of. However, we could start one.”

“Really?” Trey asked, intrigued. “And what would the superstition be?”

Gabi bit her lip and smiled. “Kiss me and find out.”

Needing no more coaxing, Trey bent down and gave her a hard, passionate kiss.

They stayed that way, locked in a passionate embrace for a long time. Their kiss becoming more and more fevered. They both gasped for air as they broke apart.

“So what’s the verdict, pet? What tradition did we just start?”

Gabi gulped hard. “Boy who kisses his girl the way you did on someone’s wedding day, is guaranteed to take his girl home with him.”

Trey eyes danced with lust and desire. “That so?”

Gabi grabbed him and kissed him again conveying emotions that mirrored his own. “Take me back and I will prove it to you.”

## **Chapter 18**

Trey ran down the long street holding Gabi’s hand tightly to his. It had started to rain. Pour to be more precise. Another oddity of New Orleans - the showers would come, but the humidity would stay the same. He did not mind the rain. He grew up in England so rainy weather was second nature to him. He was more concerned about Gabi. She had left her hat in the car and was getting drenched. The sky seemed to continue to open up and pour down almost angrily on them. Much to Trey’s relief his apartment was just up ahead.

Suddenly, he felt a tug on his hand. He turned around to see that Gabi had halted her jog altogether. She smiled up at him and chuckled. Trey cocked his head to the side in confusion.

“I’ve always wondered why people continue to run in the rain when they are already drenched. It’s not as if they could be anymore soaked,” she said.

Letting go of Trey’s hand, she took a step back and tilted her head up to the sky smiling a gorgeous smile.

He leaned back against a black wrought iron fence, enthralled. The rain poured down on his lover, her arms stretched out as if beckoning the rain to wash over her. The whole scene was almost mystical. A water sprite frolicking in her element, she began to spin around and around running her thin fingers through her drenched hair, shaking off the excess water, wiping down her face. She blinked furiously trying to prevent the water from impeding her vision.

Then, she lowered her head and looked at him, eyelids still rapidly moving, smiling seductively. Trey took a step forward ensnaring her in his embrace. He brushed the back of his fingers to her cheek then bent down and nibbled on her lips for just a moment before ravishing them with his own.

Gabi trembled in his arms, knowing it had absolutely nothing to do with the rain. Her eyes drifted shut as she molded herself to him. Answering his fevered kisses with the same fire and passion.

Trey pulled away taking a huge gulp of air.

“Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?” he asked in amazement, drowning in her kelly green eyes.

Gabi bit her bottom lip, only to have Trey tug on her skin gently demanding its release. He captured it between his own, nibbling on it before stealing another kiss from her.

This time Gabi pulled away. “Upstairs?” she asked, trying to hide the desperation in her voice.

Trey nodded grabbing her hand again and fishing out his keys.

Gabi pressed her front to his back closing her eyes and resting her head against him waiting for him to work the locks on his door.

When he had gained access into his tiny apartment he ushered her in, then slammed the door a few times ensuring it would close the proper way. He turned and watched her as she wrung the rain out of her long black hair.

Only a few drops of water rolled down her skin, but the few that did traveled down her neck and to her chest. It made an enticing image.

“I can’t believe how hot it still is,” Gabi groaned.

Trey held up his hand. “I’ve got just the thing.”

Trey walked over to the air conditioning panel and switched it on. He told her to wait there, then disappeared into the kitchen. He emerged a moment later with a bowl of ice and placed it in front of a small fan. Trey turned it on and instantly Gabi felt a refreshing cool breeze dance across her skin. She sighed in relief closing her eyes.

She felt Trey behind her. His warm fingertips skimming the tops of her arms. Gabrielle’s eyes widened as she felt an icy sensation go up between her shoulder blades and continue up the side of her neck. Gabi moaned then rocked backwards using Trey as support. She tilted her head to the side giving him better access to her neck.

Trey placed a small kiss behind her ear then took the numbing ice cube from his hand and placed it in his mouth. Using his tongue he pushed the rapidly melting cube between his teeth and skimmed it across Gabi’s neck pushing it in to give her a heated kiss in between teasing her with it.

He felt the goose bumps rise under his touch. He blindly reached forward grabbing another ice cube and inserted it in his mouth. With his arms snaked around her front, he cupped her breast within his palms and tweaked her hardening nipples through the damp white cloth of her dress.

He turned her to face him. Gabi opened her eyes watching him gaze at her lustfully.

"I have never wanted anyone the way I want you," she confessed reaching out to undo the buttons of his denim shirt. Once she pulled it off him she worked on his undershirt. Soon his chest was bare to her. Her fingertips played against his pectoral muscles. She watched them jerk under her touch. Gabrielle turned toward the bowl of ice and took a small cube in hand. She kept her eyes on him as she popped ice in her mouth then bent down sucking on his nipple.

"Bloody--" The rest of his statement got caught in his throat. He was lost in the sensation of his little nymph's icy attentions. Trying to gain some composure, he hooked his finger underneath the small straps of her dress then pulled down. The rain drenched dress made a small thump as it hit the floor.

Feeling justifiably exposed, Gabi tried to cover herself using her forearms to shield her chest.

Trey grabbed a few pillows off the couch then the throw sitting on a chair and spread it on the ground. He tugged her arms away and pulled her to him.

Gabrielle watched as he kneeled in front of her placing a tiny kiss on her stomach then turned his head to the side resting it against her abdomen for a moment.

It was a simple act, yet so profound. It was as if he was silently pleading to her. To give herself to him, to trust him.

With a shaking hand she ran her fingers through his wet locks and looked down at him.

Sensing she was watching him he opened his eyes and returned her gaze. He ran his hands up her legs and rested them on her hip. He then pulled her down positioning her in the center of the make-shift bed he'd created on his floor.

He stood up, angled the fan toward them and picked up the bowl of ice. He knelt to her side watching her carefully.

Her breathing became more erratic as he lay on his side and stroked her cheek once more. He kissed her forehead while reaching down to take off her sandals. He kicked off his shoes and socks then pulled down her panties until they were completely off. He had to look at her for just a moment. Naked, flawless, perfect. Goosebumps still rising on her skin. Her chest heaving, eyes wide with want and desire. And the heat from her

nether-region hitting his skin. Mocking and tantalizing him at the same time. Quickly he took off his jeans and lowered himself to her, resting again at her side.

He propped his head up using one hand and turned her face with the other, demanding another kiss.

Gabi slid her tongue into his mouth causing him to moan enthusiastically. He let her seduce him with her mouth for a bit longer before reaching over and grabbing another ice cube. He started at her neck tracing the ice in small patterns against her skin then brought it down between her cleavage. Fascinated and enthralled, he watched the ice melt against her skin, enjoying the way she bucked when it danced across the top of her breast. He smiled, watching her nipples become rock hard as the ice melted into nothingness against them. He kissed her again resting his hand in the bowl, reaching for yet another piece of ice.

He wagged his eye brows for a moment in glee as he popped the piece of ice in his mouth and began to suck on her nipples.

Gabi hissed, then let out a scream as Trey's ice-numbed digits found her clit and worked it madly for a few moments before plunging them into her core.

"Oh, God!" she whimpered.

His icy thumb continued to tease her clit as his hand worked her insides seeking the spot that would guarantee her release. Once he found it he tapped on it lightly, still sucking her and driving her completely mad.

Gabi clawed at the comforter underneath her head, thrashing back and forth. Seeing she was close Trey swallowed the ice cube and coasted down her body devouring her center.

Gabi screamed her release, sobbing as her juices poured out into Trey's mouth. He groaned, tasting her and becoming increasingly wild. He wanted to be inside her so much he thought he would die.

Trey waited until the last of her tremors were about to subside and surged into her.

Immediately, she screamed again writhing under him. Yet Trey did not move. He watched her face contort in pleasure and desperate need then slowly he began to move within her. Gabi sobbed holding onto his neck, kissing his lips, begging for the hard friction she wanted, but Trey would not relent. He moved at a sensual pace watching the emotion in her eyes go from frustration, to want, to pleasure then ecstasy, only to watch it circle back around.

"Please, Trey," Gabi begged kissing him again. "I need...oh God I need..."

Trey kissed her forehead. "Shh." He pleaded. "I need to..."

Gabi bit her lips waiting for his explanation.

He surged into her causing her to gasp. He kissed the side of her neck, then whispered in her ear. "I need to feel your quim. So hot, soft, sweet, squeezing me."

Gabi eyes widened. The dirty talk was new, but she loved it. It sounded so much more explicit with his British accent, voice all hoarse and raspy. She bit her lip quaking out her second orgasm.

He laughed wickedly. "I love when you do that."

Gabrielle could not take it anymore. She flipped him under her and straddled him.

"Oh, bloody hell!" he screamed as she lowered herself onto him. "Oh, God! Gabi, your quim..." he growled softly, his thoughts becoming more and more incoherent as Gabi took control of their love play.

He felt a tingling sensation within and bucked his hips up hitting Gabrielle in just the right spot. She threw her head back, her body going slack for a moment. Trey grabbed her by the hips and continued to arch himself into her until she trembled again and again. He watched her sway for a moment then pushed her forward toward him, kissing her one more time.

Gabi gulped catching her breath then responded with a kiss of her own. Their bodies were drenched in sweat making them sleek against each other. "You're amazing," he whispered kissing her forehead then looking in her eyes.

Gabi's eyes drifted open as a small lazy smile played across her face.

Trey returned her smile, then stiffened as she blinked once, then twice. Trey shook his head and stared at her, wondering if he'd imagined the look in her eyes.

Within moments she collapsed on top of his chest. He stroked her back comfortingly hoping she would just fall asleep. Mercifully she did. He clung to her tightly trying to will the image out of his mind.

Yet nothing he did could make it go away.

In his mind all he could see was that moment when Gabi had looked down at him right before she found sleep, The moment when her beautiful kelly green-gray eyes turned nearly black as night....

## **Chapter 19**

Trey's eyes were burning. He had spent the better part of the afternoon combing through anything he could find on spirit possession.

"Trey, are you all right?" Millie asked passing him a cup of coffee and sitting down next to him. She knew she was breaking every rule in the book by allowing him the cup of caffeine in her sanctuary, but the elderly woman could not help herself. He looked so determined, yet so afraid at the same time.

"Trey, what's going on?" she asked staring down at the books he had strewn across the table.

Trey sighed. Normally he would give a spiel about just doing some research, boning up on the subject-matter, but today, he could not hide behind his many facades.

Gabrielle was in trouble. And she needed his help.

"Mille, it's just...nothing...I really can't talk about it," he said choking on his words. He wanted to talk about it, tell Mille what was going on. Bloody hell, he would die to tell anyone at this point. However, it was too dangerous. The people who believed in this sort of thing would treat Gabi like the scientific find of the century, hooking her up to machines, making her go into that damned townhouse. All for the sake of research. He couldn't bear all of them staring at her. Not giving her any real solutions, just documenting everything that was happening to her. He couldn't have that.

On the flipside, most people would just think Gabrielle was insane. Make her see a shrink or even worse, tell her he was behind all this. A way to bring legitimacy to his line of work. More thoughts and images filled his head. Gabi, admitted into a sterile hospital with doctors and nurses standing there taking notes, forcing medication down her throat. All the while trying in vain to convince her that she was sick. When he knew better. People like Joshua telling her he was conning her.

It was too much, all if it. Never in Trey's life had he felt so helpless. He couldn't just grab this, shake it, and beat the crap out of it. All the normal things a man could do to protect his girlfriend. He was in uncharted territory and this thing, this apparition held all the cards.

Trey shut his eyes tightly trying to make the page in front of him come into focus. After a long while he blinked and began to read.

A not-so-pleasant, familiar feeling twisted his insides. He squinted rereading about the signs of possession .

- 1) *uncontrollable fear, rage or paranoia*
- 2) *Dreams that become intense nightmares.*



- 3) *Constant headaches*
- 4) *Spirit communication*

A entire list of symptoms that all described what Gabi was feeling.

Trey took a mental step back while reading the last paragraph.

"When total possession becomes more apparent, the victim will begin to lose moments of consciousness. They will have no recollection of events that have transpired in the last few moments. Nausea and discomfort usually follow a bout of partial possession."

*"Gabi are you all right?"*

*"Fine, it was just something I ate I guess."*

*"Are you sure you don't need anything?"*

*"No, I think I should just lie down for a second, my head is pounding."*

*"All right, pet, I'll be in the other room."*

*"NO! Don't go. Please, just stay with me."*

They were both late this morning, her to the gallery, he to his first tour. Neither of them seemed to have cared. They just wanted to lie in each other's arms, try to will away the situation. Both knew they couldn't and it was coming to a head whether they liked it or not. All Trey could do was try to find some way to help the woman who had suddenly become his entire world.

The ramifications of his thoughts didn't escape him. He had yet to tell her any of this aloud. Both seemed to be content with the way things were going, neither seemed to want to rock the boat. It was as if they silently agreed that now was not the time to talk about their deepening feelings for each other. Another talk for another day, after the hauntings and paranormal chaos. Still, regardless of how much they did not talk about it, it was there lingering between them, growing day by day.

Trey sipped the coffee Millie had brought to him and smiled at her. "Really Millie, I am all right, just a bit out of sorts. I've been working a lot."

Millie patted the boy on his back and smiled. "You need to rest better, Trey." Millie looked down at the books in front of them. "Tricky subject."

Trey cocked his head looking up at the older woman. "What do you mean?"

"Spiritual assaults. Every religion seems to think they have a solution to something like this. But in reality no one really does."

Trey nodded somberly. "I have been reading up on ways to fight something like this. It varies from exorcism to voodoo ritual. "

Millie chuckled. "Well, honey, you are in Voodoo Country here so I guess if you wanted to you wouldn't have to look far. I mean, if you decided to go that route." She looked at Trey a bit closer. "You're not telling me something. I can feel it," she accused.

"I wish I could, Millie. It's just complicated."

Millie sighed. "All right I won't push." She stood up and began to walk away. "Oh, by the way, I'm still researching what happened to our dear Justin Rousseau."

"Any luck?"

"He really did seem to disappear into thin air. The best I can gather was that he booked passage on a boat and sailed back to France. Died there."

Trey smiled trying to hide his disappointment.

"However, I am still looking." Millie winked at him then walked away.

Trey smiled again this time a genuine bona fide one. He really loved that old woman. He stretched his arms over his head then cracked his neck, trying to relieve some tension. Finally relaxing a little, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed the number to the gallery.

"The James Collection, this is Janine speaking, how can I help you today?"

"Hello, pet, it's Trey."

There was a long pause, a bit too reminiscent of when Trey had called while Gabi was supposedly in New York.

"She left for the day Trey."

"Is she all right?"

Another pause. Damn.

"There was a man here - a bit of a leach. Wanted to buy some pieces. Usually we would have had someone else deal with him, but he was quite insistent. He was on Gabi like white on rice. Gabi was handling it fine, even gave him a run for his money at one point. It was kind of shocking - never saw that side of her before. He bought what he wanted then slipped Gabi his card. She just stared at him blankly then excused herself. She got sick and said she was leaving."

*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

Trey tried to compose himself. So many emotions coursed through him in such a short amount of time. First jealousy, then anger, concern, then fear. God, where was Gabi?

“Did she say where she was going, Janine?”

“Said she was going home.”

Trey felt his blood run cold. “Gotcha, think I’ll try her there. Thanks, pet,” he said, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

Millie walked over to Trey. “Lord child, are you all right? You’ve turned white as a sheet.”

Trey stood up trying to control the shaking sensation in his legs. “Fine Millie. Do you think you could...”

“Go, Sweetie. I’ll clean up.”

“Thanks.”

Trey was running toward his car when he felt a rumbling in his hand. Still keeping his sprint he thumbed the talk button and held the phone to his ear.

“Fairfax.”

“Trey.”

“Gabi, love. Where are you?”

“I’m at a bar.”

“Which one?”

“Red’s, it’s on--”

“Lafayette. I’m on my way. Please, Gabi, don’t go anywhere,” he begged.

“I won’t.”

Trey slammed into his car groaning for a moment. He really should have been paying attention a bit more. But he wasn’t. Nothing mattered but getting to Gabi.

~

Red’s was the epitome of a local hangout. Very few tourists ever graced the place. Which was odd since it was next to Lafitte’s Blacksmith Shop - another bar. It was one

of the oldest structures in the country, still blissfully untouched by tourism and considered sacred to locals. Why and how Gabi ended up there was a mystery to Trey.

There was not exactly a bouncer at the door, however there was a rather large man who sat on a stool just outside monitoring who was allowed in.

"Who be you?" he asked in a thick Cajun accent.

"I'm Trey. I...have a friend here," he supplied trying not to sound like a frightened idiot. However, he could not help it, the old bloke was covered in tattoos and had muscles in his forearms the size of Trey's head.

"Really, what friend?"

"Gabrielle James," Trey said, trying not to let his desperate state and testosterone get to him. If he had to push his way past the Neanderthal he would, however it would be painful.

The man stood up, towering over Trey.

Very painful.

Suddenly, he smiled. Almost a boyish grin.

"Any friend of Gabi's be welcomed here. Her Me-ma used to bring her here when she was young. Been achin' to see Missy since she passed." The man said quietly.

Trey smiled. "I never had the pleasure."

The man nodded.

"Me name's Wally. Come in," he said, suddenly showing him a bit of southern hospitality.

Trey walked into the bar scanning the room. He heard a group of men cheering in the back somewhere. Trey quickly made his way over to them. He stood in the doorway watching the site before him. Gabi was surrounded by a group of men. To any outside observer they looked to be unsavory types. It took every ounce of restraint not to grab Gabi and high-tail it out of there.

"Show em' what you got Gabs!" an older man with a gruff voice cheered.

Gabi winked at him then stared at a dart board. After a long minute she raised her hand then launched an arrow straight into the bull's eye.

The men cheered as Gabi laughed.

"I taught the kid everything she knows!" the old man said.

Gabi laughed then twirled around to see Trey.

Trey walked up to her taking her in his arms. All the tension leaving his body. "You all right?" he asked not caring how he must have sounded.

Gabi rested her head on his chest. "Fine."

The old man stepped forward. "You going to introduce us?" he asked.

Gabi pulled away from Trey slightly and looked at the man. "Trey, this is Red. Red is an old friend of the family."

Trey stuck out his hand and the older man looked him up and down as if he was getting a good feel for him, then took his hand in his. "Gabi's grandfather served in 'Nam with me. Missy helped me with a loan to buy this bar. The James family means a lot to me."

Trey blinked hard.

"Jesus, Red, a simple *nice to meet you* would have done," Gabi teased.

The old man looked at her sheepishly. "Sorry, just a bit protective of her. Told her grandmother she should have been raised here in New Orleans so us old farts could look after her. Now that she's all grown up we have trouble remembering she's a grown woman."

Gabi smiled and kissed the old man on the cheek then turned back to Trey. She looked over her shoulder and smiled.

"Met Wally too, I see."

"What do you think, Wally?" she screamed.

Wally turned on his stool by the door. "He talk funny!"

The whole room erupted with laughter.

Gabi took Trey's hand and sat down at a table. Trey snaked his arm around her as all the old men left so they could be alone in the back room. After a long moment she finally spoke.

"I don't know what happened, I was fine, then suddenly...I was talking to this guy and the next minute he was handing me his card and I felt terribly sick."

Trey tightened his grip around her. "Did you know him?" he said looking at the card.

"No, I didn't. He was just some guy looking around the gallery. What's happening to me?" she murmured.

Trey held her close to him. He wanted to tell her what he'd discovered, but couldn't, not yet. Nausea, wasn't that one of the signs of spirit possession?

"I have some ideas."

"You keep saying that, but you won't tell me."

"I don't want to jump to conclusions, pet."

"So we just sit here and I keep losing time?" Gabi said, becoming increasingly irritated.

"Gabi, please..."

"Why won't you just tell me what you think is going on?"

"Because I don't want to frighten you."

"Stop treating me like a child!" Gabi snapped.

His stomach flip-flopped as he watched her eyes flash to black for a beat before she stood up abruptly and walked over to a jukebox. He sat still while she hovered over the machine trying to regain her composure. Suddenly, her head tilted to the side and her body jerked for a moment.

Trey began to stand up, but then watched her relax. Everything about her at that moment seemed different from the way she usually held herself, the sway of her hips, the way she pushed back her hair, the tilt of her head. She pressed a few buttons then waited.

Nina Simone's voice crackled in the air.

Trey knew what had just happened. He felt it just as sure as anything. She stood there facing away from him her hips swaying to the song. The lyrics cryptically floating around his head...

*"It's a new dawn, it's a new day, it's a new life for me yeah, it's a new dawn it's a new day it's a new life for me ooooooooh And I'm feeling good..."*

Trey stood up crossing his arms in front of him. "Gabi?"

She seemed lost in her own world gripping the jukebox, still moving to the music.

Trey swallowed hard and walked toward her. He pressed his front to her back. "Dance with me," he whispered.

She stopped moving then turned to face him. His eyes stayed fixed on her lips as a slow, seductive smile spread across her face. He didn't want to look into her eyes - he knew that if he did, they wouldn't be Gabi's. Instead he pressed her head to his chest and swayed back and forth.

"He's too strong, he's winning," she said in a sultry voice.

"Help me fight him, Ellie," he begged.

"He's stronger, always has been."

She ground her pelvis into him.

"Besides, is that what you really want?" she teased, her voice becoming more seductive.

Again the chorus of the song hit his ears.

*"It's a new dawn, it's a new day, it's a new life for me yeah, it's a new dawn it's a new day it's a new life for me ooooooooooh And I'm feeling good..."*

Fighting the urge to pull her away and shake her Trey closed his eyes. "Gabi, you're strong," he whispered.

She began to pull away.

"I love you," he said jumping off the cliff within. He didn't care, chaos or not he wanted her to know, needed her to know. He'd blurted it out so thoughtlessly, it almost seemed careless when in fact his admission was a plea. To remember him, remember what he thought of her. How much he truly cared for her.

She pulled back staring into his eyes. To Trey's relief they were the gorgeous kelly green-gray he adored getting lost in.

"I love you," he repeated.

Gabi began to tremble in his arms. "Trey...I love you too."

Trey smiled with relief. He knew she had loved him on some level from the moment she'd showed up on his tour smiling up at him, the perfect mixture of bold flirtation and demure insecurity. But to hear her say it was unlike anything he had ever experienced. She loved him. And somehow when the world began to spin out of control, and when

she began to drift out of his grasp, his words, the knowledge that he loved her made her steady.

Trey took her face in his hands and kissed her roughly. "God, Gabi, I love you so much. I have since the moment I met you." He kissed her again only to have her pull away.

He watched her turn a bit green. "Don't take this the wrong way but I think I am going...."

"Go ahead love, I'll be here waiting," he promised.

Gabi ran to the bathroom, Trey watched her, replaying all the events that had occurred in the last few moments. His confession of love, hers to him. His words.

"I'll be here, waiting."

Trey took a deep breath. Strengthening his resolve, he added a single word to the statement running through his head.

"Always."

## **Chapter 20**

What was it about those three little words that could make the universe shift? Tilt on its axis? Make everything else but a singular entity become a faint back drop? That was exactly what happened to him.

It was always there, always implied. They'd all but admitted that they'd fallen in love at first sight. Yet, saying it out loud to one another brought a clarity to their relationship. An unspoken promise. He barely remembered leaving Red's. There must have been some sort of arrangement made for Gabi's car to be brought to his house later, because she sat next to him in his car, tucked under his arm the entire ride back to his apartment.

Somehow they must have got into his tiny domicile because now he was lying on his side in his bed looking down at his woman.

His.

She was his. Three little words made it so. She seemed to know it, seemed to understand. She didn't have to say anything. The look in Gabi's eyes told him. The way she turned her head into his cradling palm told him. Her watery eyes and trembling form told him. She knew it, much more, she wanted it.

"I never thought I could feel this way," Trey admitted.



Gabi smiled. "I hoped."

"I'm a skeptic Gabi, I have to be. I accepted certain things in life when I chose my profession. Solitude was one of them. No chit was going to want a man who gave up a sizable fortune to chase ghosts around. No one wants a man who will probably die a pauper."

Gabi put her finger to his lips. "It's okay. I have money," she teased.

"I don't want your money."

"Trey, I know."

Gabi tugged Trey down to kiss his lips then pulled away to look into his eyes.

"Do you know what it feels like to grow up with everyone watching you? I'm an heiress, whose family had the good sense to stay humble. I never got everything I wanted growing up. I earned it. Missy and my parents were good people. Let me know that money didn't make me any better than anyone else. It gave me a sense of responsibility. Missy said I would always be taken care of, however, it's how I took care of other people that truly defined my character. I was raised to believe that."

Trey kissed her forehead and held her tighter.

"My so-called friends and the few men in my life were always my friends because of what I was, not who I was. Guys dated me or wanted me because I was Missy James's granddaughter. Not because of me. The night I met you, I saw something, I could feel it. You may have known who I was but there was a look in your eyes, it was different. I knew it wasn't because I was Gabrielle James, I could have been the checkout girl at the grocery store and you would have still looked at me that way. I felt you watching me, looking at me like I was..."

"The most beautiful thing I had ever seen," Trey interrupted.

Gabi nodded.

Trey gathered her in his arms and kissed her again. He hauled her over his body, laying her on top of him, still continuing their gentle play. His hands drawing circles on her back. Her small hand crept up his chest and began to work the top button of his shirt.

Soon their clothes fell away. Gabi began to nibble on his neck until Trey stopped her.

"Trey."

"Shh...", he whispered. "I just want to hold you a while. Can I do that?"

Gabi smiled and melted into her lover. She closed her eyes. "Yeah, I think I would like that."

~

Gabrielle found herself walking through a smoky room. She could feel the silk of her dress against her stockings. A few people smiled at her as she passed. Men seemed to lust after her, women looked at her with a mixture of envy and admiration. She owned the room. What's more she knew it.

She found an empty spot by a wall, a dark corner. Her favorite type of place. In spite of how it appeared all she ever wanted to do was hide. Hide away from the word, hide away from her duties. Hide away from being his wife.

She pulled out her cigarette holder and raised it to her lips.

Instantly a flame appeared in front of her. She felt her heart pound against her chest as she inhaled the smoke into her lungs.

She stared straight ahead, never looking at her friendly helper.

"What seems to be troubling you tonight, princess?" she heard a deep sultry voice whisper.

"Justin, he's not happy in the states anymore. He wants us to move back to France."

She felt his grip tighten against her shoulder. "What!" he snorted harshly.

"His father is not well and since he is no longer going to the University and has settled in marriage, the Rousseau's feel he should go home and take over the family business."

She looked down nearly choking on the lump in her throat.

"You can't go Ellie."

"If he decides to...if he says so, I have to."

"No, you're mine!"

She felt herself being spun around in his arms.

"No Jarek, I'm his. According to the eyes of the law, the eyes of the church..."

Jarek tilted her head up. His eyes were cold, deadly.

“You know how I feel about the church, Elysia. You are mine in all ways that count to me!”

He turned her wrist fingering a small scratch marring her perfect skin.

“You’re mine by blood and by ritual. You promised yourself to me. That’s more powerful than a piece of fucking paper!”

Elysia yanked herself out of Jarek’s grip. “I didn’t know what I was doing, I was lonely and desperate. You made me feel so wanted. Desired. But it has to be over now. I’m his wife. I have to go where he goes,” she said weakly.

Elysia backed up staring at her lover wearily. She used to adore that look in his eyes. The one that screamed his desire to possess her. To own her. It would stoke a fire that raged out of control. But now, staring at him, all she felt was fear. She knew that coming here to tell him of her decision would not go well. However, he thought he would coax her, try to seduce her, she vowed to herself that she would be strong. But the look in his eyes now truly frightened her.

On some level Jarek had always frightened her; that’s what made him so exciting. Now however, this was a different kind of fear, a different kind of danger. For the first time Elysia feared for her life.

“You are mine, Elysia. By blood,” he said again.

She looked down at her wrist. It was a silly game right? It meant nothing. Jarek had been raised by a Voodoo Priestess. It had been part of a kinky sex game. She was all right with that. The sex after it had been amazing and even in her frightened state the thought of it made her tremble.

Jarek’s eyes drifted close for a moment.

“You feel it don’t you, Ellie. You know you can’t walk away from me. You are part of me, just as I am a part of you. For eternity, Elysia.”

Elysia tilted her chin up looking at him defiantly.

“I told you before I don’t belong to you. This is over.”

Elysia took a few more steps back then turned around ready to walk out of the room. She fought the urge to run. Get as far away from him as she possibly could. Her pride would not allow it. Instead, she walked slowly away smiling to her friends and acquaintances as she went.

What was it about pride before the fall? Before she made it to the door she felt herself being spun around again. She opened her mouth to scream only to be silenced by a

rough kiss. She fought for a moment trying to pry his mouth away, but slowly she went slack, her body being played like an instrument in his knowledgeable hands. He knew just where to touch, just where to caress to get her to respond to him.

All resolve left her in a whimper.

Before she knew it, she was pushed into a dark closet. Against the wall he kissed her again, his hands finding her panties and ripping them away. In a flash he was on his knees flinging one of her legs over his shoulder. Inhaling deeply, she felt him chuckle.

"You see how your body knows," he whispered licking her slowly.

Elysia felt her knees buckle as her eyes rolled to the back of her head. She blinked in vain trying to adjust to the blackness surrounding her. However, the feel of his hot tongue sucking her hardened nub superceded every other sense. Her head hit the back of the wall as she began to sink down.

Jarek held her up grasping her hips. Continuing to devour her.

"Oh, God! Jarek..."

Jarek chuckled again inserting two fingers into her.

She wailed again coming fiercely on his hand as he continued to tease her nub.

"Does he make you feel this way, Ellie?"

Her only response was to whimper.

"Answer me!" he demanded.

Tears fell freely from her eyes.

"No." she choked out.

He growled granting her a second release, manipulating her body in ways only he knew how.

Elysia let out a silent scream then bit down on her lip. The intensity of it all nearly making her blackout.

Before she could recover Jarek spun her around so she was pressed into the wall. Pulling viciously on her hair he kissed her. He shoved away leaving her breathless.

"Do you taste yourself on my lips, the way you drench me with your essence? All of it is mine, Ellie. Your body knows it. You think you can just walk away from this? From me?"

She heard his belt buckle being worked. He inhaled then thrust himself into her from behind. He slapped his hand over her mouth, stopping the scream she was about to release from alerting the outside world to the goings-on inside the closet.

"I told you. You're mine. You think you belong to anyone else? You don't, you don't even belong to yourself. You belong to me." He continued to pound into her. Whispering a litany of dirty words sprinkled with praise. Enough to keep her in a state of euphoria, but crazed enough to keep him in control. She knew it then as she found yet another release. He was right. Nothing she did or said could change it. She was his.

His to own, his to possess.

She felt him grunt then spasm behind her. Finally, he went slack still holding her close. Suddenly, his almost violent onslaught stopped and was replaced by a kinder gentler one. She felt tears fall from his eyes as he kissed the side of her neck. "I can't lose you, Elysia, I would die without you." He held her tightly against him still covering her shoulders with kisses. "You're mine, Elysia."

Suddenly, she could see him, looking down at her, his eyes boring into her.

"You're mine," he repeated. "Say it!"

"I'm yours," she whispered.

"See that wasn't so hard, my princess."

He kissed her again then smiled.

"You're mine...*Gabi*."

Gabrielle bolted up screaming.

She flailed around only for a moment until she felt Trey's hands on her shoulders. Gabi collapsed in his lap holding onto him tightly.

"Oh, God...he... he..."

Trey raised her up and kissed the top of her head. He reached down hooking his arms under the backs of her legs then scooped her up cradling her like a baby. He stood up and walked over to the large chair by the balcony of his bedroom. Once he'd settled them down he reached toward the edge of the bed grabbing the sheet and pulling it off. He wrapped it around both of them then rocked her in his arms waiting for her to calm. Waiting for her to open her eyes.

After a long time her breath became less erratic. Finally, she began to breath normally again.

"He...he called me Gabi," she whispered.

Trey held her tightly.

"It's not about just her anymore. He knows who I am. He knows I'm not her. But he doesn't care. He says I'm his."

"No, you're not," Trey whispered. "You're mine. Not in the way he means, Gabi but..."

"I know Trey," she whispered relaxing a little in his arms.

He placed two fingers under her chin. Then turn her head slightly. He kissed her lips softly and smiled. Gabrielle smiled back lowering her head and nuzzling it under his chin.

"It's late we should get some rest," she said.

"We should, or we can just sit here and watch the sun come up."

Gabi chuckled.

"I guess we can do that."

They stayed there, wrapped in each other's arms with only a single bedsheet covering their naked bodies, as the sun came up. Gabi stared at the orange haze watching it come up over the horizon. She could hear the sounds of the city beginning to awaken. The garbage truck beeping, dogs barking, the chiming of the trolley going down the street. All of it was strangely comforting to her. But none of it, nothing compared to the feeling of being in Trey's arms, his soft caress, occasional kisses, the way his breath tickled the top of her hair. It was all so perfect.

"I love you, Gabi," he said quietly.

Gabi smiled, now it was beyond perfect. She looked at the clock, doing her best not to groan.

7:30, almost time to get up.

The phone rang and they both looked at it.

*"This is Trey Fairfax, please leave a message and I will return your call as soon as I can. Thank you."*

"Trevor, this is your father. I'm here in town again..."

Trey closed his eyes and threw back his head. Suddenly, he felt two hands on either side of his face. He raised his head up and opened his eyes to see Gabi smiling back at him.

“Looks like we have a dinner date.”

## **Chapter 21**

“Hello sir, welcome to Windsor Court,” the valet said opening Trey’s door and stepping aside so he could get out of his car.

Trey nodded handing him the keys and trying his best not to smirk at the poor man. The ratty upholstery of his run-down car would probably rub off on him and ruin his pristine uniform. Normally Trey would have felt guilty, but tonight he was too angry. His father was back in town and had all but demanded his presence. What for? He was vague - that Trey expected - but the way he still felt he could order his son about really grated.

Gabi had managed to convince him to go and had even offered to be there with him the entire time, until she was called to the gallery for some shipping mishap that she had to oversee. The night was becoming increasingly unbearable.

Trey took a look around at the five-star hotel. It was even more elite than the St. Louis Hotel. It frightened Trey how easily he could slip into his role. He had been groomed his entire life to fit these social circles. Play the part, be a member of haut-monde, even though he hated every moment of it.

Still, he was here because his father had insisted on his presence. A part of him wanted to tell the old man to go to hell, however, Trey was an honorable man. His father had paid for his education. For that, and for that reason alone he would indulge the old man.

Trey saw Owen Fairfax sitting in a large leather chair in the sitting room adjacent to the lobby. His suit was perfect as usual and he had a copy of the Wall Street journal fixed in his hands. Trey took a deep breath and stood in front of his father.

“Father.”

Owen raised his eyes just enough to take a glimpse of his son before looking back down at his article and finishing it.

The whole scene reminded him of being back home in England. Entering his father’s office to be reprimanded for some misdeed as a child. He would sit there in complete silence, finish whatever it was he was working on, then turn his attention to his son. It didn’t matter whether Owen was just starting something or finishing it, he would make Trey sit there and wait for his punishment.

What he was being punished for now, Trey had no clue. The only thing Trey did know was that his father had his *barrister* air about him. Like he did when he was about to go into court and decimate some poor sod.

*To bad the bloody sod is me*, Trey thought to himself.

Owen folded the paper neatly then tossed it on the table to the side of him.  
“Let’s get something to eat. Our table is ready.”

Trey nodded allowing his father to take the lead.

~

The hotel also housed The New Orleans Grill, a five-star restaurant on the top of the list of the most prestigious and most recognized dining establishments on both continents. The cost of the meal would set Trey back a month in bills if he was expected to pay for it.

Still having no idea why his father was yet again in the states, and erring on the side of caution, Trey ordered a coffee to his father’s forty-dollar-a-glass brandy.

They sat in silence for what seemed like an eternity before Trey finally spoke.

“Why am I here?” he asked trying to hide the anxiety in his voice. What was it about this man that could make Trey feel like he was a small child?

Owen looked at his son carefully. He leaned back in his chair, then folded his arms across his chest.

“Your mother and I feel it’s time for you to come home.”

Trey’s eyes widened in shock.

“You what?”

“It’s time for you to come home. We have indulged in your little fantasy life long enough, Trevor. We had hoped you would have worked this out of your system by now, however since you have not come to your senses as I hoped we feel it’s time for us to intervene.”

Trey chuckled a bit louder than he wanted to. He scanned the room for a second making sure no one was watching him before he continued.

“Did you really think you could come here and just demand for me to return to England and I would? I don’t live off of you anymore, I haven’t in years. What do you think you have on me that I would just tuck my tail in between my legs and follow you home?”



Owen stared into his son's eyes. Never in Trey's life had he seen his father's gaze so cold, so serious.

"Your inheritance," he said simply.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning if you don't return with me at once, that is it Trey, you are cut off not only from your money, but from your family as well."

Trey felt as if he had been kicked in the gut. He swallowed the bile rising in his throat by taking a sip of his coffee. "You think I give a bloody damn about the money."

"Trey don't be ridiculous. You would give up your fortune, everything you are entitled to for this?"

"I already have," Trey snapped.

"Would you give up your family?"

Trey raised his head slowly, squaring his eyes to his father's. He fought the burning sensation of his forced back tears. This wasn't about the money, this was about the ultimatum, a tired and old one. It always seemed to come back to this.

"You're brother is getting married."

"And?"

"To Lady Marion Hampton. She is the third cousin once removed from the Duchess of Kent."

"Which means?"

"Which means, your brother's put himself in the position he has worked his entire life for."

"His political ambitions."

"Yes."

Trey nodded.

"And having a brother who chases ghosts in America isn't good for the image, I take it?"

“Trey, think of your family for once. This means everything to your brother. All his hopes and dreams, everything he has worked so hard for.”

“And what about everything I have worked for?” Trey interrupted.

Owen blinked hard.

“Did you ever stop to think for one bloody minute that if you gave me the merest speck of support that you have shown Alfred or Carter I would be less abrasive? All you have ever done is berate me for my career choice.”

“I would hardly call what you do a career, Trevor.”

Trey pushed back his seat ready to stand up and walk out on his father yet one more time. His heart thundered against his chest as he did. This time he knew that if he walked away, it would be for the last time.

The two men stared at each other knowing whatever happened next would change everything for their already severely fractured family. Trey began to stand just as the maitre de came to their table.

“Mr. Fairfax, sir, the final member of your party has arrived,” he said.

Trey whipped his head around trying to suss out his father’s latest surprise. Never had Trey’s emotions swung so high on a pendulum before. In a moment, he went from indignant rage and unbearable pain to complete elation and entrancement.

Gabrielle smiled at him from the entrance of the restaurant and started to walk towards their table, slowing for a moment when she caught the inner turmoil in Trey’s eyes.

His eyes softened and instantly he was in a state of complete awe as she made her way across the crowded room. The green of her dress matched the color of her irises. He could swear her eyes were mystical, they seemed to cast a spell on him every time he dared to gaze into them. Her dress swayed around her lithe form dancing against her olive skin. The layered ruffles of her skirt reminded him of a flamenco dancer as she glided up to the table. He looked her up and down in complete admiration. She was flawless from her heeled, sandaled feet to the barrette affixed on top of her head holding back a lock of her beautiful hair as the rest danced on her shoulders and down her back on elegant curls.

Reaching out for her, Trey took her hand and kissed it lightly, his eyes never leaving hers.

“Amazing,” he whispered.

Gabrielle blushed, lowering her eyes a little before Trey wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her forehead.

Gabrielle closed her eyes for the briefest moment before casting her attention to the elder Fairfax, who had since risen to his feet.

Trey straightened up, all his previous torment shoved aside by the pride and adoration he felt at that moment.

"Father, I would like you to meet Gabrielle James, the lady of my life," he said proudly.

Owen raised his hand to shake Gabrielle's only to have it side-stepped by the young woman in favor of placing a kiss on his cheek.

Trey tried not to laugh at his father's flustered state as Gabi pulled away.

"Ms. James...I...it's a pleasure. Trey's mother and I were great admirers of your grandmother's work."

Gabrielle smiled.

"Yes, Missy was incredible, she left a truly remarkable legacy."

"She was truly a talented artist."

"Well, Missy would dispute that, she always did."

Owen eyed Gabrielle as if he found it odd that she referred to her grandmother using her first name.

"I never called Missy Grandmother," Gabi explained.

"Really? Why, if I may ask?"

"Because her name was Missy not Grandmother. She said it was too old and stuffy for someone like her."

Trey fought the urge to laugh. Stuffy and old, the two adjectives he would have used in a heartbeat to describe his own grandmother.

Biting the side of his cheek his eyes sparkled with amusement. Maybe this dinner would not be so bad. Looking at his father's uncomfortable state he pulled out the chair that seemed to appear out of nowhere for Gabrielle and said, "Everyone ready to eat? I'm feeling a bit peckish."

~

Dinner was a lot more relaxed than Trey thought it would be. Gabrielle was naturally charming, while his father seemed to be going out of his way to be pleasant to both Gabrielle and his son. It was almost as if the ugliness of their initial conversation had all but disappeared.

All but. As much as Trey would like to forget them, his father's harsh words still swirled around his mind.

After the threesome had polished off their rather delicious meal with the restaurant's world famous lemon verbena ice cream, Gabrielle unwittingly opened up a can of worms.

"How long will you be in town, Mr. Fairfax?" she asked.

"Not long, only a day or so more."

"Will you be seeing much of the city? Perhaps you will have time to take one of Trey's tours?" she suggested.

Trey reached for Gabrielle's hand under the table.

"Love, I don't think my father has time for that."

Gabrielle looked at Owen for a moment.

"I see."

"Yes, I am afraid Trey is correct. I just wanted to come and tell Trey in person about the news of his older brother Carter's engagement."

"Really? How exciting."

"His betrothed is related to royalty," Owen said proudly.

"Barely," Trey muttered.

"Do you have something to say, Trevor?" Owen asked.

"How is Rebecca these days?" Gabrielle asked.

"Rebecca?" Trey questioned.

"Are you referring to Rebecca Wyndem? The daughter of the Duke of Gloucester?"

Gabrielle looked up for a moment.

"I believe that was her title. I am not sure. Missy just called her Becky."

Owen raised his eyebrows

"I...I believe she is well."

Gabrielle smiled at Trey.

"She came here once to visit Missy. She and Bootsie took her to Red's. Apparently, the lady knows a thing or two about darts."

Trey stared at her, as speechless as his father.

"I only met the dear woman once. She never seemed to care about her title. She and Missy were kindred spirits that way. You must tell her I said hello and thank her again for the lovely flowers she sent me when Missy passed."

Trey slid his arm around Gabi's shoulders holding her close to him. He saw the tears threatening to fall from out of her eyes at the mention of her beloved grandmother's passing.

He kissed her temple not caring how uncomfortable his father was at his display of affection.

Composing herself a bit Gabi returned her attention to Owen smiling brightly.

"There is simply no way you can leave without seeing one of Trey's tours. He is simply amazing," Gabrielle said her voice laced heavily with admiration and devotion.

To this all Trey could do was smile. He took her hand under the table again, finally feeling free. It didn't matter what his father thought of him, what he would do. Gabrielle was proud of him, proud of what he was. At that moment, Trey felt he could take on the world and conquer it with one hand tied behind his back.

"You have participated in his tours?" Owen asked a bit shocked.

Gabrielle looked at Trey again. "Actually I snuck in on one. I know Trey would have had a fit if he knew I was coming. He is terribly shy about it. I keep telling him however that he has nothing to be shy about. What he does is wonderful and daring. He should be very proud of all he has accomplished."

Trey looked down.

Gabrielle took two fingers and pulled up his head by his chin.

“Don’t you dare get all modest on me now,” she teased cupping his face in her palm.

Owen watched the two lovers for a moment trying to digest everything that had occurred.

He must have looked a bit off because Gabrielle looked at him concerned.

“Mr. Fairfax, are you all right?”

Owen nodded his head slowly. “Just a bit tired from my trip.”

“Oh, forgive us!” Gabrielle said. “Maybe we should call it a night?”

“Yes, that would be a good idea.”

“Would you like to meet for tea?” Gabrielle asked. “The Le Salon is quite remarkable and world-renowned for their tea service. Perhaps I can even work on cajoling you into that tour.”

Owen smiled. “I would love to see the two of you for tea tomorrow. I know you do not live far, but the hotel is quite remarkable. I really wish I could have reserved a suite so the two of you could enjoy their amenities. The hotel is booked through the month, perhaps some...”

“Ms. James?” The waiter said appearing at her side.

“Yes?”

“I was sent to inform you that your room is ready as well as yours and Mr. Fairfax’s things have been brought up already from your car.”

Gabi beamed looking up at the waiter. “Thank you.”

Gabi turned back to Trey coyly.

“I hope you don’t mind. I packed a few of your things as well as mine. I know you have the late tour, but I thought you might want to spend a bit more time with your father.”

“How did you manage to procure a room?” Owen asked.

“If I may, sir,” the waiter interjected. “The James Family is always welcomed at the Windsor. In fact, the hotel manager was a bit embarrassed, if he had known you were friends of Ms. James he would have made your accommodations a bit more comfortable.”

Trey sat back trying to will away the Cheshire-cat grin creeping across his face as his father continued to be rendered speechless in relentless waves.

"My...accommodations are more than sufficient thank you," he said rising to his feet trying to hold his head up as high as he could.

"Until tomorrow then?" Gabi asked.

"Of course."

Owen bowed slightly.

"Trevor, Ms. James." He exited the restaurant leaving Gabi a bit bewildered.

"What was that about?" she asked.

"I believe you just out-snubbed my father, love," he laughed.

"I'm not a snob!" Gabi exclaimed.

"That's the best bit about the whole thing."

Trey laughed a bit louder then took Gabi's face in his hands and kissed her soundly. "God, I love you," he said still chuckling.

"Really Trey, I don't get it."

Trey threw her a sly smile and kissed her on her lips again, this time slowly and passionately. As he pulled back he heard the other patrons whisper amongst themselves. Sod formal dinner etiquette--his girl just unwittingly made his whole bloody night. He leaned in, and whispered in her ear.

"Maybe not yet, love, but you will, trust me. You'll get it, all right."

## **Chapter 22**

Trey looked down at the sleeping beauty lying peacefully in his arms. A part of him wished that for a brief moment he possessed any kind of drawing skills. If he did he would take the image he was currently burning into his mind and sketch it. Give it to her to show how truly exquisite he thought she was.

They were lying on their sides, their nude bodies pressed together. She had one arm flung around his back while the other one was folded upwards, its hand cradling the side of Trey's face. As if to reassure herself that he was there and not going anywhere. Her

head was resting on his arm. It was as if she was seeking safety. Trusting him to provide her with shelter from the harsh sunlight threatening to invade her blissful slumber.

Trey smiled to himself, pressing a soft kiss to the top of her head and suppressing the urge to chuckle as the sensation of her hot breath tickled his chest.

She moved for a moment then turned in her sleep, her face scrunching adorably for just a moment as the sun softly attacked her slumberous form.

Gabrielle's eyes fluttered open. She smiled and sighed blissfully.

"Good morning, love," Trey's soft, raspy voice whispered.

She turned slightly smiling up at her lover then kissed him gently on the lips. "Can every morning begin like this?" she asked.

Trey smiled rolling until he rested on top of her. "It could, or I can think of better ways for our mornings to start."

Gabrielle opened her legs a bit more, allowing Trey to settle between them.

"Really, how so, Mr. Fairfax?" she teased.

He lowered his head pressing soft kisses against her neck. "Hmm, let me think on that one." Trey nudged her head down until he captured her lips. He smiled as he felt her soft, perfect hand grasp him gently and guide him to her entrance. He shut his eyes tightly as he thrust into her.

"My God, Gabi, nothing has ever felt as good as you."

Gabi gasped, nodding in agreement as she pitched her hips up to meet his thrust.

"Trey..."

He pulled away watching the sensual sway of her body as she rolled her hips, arched herself up and pulled her head back onto the pillow. She stared up at the ceiling her eyes filled with unfocused pleasure as he worked her.

Trey grabbed hold of her hips thrusting in at a specific angle. He wanted to see a certain look on her face. It was one of his favorites. Gabrielle's eyes widened with shock as she bit down on her frantically quivering bottom lip when he pressed against that spot within. Her head snapped down staring into his eyes with a wild look of astonishment and awe as he increased his pace, showing no mercy and catapulting her into oblivion.



"There it is, Gabi," he rasped. "Please love, give it to me. I love it when you come all around me. Your quim...so hot, so wet..."

"Oh, God...", she whimpered.

She clung to Trey as he continued his onslaught of her senses. It was more than the physical act, it was the look in his eyes, the sound of his voice, the dirty little words he muttered. Giving her the things she'd always wanted but never knew she did. Not until him. Until Trey.

Her eyes locked onto his, his intense gaze boring into her very soul. Was there anything before him? Why did it seem like everything before him was just a haze? She felt her body begin to tremble. Knowing her as he did, he kissed the top of her forehead holding her even closer, silently assuring her it was okay to let go. To fall. He would hold onto her. He'd be there.

She threw her head back letting out a cry. Trey silenced it with a comforting kiss as her body exploded within and she crashed into him gasping and moaning. Her muscles went completely limp as her head turned to the side. Low, agonizing, pleasurable moans poured out of her throat as Trey continued to pound into her.

It was animalistic of him he knew it, but there was a part of him, a primal part of him that exalted in her like this. Limp under him, helpless to the intense pleasure he was bestowing on her. Her body pouring out everything it had to offer. He lowered his head nudging her by her chin again until his lips found hers once more. His kiss seemed to bring her back to him, back from her nearly incoherent post-orgasmic state.

"I love you." The words came out in short, gasps. "I love you so much. More than anything."

"God, Gabi, I love you too."

Trey's eyes scrunched tight as his hands slipped under her shoulders. Her words, her beautiful, bloody, heartfelt words pierced through him. Snapping the last bit of control he had. He gritted his teeth and roared arching his hips up into her.

Like him, she knew what he wanted, what he needed. She raised her head taking his in her hands peppering his face with soothing kisses as he emptied his seed into her. She felt his arms begin to tremble and guided him down to rest against her breast as she stroked his dark hair languidly.

Finally, his breath became less erratic. He turned his head and kissed her chin.

"That was better, don't you think?" he teased.

Gabrielle smiled closing her eyes.

“Everything and anything will always be better if I wake up with you. No matter what we do.”

Trey smiled holding her a bit tighter in his embrace, silently agreeing with her as they found sleep once more.

~

Owen did his best to keep his disdained and slightly mortified air about him however, it was getting increasingly difficult. He could not help but be fascinated. It was not solely the tour, it was them. The young couple standing in front of him.

Ever since they'd appeared at The Le Salon, ten minutes late much to the punctual elder Fairfax's chagrin, he'd found himself unconsciously observing their every move. They walked into the tea room not only hand in hand but entwined together. Not in a lewd manner, but with a simple, sweet air. His son had his arm flung around Gabrielle's shoulder while hers was snaked around his waist. Their counterparts were crossed across their chests as their fingers latched onto one another.

He watched their intense, yet playful conversation in the distance as they approached. Somehow their eyes stayed trained on each other and yet, managed to keep a straight stride to him without walking into or knocking anything over.

Suddenly, Gabrielle blushed madly as his son leaned in and whispered something in her ear. She hid her face against his chest as he chuckled kissing her temple and all the while keeping step.

He could not help but notice the light air his son had about him. Like his father, Trey always had a certain heaviness to his demeanor. He was considered a bit stoic to many who knew him, however now he seemed completely relaxed.

Owen found himself looking for some sort of flaw, some sort of deficiency; much to his shock he could not find anything. Even down to the way they were dressed.

He knew Gabrielle was responsible for picking out Trey's clothing for the day. She'd announced it last night when she'd surprised his son with their overnight get away. A part of him was shocked that she didn't do that thing most American woman did which was to coordinate their attire with their partners to visually show the world that they were indeed a couple.

His son was dressed in a pair of blue jeans and a white cotton collarless button down shirt, one of his favorites to conduct tours in. Something Owen had discovered from the thank you Trey had thrown Gabrielle's way during tea.

He saw the glint in his son's eye as he looked at his lady. Owen had to admit, she seemed to glow this morning. She was dressed in a light pink blouse with layered chiffon short sleeves and a matching bowtie in front. The top may have seemed a bit dressy but the khaki capris that she wore added the casual flair it needed.

Even though their attire did not match there was no doubt to anyone who may have been watching that this couple was very much together. Every time they looked at each other their faces seemed to become brighter. He observed the way his son's hand was never far from hers, grasping at it, gently stroking it, placing it over hers as she spoke to him.

Maybe that was the reason why he was standing here now. It seemed a plausible argument. Why else would he have agreed to change into something more casual and attend the tour his son was conducting.

While at tea Trey had received a phone call. Hanging up the phone, he explained the situation, ready to apologize to both his father and Gabrielle for his abrupt exit.

The tour guide conducting a Haunted Plantation tour in St. Francisville, two-and-a-half hours away from New Orleans, had become ill. His boss was in a panic--there were forty-two passengers on a bus, with only Danny the bus driver, on the way to The Gallagher's Plantation, a mansion built on an ancient Indian burial ground known for being one of the most haunted places in America. It was a specialty tour, so the loss in monetary sums as well as reputation would be huge.

In desperation Joshua's father had called Trey explaining they were two hours from their destination, pulled over at a rest stop so they could drop off the sick tour guide. He explained to Trey that the group would have lunch when they arrived, giving Trey ample time to get there if he hurried.

Trey had agreed, but as he rose to go Gabrielle placed her arm on his.

"That sounds fascinating. Do you think your boss would mind if your father and I drove you out and joined the tour?"

"I don't think he would. I am doing him a favor, but honestly love, maybe you should show my father around New Orleans. I'm afraid the two of you would be quite bored..."

"Stop it, Trey. I can't think of a better way to spend the day and the drive is lovely. I think it would be fabulous, not boring at all. Don't you agree, Mr. Fairfax?"

Owen watched Trey grimace as he waited for his polite excuse, obviously afraid of the disappointment Gabrielle would feel.

"Completely, it will only take me a moment to change," Owen said to his surprised son, who'd nearly fallen out of his seat with shock at his comment.

As promised, the ride to St. Francisville was pleasant. The scenery was extremely fascinating to Owen; he'd never seen swamplands quite like this. Instead of Trey, it was Gabrielle playing tour guide, sharing with Owen the history of New Orleans as she drove. Trey had insisted his father sit in the front seat next to his lady.

At first Owen was a bit uncomfortable, but Gabrielle, with her natural charm and warmth, disarmed him almost immediately. He found himself talking about his work while his son's paramour asked relevant and well thought out questions. He caught his son watching her through the rear view mirror. He beamed as their eyes locked for a moment. Beamed, there was no other word to describe it.

When they arrived his son slipped easily into his role and welcomed the tourists.

Much to his shock the tour was not at all like he thought it would be. He'd envisioned his son acting like a jester, finding ways to frighten his party. Using silly voices and tricks to entertain them.

Trey did none of that. He not only talked about the tragedies that had occurred at this plantation, but of the history of the land and its people. Owen had to admit it was extremely interesting, especially the story he was currently telling about the young slave boy who had secretly poisoned the young children of the plantation owner in an effort to win favor with him.

Gabrielle stood next to Owen and snapped a few picture of his son. She smiled at Trey as he continued to tell the tale.

"He believes this one really is haunted," she explained softly.

"What do you mean?"

"Trey doesn't believe all places he tours truly have spirits lurking around. He just indulges the tour parties. However, sometimes he does. He gets a look in his eyes. Part seriousness, part interest. His eyes light up like a little boy. I don't think anyone notices, but I do. It's wonderful to watch." She snapped another picture of Trey and turned to his father.

"It's a certain feeling one gets when they believe in something. Like when I take a picture and I know I've captured something deeper than just an image. I admire Trey, and I don't think I could do it."

Owen looked down at the girl curiously. "Do what?"

Gabrielle held her camera, fingering it lightly.

“As a photographer, when you feel you’ve captured something you can run home, develop the picture and see if you were right, if what you felt was valid. It’s right there in your hands; the confirmation or disappointment, depending on the situation. However, with Trey, he has to keep going on faith and a few scattered scientific facts that could be explained away by any skeptic. Yet, he keeps on. It takes a truly remarkable person to have that much faith.”

Owen felt his eyes tear up as he choked back the lump in his throat. The look on the young woman’s face humbled him in a way he’d never felt before. Adoration, admiration, unyielding loyalty and devotion were all conveyed by a single gaze. She smiled so sweetly as if his youngest held the world in his hands. Trey looked up at that moment and smiled back at her then continued to conduct his tour.

No one could tell by the way they were acting that they were a couple. Trey remained professional while Gabrielle stood by Owen keeping him company as she took various pictures of the house and his son. Every once and a while an adorable blush would creep across her cheeks when he looked in her direction.

Yet, somehow they still managed to find subtle ways to stay in physical contact with each other. He would position himself in front or behind her, gently brush by or place a hand on her as if to nudge her politely to the side. It looked casual to most, but Owen knew different. Their touches were timed, lingered a bit longer. Every once in a while their finger-tips would find a way to graze each other as small, knowing smiles played across their faces. Could it be that someone had fallen in love with his misguided son? Loved him enough to look past his eccentric ways and see him for the man he was?

Owen watched for a little while longer. Gabrielle continued to snap away with her camera, glancing in his son’s direction with a look in her eyes similar to one a school girl would direct at the object of her affection. It was sweet, innocent, pure. So pure that it shocked Owen, it had been so long since he had been able to look at his son without complete disdain.

Suddenly, he felt shamed.

## **Chapter 23**

At one point it seemed as if everything that had occurred was starting to overwhelm Owen. He stepped away from the crowd pretending to be taken by a painting and trying to gather his thoughts. Gabrielle however would have none of it. She sidled up by him, took a step in front of him and took a picture.

“Forgive me, you must think I am incredibly rude.”

“No, my dear, not at all.”

Gabrielle looked at the painting. She seemed to be analyzing it in great detail.

"I think Missy would have liked this portrait. She always liked things with a bit of character, a flaw here and there. She said it made them look more real. Believe it or not she was not a fan of paintings."

"Really, why is that?" Owen asked curiously.

"She said when a person paints something they have a tendency to wash out the flaws. Mold it to their version of what perfection should be. Now with a photograph, you get what's there. Flaws and all. Sometimes things are blurred and skewed, other times crisp and clear, but they're always real. Kind of like people, she used to say."

Owen closed his eyes for a moment. He felt Gabrielle take a step closer to him.

"You know my father's grandparents did not approve of my father's choice in bride."

Owen looked at her stunned.

"They did not approve of Missy?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "She was far from the genteel southern woman they raised their son to believe he needed in a wife. Treated her horribly for a long time. Yet, she endured it all. For Charlie, because she loved him so much. She knew it killed him though, nothing cuts you harder than parental disapproval."

Owen looked down. "Ms. James, I do not know what Trevor has confided to you, however..."

"He does not say much. Just that you don't approve. I can understand to a certain extent why you feel the way you do. However, it does not take away that it hurts to see Trey so tortured over it."

"You love my son very much don't you?" Owen asked quietly.

"Yes sir, I do," she said with the utmost respect and reverence. "No one has ever made me feel the way he does." Gabrielle took a deep breath. "I was engaged before. It was the only time I truly felt like Missy was disappointed in me. Later on she told me it wasn't that she was disappointed in me. It's that she feared for me. She feared I would get hurt, lose myself in someone that didn't deserve me. Strange isn't it how fear can manifest itself as disapproval."

Owen chuckled. "When you have children, Ms. James, you will understand. When they are young you fear that somehow your deficiencies will find their way to them. You do your best to become a role model, find a way to ensure they are better than you. And

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all they want to do is go off and become their own person, find their own beliefs. How can you have any hope of saving them from the cruelty of the outside world if they insist on following such a bizarre path? It makes you feel so helpless.”

Gabrielle smiled sympathetically. “So you find ways to grab onto them. Hold on in an effort to save them from themselves and the world in general, no matter how destructive a thing that is?”

Owen nodded slowly. “All the while telling yourself the end will justify the means, if it will save them the heartache. A child’s heartache, Ms. James, is the most unendurable emotion a parent can ever feel.”

Gabrielle looked at the painting. “Did you ever want to be anything but a Barrister, Mr. Fairfax?”

“I had a few dreams,” he chuckled.

“Dreams are good. I admire those who have enough courage to go after their dreams. Who are we to stifle them? The most farfetched dreams have made the world what it is today. If we are fortunate enough to love a dreamer who has the faith to believe in the unbelievable then we are truly blessed. Wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Fairfax?”

Owen closed his eyes for a moment. “I wish I could. I wish I could have your faith.”

“I believe you do.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Trey got it from somewhere. Fortitude, drive. Yes, some of it is natural, but some was instilled by someone. He may not say it, but you, especially you, mean a great deal to him. If he felt he had your love and approval it would mean more than you can imagine.”

Owen opened his eyes.

Gabrielle studied him for a moment.

“Has anyone every told you how much you and Trey look alike?”

Owen chuckled again.

“It’s the one thing that is constant between us, Ms. James.”

“I wish you would call me Gabrielle or even Gabi. I would settle for Gabrielle though.” She took another picture of him. Then smiled shyly.

“I’m sorry. I just needed another one.”

“Why may I ask?”

Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders looking down at the carpet. “You’ll think it’s silly. You look how Trey will look like when he gets older. When I develop it... well I can’t help but feel I am looking into my future....”

Gabrielle gasped, feeling someone standing behind her. Her face turned beet red as she heard Trey say.

“We’re about to wrap up now.”

She bit her lip, her heart thundering against her chest then turned around praying to God he hadn’t heard her last comment.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Owen said. “I need to make an important phone call.”

She looked up at Trey apprehensively, ready to explain her rash words.

The look in his eyes stopped her abruptly. They looked dazed as if he was punch drunk. He held her gaze for just another moment. Trying to steady himself before he gave her a brilliant smile and turned back to his tour. He pressed his hand to the small of her back as if he was ushering her forward. No one saw the quick stroke he gave it as they returned.

~

After they’d loaded the tourists onto the bus and waved goodbye to them Trey, Owen and Gabrielle got into her car and hit the road back to the hotel.

The ride back was as pleasant as the ride up. Once they got to the hotel Owen announced that he needed to do a few things before he left and went about his business before meeting them in the lobby a few hours later to say goodbye.

Owen looked at his son carefully before sticking out his hand to shake Trey’s. A million questions raced through Trey’s mind. Was this it? Would he ever see his father again? Their initial conversation hung in the air once more.

“I will be sure to give you brother your well wishes.”

Trey nodded.

Owen looked at Gabrielle and smiled.

She smiled back and went to hug him. Much to Trey’s amazement his father hugged her back and placed a chaste kiss on her cheek.



“To say it was a pleasure to meet you is an understatement. You are truly as amazing as my son seems to repeat constantly.”

“Careful Father, can’t let it out that we actually agree on something,” Trey teased, snaking his arms around Gabi’s waist from behind.

Owen gave his son a small smile.

“Thank you for your hospitality again.”

Owen looked at his son and nodded. “Take care of yourself.”

Trey’s felt the kick in the gut again. Despite his girlfriend’s charm his father would remain staunch. He would be cut off without a family.

Or so he thought until the elder Fairfax smiled at his lady.

“If he doesn’t I am sure you will, Gabi.”

Gabrielle smiled brightly. He called her Gabi.

Owen began to walk away then turned to face the couple one more time.

“By the way Trevor, there is something for you at the front desk. It’s a private matter so please make sure you are by yourself when you receive it. Nothing against you Gabi, it’s a father and son thing,” he explained before leaving the hotel.

Gabi shrugged her shoulders and excused herself saying she was going to pack their things. Giving Trey the privacy he needed.

Trey walked to the counter. “I need to pick up something left here by Mr. Owen Fairfax. I’m his son Trey.” The man bowed pulling out a small package and asked Trey to show him the proper identification then sign for it. Trey looked at the package curiously, then tore open the note within.

*Trevor,*

*I am not a man of many words. As you know I do seriousness very well, however sincerity, is something I still sadly struggle with. You may think this is cowardly of me to give this to you in a note rather than say something to you in person, however I know because of my previous actions my words sometimes become lost to you.*

*So, in an effort to convey my sincerity I give you this. It’s not a way to buy you off, or get you to change your lifestyle. It’s quite the opposite. Believe it or not all parents make the same wish when a child is born; they may forget that wish as life overrules them, but it’s*

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*the same wish. It's the wish I made the first time I held you in my arms. My one wish was that you would find happiness.*

*Something you obviously have found. In seeing that, I no longer feel the gripping fear I felt for you ever since that fateful day in my office when you made your announcement. Be proud of what you have found Trevor, know that I am proud of you, too.*

*Again, please do not feel like I am trying to buy you off. Think of it as an investment into your future. An investment I make un-begrudgingly for the first time in a long time. My only hope is that it conveys what I feel and the steps I would like to take to mend our relationship.*

*Hold on Trevor, and do not let go.*

*Sincerely, your father,*

*Owen*

Trevor blinked back his tears wiping at them furiously. His trembling fingers opened the package and he gasped and shook his head. He blinked back more tears as he stared at it.

Trey raced up to the elevators and once inside watched the steady climb of the numbers becoming increasingly impatient as it made it's ascension up to his floor. The doors swished open and Trey ran down the hall to the room he was sharing with Gabi. He opened the door so suddenly she stopped her packing and looked at him, shocked.

"Is everything o.k. Trey?"

Trey was on her in an instant. He kissed her soundly, lowering her onto the bed.

"Trey what is it?" she asked almost a bit fearful.

Trey shook his head. "Nothing bad love. In fact, everything good."

Gabi looked up at him questioningly.

"You think parents have a sixth sense when it comes to their children? Like somehow they have an ability to sneak into their minds and suss out things?"

Gabi shrugged her shoulders. "Missy seemed to, so did my parents."

"My father never did. Not until today."

Gabi touched Trey's face, concerned.

"Went right into my head the Old Man did. Knew what I was thinking all day. I didn't have the balls to say it. Thought it would ruin everything," he muttered looking away for a second.

"What?" Gabi said trying to control her rising panic.

Trey seemed to know what she was feeling. He kissed both of her eyelids.

"I love you Gabi, more than I thought was possible. You asked me a question when we first met, do you remember what it was?"

Gabi nodded.

"I asked if you believed in fate."

Trey stroked her cheek. "You never got my answer."

"What is it?"

"No," Trey said.

"No?" Gabi repeated trying to mask the momentary stab of pain.

"No, never. Not until the moment you walked into the room. Not until the moment I saw you. As much of a wuss as I may sound right now, my world didn't come into focus until I looked at you for the first time. Everything made sense, but yet became completely chaotic at once. You do that to me, Gabi. Make my head spin, but somehow steady my soul."

Tears fell from Gabi's eyes. He wiped them away and kissed her eye lids.

"My father left me something."

"What?"

"Acceptance," he choked back.

"I don't understand."

"Everything about it screamed acceptance. It's not something he would normally have gotten, but it was something I would have wanted. Something he knew I would have chosen. It's perfect."

He pulled out the envelope and opened it. The contents spilled beside Gabi's head. He picked it up with trembling fingers.

“Perfect just like its owner.”

Gabi blinked hard staring at a flawless square-cut diamond ring. Not too big, not too small. The facets danced in the light as Trey held it in between his fingers.

“That is if the lady accepts,” he said. “Gabi, will you? Will you marry me?”

Gabi’s eyes widened as she stared agog at the ring. She looked up at him biting her bottom lip as tears began to fall out of her eyes once more.

Gabi nodded furiously, covering his face with wet kisses. He laughed, slipping the ring onto her finger.

“It fits. I don’t even want to know how your father managed that one.”

Trey shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ll ask him later.”

Gabi smiled up at him staring at the ring on her finger.

“We could always call him now,” she teased opening her legs a bit wider.

“We have much more pressing matters to attend to, Mrs. Fairfax,” he whispered, kissing her neck.

“Not yet.”

Trey’s hands found the bottom of her delicate blouse. “Just testing it out. Seeing how it sounds,” he murmured into her hair, nuzzling for a moment before lifting her shirt up and over her head.

“How does it sound?”

“Perfect, just like you.”

Gabrielle kissed him again.

“Wait, maybe we should continue this at home. Don’t want to start something we can’t finish. We are suppose to be checking out.”

Gabi began to unbutton Trey’s shirt.

“Didn’t you hear the waiter last night? The James family are always welcome guest here at The Windsor.”

"Hmm, of course how could I forget?"

He began to trail kisses down her neck, resting for a moment between her cleavage.

"So, one more night?" Gabi asked.

"Why not. You're rich, you can afford it," Trey teased.

Gabi laughed.

"I knew you would see things my way eventually."

## **Chapter 24**

Gabrielle entered her grandmother's studio flinging down the huge bag Bootsie had made her pack the day she'd rescued her from the townhouse. After Trey announced he had a few errands to run Gabrielle decided she would go back to the studio, do some laundry, and pack more things for her now more permanent stay at Trey's apartment.

She smiled looking down at the ring on her finger. Maybe it was careless and reckless for the couple to even think along these lines right now. Every time she thought about being sensible and of talking about their odd and frightening situation to Trey, she found herself deciding against it. Everything felt too right. This was where she was supposed to be. Somehow in the midst of chaos she'd found the man of her dreams. She would be damned if a few voices and would-be ghosts were going to take that away from her.

Gabrielle was washing the contents of her duffle bag when she heard the phone ring. She ran to catch it and banged her knee against the side table so that she answered the caller with a loud, "*Ow, damn it!!*"

She heard a soft chuckle on the other side.

"Interesting way to answer the phone love."

"Sorry just my naturally klutzy personality coming out in full force."

"Seriously, are you okay, pet?"

Gabrielle smiled. "Yes, fine. Where are you?" she asked hearing the sounds of voices and glasses clanging in the background.

"Actually I'm having a drink with a very beautiful lady."

Gabrielle leaned against the table. "Really, something I should know about?"

Trey chuckled. "Perhaps, I've just been going on and on a bit too much about my newly acquired fiancée. She's utterly fascinated. Insisted I call you so she could congratulate you."

Gabi heard rustling at the other end of the phone.

"Gabs?"

Gabrielle bolted up.

"Bootsie?"

"Who else would it be?"

"I don't understand, what are you doing there with Trey?"

"Well, funny story. I was sitting at home when I got this call from this guy with a funny accent. He insisted I meet him at Red's. Said he needed to talk to me about something. So I got in my car and drove over here to find him engrossed in a game of darts. Red wiped the floor with him..."

"Hey, it was a close match!" Gabi heard Trey yell in the background.

"In your dreams, Brit-Boy!" Another voice Gabrielle recognized as Red screamed further in the background.

Gabi began to giggle.

"Now, let me finish my story before I take back everything I said!" Bootsie threatened.

"Still there, Gabs?" Bootsie asked.

"Yes, continue."

"Well, after the boys finished playing. This handsome fella of yours sits me down and tells me he's in love with you. Like that's some sort of newsflash, right?"

Gabrielle chuckled.

"So, he wanted to tell you. I wish he would have told me what he was up to, I would have loved to have seen the look on your face."

"Actually, he didn't tell me."

Gabrielle's knitted her eyebrows cocking her head to the side.

"I don't understand."

"He said since Missy wasn't with us anymore he could not ask for her blessing so he did the next best thing."

Gabrielle eyes widened and tears began to fall freely from her eyes.

"He what?"

"He asked for our blessing. Should have seen Sam. I thought he would never get his jaw rolled up again."

"Sam's there?"

"Was. Said he had a meeting to attend. I think he was using it as an excuse. Didn't want your guy to see him cry."

Gabrielle wiped the tears from her eyes and giggled. "I can't believe he did that."

"Well, he did. Got to tell you Gabs, mighty impressed with this one. Wouldn't throw him back if I was you."

"So, I take it you gave him your blessing."

"You know I did. Been rooting for you two since the night of the party. A bit fast, but then again, who I am to talk right?"

"You mean everything to me, Bootsie."

"Stop that now, I have managed to keep my eyes dry to this point. Can't have you breaking me. I could see Missy up there getting a good guffaw."

"She did love to laugh to your expense."

Gabrielle heard a long pause.

"Bootsie?"

"Still here...she'd be proud you know? She would approve. But I think you know that, don't you."

Gabrielle smiled looking down at her ring. "Yes, Bootsie I think she would have."

"Well, I am going to go. Let this fella of yours buy an old broad a drink and take him in darts. I love you Gabs, congratulations honey."

“Thank you, Boots, I love you, too.”

Gabrielle heard the rustling of the phone once more.

“Hey,” Trey said, his voice soft.

“Have I told you how much I love you?” Gabi whispered.

“Mmm, yes but I love hearing it.”

“I love you. You know I could do more than just tell you.”

“Saucy little minx,” he muttered into the phone.

“Only with you.”

“Really?” he asked, in an almost a child like voice.

“Yes, really.”

“Can’t wait to get home to you,” he said.

“Well, I’m at the studio and I am doing some laundry. Pick me up after?” she asked.

“Anything the lady wishes.”

“Anything?” she teased.

“We’ll discuss that further a bit later.”

Gabi laughed again. “I’ll hold you to that. I love you.”

“I love you too. See you soon.”

Gabrielle hung up the phone, a smile still fixed on her face. She turned around grabbing the duffle bag. As she shook it out to make sure she had gotten everything, a couple of small film canisters came spilling out.

Gabrielle picked one up and shook it.

It was the film from the tour. She picked up the other one and did the same. It appeared to be empty. Shrugging her shoulders she gently tossed the film in her hand. She would have to do at least two loads. Deciding to kill two birds with one stone, Gabrielle walked into her grandmother’s dark room. Perhaps there was a decent shot of Trey and his



father in the roll. Maybe she could enlarge it and send it to her future in-law to thank him for his approval and his beautiful gesture.

Feeling much more lighthearted, Gabrielle switched off the light and began the in-depth process of developing the film. Hoping Trey did not have too many more surprises up his sleeve.

She was standing there in the complete darkness necessary to develop the black and white film when her phone rang again. Fumbling at little, she found the right button on her cell.

"Hello?"

"Still missing me?" she heard Trey say.

"Actually, I was standing in the dark. I decided to do some work while my clothes are washing."

"I wanted to tell you I'm going to be a few hours. Millie just phoned. Wants me to come down to the library. Said she found something."

Gabrielle closed her eyes.

"Love, try not to worry. She sounded a bit hopeful, maybe our run of good luck is still going. Please don't frighten yourself."

"Says the man not standing in complete darkness."

"I could tell her I'll come by some other time."

"No, don't be ridiculous. Go, I will be fine. I'll wait here. Really."

"Only if you're sure, Gabi."

"I'm sure."

Gabi heard Trey take a deep breath.

"I love you."

"Me too."

"I'll be home soon."

Gabi hung up the phone trying her best not to succumb to her worried state. After a short while she was engrossed in her work.

She took a deep breath before removing the film from the cassette and placing it on a metal reel. Slowly, she loaded it knowing instinctively she'd done it correctly. Smiling to herself, she placed the film in the light container and turned on a dim light.

She checked the temperature of the room making sure conditions were ideal before setting out her chemicals. She turned the dial just to be on the safe side to lower the air-conditioning until a good chill settled in the air.

Setting out the chemicals, she began to develop her shots. Some of them were decent, although she was unhappy with the outdoor shots of the plantation.

She smiled at the appearance of a mysterious light hovering over the tour group, thinking Trey may get a kick out of seeing it. At this point it was too early in the process to see whether or not it was a camera issue or something more. Still, she clipped it onto the line above her head for further examination.

She developed a few more shots and noticed the light appearing a few times over the heads of the unsuspecting crowd. Gabi took a step back examining it. The light did seem a bit odd.

She continued to process the pictures. The light was absent in a few shots, including the ones she'd taken of Trey's father. But in nearly every other shot there it was.

Gabi heard the ding of her washer indicating the first load was done. She carefully stepped out of the dark room to take out the washing and refill the machine. Walking back, she picked up the second film canister and walked back into the darkroom.

She stopped short, looking at the shots she'd just developed. They all had something in common. At first it had seemed that the light was hovering above the group. However, now that she was standing a bit further back she realized the light was hovering specifically above Trey.

Gabi put down the seemingly empty film canister and scanned the pictures. She plucked off the one that had the biggest light in it. It was a picture of Trey standing by a huge mirror. She'd thought the shot would be interesting, since she'd managed to catch both Trey and his reflection in the mirror.

Yet, in the background the small light seemed to overpower his reflection.

Gabi took the picture and went through the process of enlarging the photo. She ran it through the chemicals again repeating the developing process over and over again until only a fragment of the original picture filled the paper. Clipping it to the line, she waited.

Gabrielle watched the picture come into focus. She gasped covering her mouth with her hand. Jumping back and closing her eyes. "No," she whispered.

Opening her eyes again, she slowly walked up to the picture. With a trembling hand she pulled the picture off the line and stared at it. The light was no longer just a light. It had definition. Gabrielle looked down at it. There was Trey standing in front of the mirror. His reflection a bit crisper, but the hazy light was no longer a misty form. It was a face, a face she was familiar with. A face she dreamed about constantly.

“Jarek,” she choked out.

She continued to stare trying to process the implications of the shot. He wasn’t just standing next to Trey. She could see him hovering a bit above him as if it was almost trying to merge with Trey.

“God, no. Please, no,” she cried.

Suddenly, the room became much colder and Gabi pushed away from the table, knocking the canister over. She backed up against the door turning around to try to get out. The door seemed to be wedged shut.

Gabrielle began to bang hard on it.

*“Help me, please help me!”* she cried yanking at the door.

The metal of the knob became ice cold as the room’s temperature continued to drop.

Gabi turned around seeing her developer and pictures begin to frost over.

“Gabi...”

She heard *him*.

“No...,” she whimpered sinking to her knees.

Gabi hugged them tightly and began to rock back and forth. She shut her eyes tightly trying to will it all away. Letting out a cry, she felt airy glacier-cold fingertips playing against her hair. Her body shook violently and she felt a numbing sensation taking over her. She fought it for as long as she could before she found herself gasping for breath and sunk further to the ground. The room began to spin as she lost consciousness. Two words hung in the air as darkness engulfed her.

*“It’s time...”*

## **Chapter 25**

Trey stood in front of the large oak door of a plantation style home in the Garden District. He eyed the bronze plaque above the metal knocker.

Devereux.

He shook his head in amazement. Mille must have been a bloodhound in a former life. How she was able to dig up Justin Rousseau's relatives still had his head reeling. Then again, this was Millie, the woman who prided herself on knowing anything and everything about her beloved city. Had Trey really expected any less of her?

Justin Rousseau was related to the Devereux's, one of the most prominent and well respected families in town.

Trey rung the doorbell and stood there waiting. A man answered the door and without any formalities ushered him in.

"Mr. Fairfax. Mr. Devereux is expecting you," he said.

Trey bowed slightly following the butler down a long hallway. The man stopped in front of the double doors and opened them stepping to the side. Trey walked into the room and saw an elderly gentleman standing by the window.

Trey gave the butler a look as he closed the doors and left him standing there alone with Mr. Byron Devereux, town philanthropist and renowned citizen.

"Mr. Fairfax," he said, turning and walking slowly toward him.

He walked up to Trey and shook his hand.

"Please have a seat."

Trey took a step.

"Can I offer you a drink?"

"No sir. Mr. Devereux, I know this may seem odd but I wanted to know if you had any knowledge of a relative by the name of..."

"Justin Rousseau."

Trey nodded slowly.

Byron stood up folding his arms. He walked over to his large cherry wood desk and pulled out a small box. Sitting once again in the seat across from Trey he pushed the small box over.

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Trey lifted the cover and saw an old, tattered and torn, leather journal. He looked at Bryon questioningly.

"It's all right. I think you will find a few interesting things in that box."

Trey pulled the journal out and looked underneath.

He stopped himself from gasping when he saw various clippings. All of Gabrielle. Her grandmother's funeral, a few charity events and the two recent receptions at the gallery. There was even the one of him and her on the night they'd met."

"I don't understand."

Bryon released a breath. "Neither do I. However, since Ms. James's arrival in New Orleans my father had been quite obsessed with her."

"Your father."

Bryon leaned back in his chair. "Mr. Fairfax, my father was Justin Rousseau."

Trey felt as if the man had sucker-punched him. "Is that possible?"

"Quite, with enough money anything is possible."

Trey took the tattered journal in his hands. "You mean he has been here the entire time?"

"Not the entire time. After the death of his first wife my father left New Orleans, came back some years later. Married my mother, Nicole Devereux. They took her family name to escape the scrutiny."

"I see. Your mother, did she know....."

"My mother was Creole. She knew my father when he was married to his first wife. She saw him through the entire ordeal. After my father had found some peace, he returned here to her."

"Mr. Devereux, when you say ordeal...?"

Byron put his hand up. "My father was adamant it was never to be spoken of. It was not until recently that all of it came up again."

Bryon pointed at the clipping of Gabrielle. "He had a stroke when he saw her picture in the paper. He recovered, but never fully."

"I see, Mr. Devereux. I think I can explain your father's reaction."

"You do not have to, he told me. She was the spitting image of his first wife, except..."

"The eyes. Gabi's eyes are green," Trey said softly. "I would like to speak to your father. If he is well enough."

"I am afraid that is impossible."

"I do not wish to weaken him further, however..."

"Mr. Fairfax, my father passed last week."

Trey looked down. "My condolences."

Bryon nodded.

"He always said he lived too long after Mother passed. He loved her dearly. He called her his peace."

"Why share all this with me?" Trey asked.

"My father was a bit eccentric. Always said he knew someone, someday would come for him. Make him revisit his past. He said if they did I was to give them this box."

Trey looked at the box again. "You are aware his first wife was killed."

Bryon nodded. "Yes, and if you are asking if I know whether or not my father was the one who did it - I do not know. He never confided in me. I have a feeling the answer lies within that journal."

Trey opened the leather bound book as Bryon Devereux stood up.

"Please, take your time. However, you must excuse me; I have no desire to know the secrets of my father's past, which is why I never read it. I will tell you this, though, my father always carried something with him. Guilt, remorse I do not know. It was a darkness, though. However, with my mother he found happiness. He loved her dearly with everything he had. That may not make a difference to you, but it meant something to me. Regardless of what happened, he always felt responsible for what occurred that night. He never said it, but I could feel it. All I ask is do not be too unyielding, do not judge him too harshly."

"And what if he confesses to murder in this journal?"

Bryon took a deep breath and released it slowly. "My father said you would know what to do. If that means bringing him to justice for a crime he committed, then so be it."

Trey nodded, slowly opening the journal.

Bryon walked across the room and stopped in front of the door. "I will have Kenneth check in on you."

Trey slumped back in his seat taking a moment to digest all the information he'd just been given. He reached into his pocket and began to dial Gabi's number as he thumbed through the beginning pages of the journal.

A small sketch dropped out of the journal. Trey hung up his phone staring at it. It was a tiny drawing of Elysia. Trey thumb through the first few pages. Mostly it talked of Justin's arrival in the states. A bit about his time at Tulane.

About ten pages in he spotted an entry that intrigued him.

*I was sitting with Nicole talking about my last lecture when I saw her. She was the most exquisite creature I had ever laid eyes on. Beautiful. Enchanting. She smiled at me and walked toward us asking where to find the Cafeteria. I immediately volunteered my services. We talked during our stroll. She told me she worked at the college. A maid to the Dean of Admissions. Her name was Elysia. Even her name was mystical.*

*Elysia.*

Trey thumbed through a few more entries.

*I told her tonight that I loved her. I told her I did not care what people thought. I wanted to be with her for the rest of my life. She was everything to me. She finally relented. We are to be married tomorrow.*

Trey read some more about Justin's parent's initial disapproval. How he had won them over. His tragically blissful state, the first few months of his marriage.

*She is part spirit. She must be. No woman should be able to send a man to such euphoria with her body. I would deem it downright wicked, if she did not leave me with this feeling that somehow I had found nirvana in her embrace. I am lost. I am hers.*

Trey sat skimming through a few more entries. He spotted a particular page Justin's hand seemed shaky, the words smudged.

*My Beauty came back tonight smelling of liquor and cheap cologne. She cannot look me in the eye. I know she has been unhappy. I fear the worst. She will not let me touch her. She just looks down in shame. Please, God, let it not be true.*

Trey read more of Justin's entries, which became more tortured and erratic.

*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

*She tells me I am seeing things. I know I am not mad, I can see him standing there across the street looking up at our window. Waiting for her, beckoning her away from me. Luring her into the night. Stealing my love from right under my nose. I close my eyes and pretend to sleep. When she thinks I am no longer awake she rises and goes to him. She is lost to me. He has cast a spell on my beloved. I must save her. We will go to Paris. She will be free of his darkness, be mine once again.*

There was a knock on the door. Trey snapped the journal shut as if to guard the tortured man's words.

"Sir, did you need anything?"

"No, thank you."

"Very well, sir. If you need my assistance..."

Trey nodded and waited for the door to close. He opened the book again and began to read.

*There is darkness everywhere. It surrounds me. It surrounds my wife. I fear only death will release us from the devil's hold. Nicole, bless her heart, is fearful for me. She has consulted her Voodoo Priestess of a mother to help keep me safe. I have neglected my dear friend, yet she remains steadfast at my side. Oh, Nicole, did I choose unwisely? Would I have found happiness with you? Instead, I am engulfed in darkness and evil. With no hope of getting out. This will end.*

*Somehow it will end.*

Trey flipped another page.

*It is done, may God have mercy on my soul.*

The words leaped from the page. There it was. The confession. The truth. Sitting there glaring at him like neon lights. Trey had what he needed. He began to sit up ready to retrieve Mr. Devereux to tell him he was bringing the journal to the authorities. He began to rise, yet something niggling within caused him to settle back down. There was something else, something he needed to know. The next page rested in his hand, teasing him, daring him to flip it once more. Intrigued, he did just that.

It was an entry made years after the last ominous one.

*She sits at my feet, tears in her eyes, begging me to forgive myself. My Nicole, my peace, she loves me so. She says I have paid enough. That the truth can sometimes become distorted. That depending on how one looked at it I was more innocent than anyone else who stood in that room that dark and gloomy night. She says she regrets none of it. The decision she made. What she taught me. How I saved myself. She tells*



*me I am repenting, but a part of me remains forever tied to them, locked in that horrible, blood-stained room. She begs me to let go. I tell her it is impossible. Nicole takes my hand and presses it to her belly. Tells me nothing is impossible. Nicole, my peace, my love, my salvation. You freed another small part of me. I love you for that.*

Trey gulped hard, reading the last entry over and over again, line by line, memorizing it, burning it into his mind. Finally, he stood up.

As if on cue, Bryon Devereux walked into the room. The two men looked at each other for a long moment. Finally, Trey held out the journal to Bryon.

“There are things you may want to know about. Not all of them are bad. Regardless of what your father said. This belongs to you and your family. I have what I need. Thank you.”

“No, Mr. Fairfax, thank you.”

Trey walked down Bourbon Street to Gabi’s studio. Hopefully, now that he was armed with the truth of Elysia’s death, they would find some way to stop the attacks on Gabi. He walked up the stairs and knocked on the door only to have it open at his touch.

“Gabi?” he said pushing at it.

Trey walked in and felt his blood run cold. The studio looked as if it had been ransacked. Papers and clothing flung about everywhere, as if a tornado had whirled on through. He ran into the dark room and turned on the light.

There were pictures scattered everywhere. Chemicals dripping from atop the table. He grabbed a rag sopping them up trying to stop them from running into each other not knowing what reactions that would cause.

He looked down and saw a picture, it was of him. Trey’s picked it up, his eyes widening. He dropped it as if he had touched acid. The picture drifted slowly down to the floor and he stared at the image of Jarek hovering over his own. He bolted out of the studio praying to whoever would listen that he would not find his fiancée at his next destination.

Trey arrived at the Townhouse. He kicked in the back door, slamming his way in. All the Hygro Thermometer Clocks were going insane blaring through out the house. Then, as he ran through the kitchen he felt his skin numb from the cold.

“Gab!” he screamed. “Gab. Are you here?”

He turned ready to dash up the stairs and stopped dead in his tracks. Standing at the top of the stairs was Gabrielle. She has dressed in a white silk gown, wearing the

diamond choker and earrings she'd worn the night they met. She cocked her head to the side, one hand holding onto the banister.

"You're too late," she said sorrowfully. "It's too late."

Trey took a step toward her. She blinked and her eyes turned black.

From behind him Trey felt something grab him and then he was being thrown to the floor. He tried to stand. A gut-wrenching burning sensation overtook him causing him to scream. He felt as if he was being torn apart at the seams. The pain was so intense he actually felt his body convulse. He looked up at Gabrielle as she slowly descended the stairs.

"He's too strong. Don't fight it," she whispered.

"Elysia, help us, please." He looked into her eyes, pleading with her.

She looked down, then raised her head. "I can't. No one can help you now."

## **Chapter 26**

Trey opened his eyes, staggering for a moment because the room felt as if it was spinning. He reached out to steady himself and his hand grasped at what felt like a wooden surface. He looked down and saw that it was a small wooden vanity table. Finally, the room stopped spinning.

He searched his surroundings trying to suss out what exactly had happened. Only a moment ago, he'd been down stairs. Now he was standing in Gabrielle's room. He heard the bed creaking, the sounds of moans and grunts. Trey turned.

"No, it can't be," he whispered.

There, lying on the bed on top of Gabrielle was the mirror image of himself. They were gasping and clawing at each other. Gabrielle's eyes were welded shut as the figure that seemed to be him ravaged her neck with passionate kisses.

"Ellie...yes," he heard the man groan. The voice was low, made baritone by the lust that seemed to consume it, no traces of his English accent remained.

He watched as the man grabbed Gabrielle. Her eyes widened in shock. Trey tried to lunge forward, to pull his doppelganger off her, then he saw the dark unfocused iris's of her eyes staring up at the ceiling.

"I told you Ellie, you are mine. Forever," the man above her said.

“Jarek,” she murmured as she closed her eyes.

“It’s not your love.” Trey heard a voice behind him. He turned and saw a woman standing there, looking at him.

She was dressed in a white camisole dress, her hair hanging loosely around her face. Her dark skin contrasted her blue eyes as they darted from the two figures on the bed and back to Trey.

“What’s going on?” Trey asked.

“It looks as if it is winning.”

“What is?”

The woman pointed at Trey, motioning for him to take a harder look at himself.

Trey looked down. “Bloody Hell!” he yelled. His body looked translucent. He swung his arm down only to watch it go completely through his torso. Reaching back, he grabbed for the vanity again. His hand slid straight through.

The woman walked closer to him. “Nothing is what it seems. Remember that, Mr. Fairfax.”

Trey stared at the figures writhing on the bed, kissing as if they were trying to devour each other.

“If I’m here, where’s Gabi?” Trey asked.

The woman looked down. “Trapped somewhere in between. She does not have your strength, your resolve. She fears, so she hides deep within,” the woman said, pointing at the girl on the bed.

“So, she’s feeling all that?” Trey screamed. “God, I’ve got to help her,” he turned back toward the woman. “Please...tell me how.”

“I’ll help you if you help me,” she said softly.

“Help you, how?”

The woman walked over to Trey and pointed away from the bed, across the room.

Trey looked over and on the floor. Sitting there was a man crying, rocking back and forth and holding something in his arms.

Trey took a step closer. As he circled the man, the sounds and images of the coupling on the bed faded in the distance. He felt a shift as the scene seemed to change. The room dimmed, the air around seemed to grow stifling. Then, a strange glow came off the distraught man as he flickered in and out of a hazy form. Despair and darkness clung in the air. He could almost feel the man's sorrow, his hopelessness.

"Oh, God forgive me!" the man begged. "Please, forgive me." The man was rocking someone, a woman who lay limp and unmoving in his embrace.

Trey took a closer look confirming what, in his heart, he already knew.

"Elysia," the man sobbed, staring at the mirror-image of Gabrielle.

Trey saw another body lying prone next to them. The body of a man, Jarek, his blood covering the hard wood floor.

The woman bent down hovering over the tortured man. "He's stuck here. Can't get free. It was his curse. For what he did. For trying to protect himself. So, now he is held here in this moment, suffering. Feeling the guilt and remorse. Everything he felt that night. He needs to be free," she said, her voice getting shakier and shakier.

Trey looked down at the man and woman, then back to his mysterious companion. "You're Nicole,"

"Only a few people ever get to see this place. The place where restless spirits wander. Angry, frightened, sorrowful they are all here. Unable to let go of their humanity and move on. Some don't know how to, others...others stay here in hope of seeking vengeance or to right a wrong they feel was committed against them."

Nicole looked down at her husband. Then at Trey. "He cannot cross over, the curse keeps him here."

"Perhaps it's justice. For what he did to them." Trey said, unable to hide his anger

"You don't understand."

"No, you don't! Why Gabi? Because she looked like her? Because she had the misfortune of owning this home? She was innocent, the only true innocent here. And now she is stuck somewhere dark and lonely where I can't get to her." Trey felt enraged; he stormed toward the direction of the bed.

Suddenly, it appeared in front of him. Once again the couple were on the bed, more clothes stripped away this time as they continued to attack each other.

"Do you know how it feels to know she's in there somewhere? I can see her right in front of me and I can't reach her! This is sick, all of you are sick!" he screamed.

Nicole circled Justin who was still holding a limp Elysia in his arms. She spread her arms. "Yes, Mr. Fairfax, I know exactly how you feel," she whispered. "Right there in front of me and not able to reach... As I said before Trey, nothing is what it seems. Find the thing that binds them all together, the truth will burn through this room tonight one way or the other. Not only Justin, Gabi. All of you will be lost," she said ominously.

"Find the truth," she whispered again as she faded into nothingness.

~

Trey opened his mouth to say something. "*Jarek!*" he heard. In front of him were Elysia and Jarek still ardently writhing on the bed.

"Please, stop," Elysia begged. "He'll be here soon. You must stop!"

Jarek stopped groping at her and tilted her head up.

"Good, this ends tonight. You will be free, my Ellie."

Elysia closed her eyes as if she was in a daze. "Please, you must..."

Trey heard a door slam below.

"Elysia! I'm home, I've booked the passage."

Elysia looked at Jarek, full of fear now. She jumped out of bed pulling him toward the balcony only to have Jarek smirk.

The door swung open to reveal an overjoyed Justin. "We are to leave...."

Justin stopped dead in his tracks. Elysia gasped.

"Justin, I can explain."

"You!" Justin snarled.

Jarek was still smirking. "So sorry to disturb you. Only came to get what is mine." He grabbed Elysia around the waist, his hand closing over her right breast possessively.

"Get your hands off my wife!" Justin screamed.

"Come now, do you really think you are man enough to hold her?"

"She's mine. She knows it, ask her."

Justin looked at Elysia who cast her eyes up at Jarek.

"Please, Justin, just let him have me," she whispered.

"No."

Jarek pushed Elysia to the side. He pulled out a small pouch full of fine white powder and poured it out into his hand as he began to chant.

Justin took a step back as Jarek blew the powder at him.

Justin coughed and then began to gasp. He sunk to his knees, screaming in pain.

Trey blinked as the next scene in front of him was one he had seen before. Justin, on the ground, rocking a bleeding and pale Elysia in his arms.

"God, forgive me, please forgive me."

Trey cocked his head to the side. Something was off, a whole chunk of time was missing. Something had occurred in between the attack and the deaths. A whimper from the direction of the bed caught his attention.

He looked over at the bed at the girl lying there. She blinked, her eyes trying to focus. Her eyes turned kelly green and widened in fear as she looked up at the man above her.

"Trey?" she asked in a fearful voice.

"Oh, God, no," Trey whispered.

"It's all right, love," Jarek said, sounding exactly like him. "I've got you, pet, nothing is going to happen to you. Just let go."

"No!" Trey screamed. "Gabi, don't listen."

"Trey?" she asked again as the man continued to undress her.

"It's me. I'm here, I'll keep you safe. Just do what I say and everything will be all right."

He could see the trepidation in her eyes as she questioned his words.

"This isn't right," she said, valiantly trying to push him off.

"It is. It's me, trust me."

Gabi closed her eyes.

Trey launched himself onto the bed falling with a sickening lurch into the person who looked like him. Suddenly, everything began to spin. He saw his life flash before him. Bits and pieces of Jarek's as well.

Jarek's first encounter with Elysia. The first time they had sex, the way he stood outside waiting for her to come to him.

He felt himself being pulled out of his body once again. More flashes of his life flew all around him, then he was losing his grip and floating away. The flashes stopped abruptly at one single image. Trey concentrated, using the memory to anchor him.

It was of Gabrielle bouncing up the stairs of the tour bus, smiling up at him brightly. The racing from one scene to another stopped. Slowly another memory came, the first time they'd made love, waking up with her in his arms. Yet another of her cradled in his arms, a thin sheet covering their naked bodies.

"I love you, Trey," he heard Gabrielle whisper.

He could really feel her then, solid in his arms. Jarek's memories becoming fainter and fainter.

"No..." he heard a male voice scream in his mind.

Trey concentrated hard, remembering every nuance of his love. The feel of her skin, her breath against his chest. The way she'd smiled through her joyous tears as he placed their engagement ring on her finger. The room started spinning as his touch became more solid. Suddenly, he remembered his father's words.

*Hold on, Trevor, and do not let go.*

Trey reached deep within and gathered the last of his strength. Concentrating on a single thought, a single action, Trey did something he had not done in over ten years.

He listened his father.

Feeling more in control of his body, Trey did just that. He held onto Gabi. Held onto her for dear life and with everything he had.

Then, with another blood-curdling scream, something was being pulled out of him.

"No...", he heard Jarek's voice roar. "No!"

In an instant the room stopped spinning. Trey found himself above Gabrielle, their clothes disheveled, Gabrielle was gasping and panting for breath.

"It's all right, love," he said quickly, "It's really me. We're safe now, we're safe."

"Trey?" She wrapped her arms around him tightly.

"God, Gabi," he choked out, trying to contain his tears of relief.

Her grip became tighter and tighter to the point where Trey began to feel as if he couldn't breath. "Gabi, it's okay..." He pulled back and searched her face.

"We're safe now."

Gabi whimpered softly, her eyes still closed. "Trey," she cried again. Nudging forward, she hugged him tighter.

Trey felt her nipping at his ear.

"Trey." Her voice dropped an octave lower. "You've ruined everything."

Trey blinked hard looking down at her.

She opened her eyes and they were still black as night, but gone were the scared sorrowful eyes he had seen before. Now, she glared at him, her gaze cold, deadly, evil.

"Everything," she sneered.

With a flick of her wrist Trey found himself hurled off the bed and onto the ground.

Elysia scrambled off the bed and stared down at him. She smiled manically.

"I told you before. Nothing can save you now..."

## **Chapter 27**

Trey rose shakily to his feet, eyes darting round the room, and realized he'd been catapulted into the past again.

He heard a man groaning beside him. Looking down, he caught sight of Justin Rousseau curled up in a small ball holding his sides in pain.

"You used too much," Elysia screamed.

Jarek looked at his fuming lover. Gone was his vicious and commanding demeanor, in its place was an almost timid one. He smiled at Elysia.



“Trust me, my love. It was just enough. He will not be able to fight back.”

“It’s no good if he’s dead!”

“What does it matter, Ellie!” Jarek screamed. “You said you wanted him dead, have you changed your mind? I thought we were going to make it look like a robbery?”

Ellie walked over to Justin and pushed him over onto his back with her foot.

“If there are any traces of this powder on his body then they will know something else happened here. Do I have to think of everything!” She looked down at her dress and ripped a small piece of lace from the bottom using it to wipe off the remnants of powder from Justin’s face. Justin twitched at that moment. He reached out blindly as if trying to push the pain away.

Surprised by his sudden movement, Ellie bent down and struck him across the face.

Elysia shook her head, silently berating herself as she saw a small trail of blood appear from the side of Justin’s mouth. Quickly she wiped it off with the scrap of lace.

“Let’s just get on with this.”

She steeled herself and took a breath, telling herself it was almost done. She was just close enough to getting everything she wanted, everything she deserved. She looked down at Justin, feeling for the briefest moment a tiny bit of remorse for what she had set in motion.

The poor little man, how was he supposed to know she’d sought him out, knew him by reputation. That their initial meeting was no accident, but a well planned seduction. He was nothing but a means to an end. A way to finally remove herself from the poor lot in life she was born into. How was he supposed to know that ever since she was a child she’d resented her meager existence?

This whole thing was Justin’s fault. If he had just let her be, let her have her fun, this whole scenario would not have been necessary. He could not however, because he’d become fixated on this crusade to “save” her from her own darkness. Tried to take her away to France, away from the gaiety of her life, the passion of her lover. What else was she to do? She had no other choice.

Trey watch Ellie stand up and walk over to her vanity table. Then she pulled out her diamond and emerald choker along with its matching earrings. She tossed the jewelry back and forth from one hand to the other. The she pulled out a few more of the tiny compartments, leaving them askew, making it seem as if her vanity had been rummaged. Taking a satisfied look at the disheveled room, she dropped the jewelry onto the floor.

Elysia shimmied up to Jarek, grabbed him by his lapels and kissed him deeply.

Jarek groaned, responding hungrily to her.

“God, Ellie, I want you, right now,” he said.

“All in due time, my love.”

Ellie held out her hand revealing a tiny crimson cut. “Forever, remember?” she whispered.

Jarek smiled at her and clasped his hand to hers. There, resting within his palm was a similar incision to Elysia’s. “All we have to do is make sure he does not make it through the night. Then, I get everything. And you and I can be together,” she whispered.

Jarek smiled.

“Now, go turn him over,” Elysia demanded.

Jarek unwillingly pulled himself away from her. He crouched to turn Justin over and suddenly staggered back, screaming.

Elysia turned around and gasped, her hand coming to her mouth.

Jarek was hunched over a now-kneeling Justin. He staggered backwards, clutching at his stomach. He looked up at Elysia then back down at his stomach. Slowly, he pulled the long, bone-handled knife from his abdomen and dropped it to the ground.

Elysia ran to her lover. Dropping to her knees, she cradled him in her arms. “Jarek, no,” she cried, rocking him back and forth.

Jarek reached up to Elysia, smearing her face with blood from his hand. “Find me. Avenge me,” he whispered.

Elysia covered his face with wet kisses as he went still in her arms. She reared back her head letting out a silent howl, then held onto her dead lover until her knuckles turned white. After a long while, she released him and turned back to her husband who was still hunched over trying to stop the pain surging through him.

She grabbed him by his coat and pushed him back against the bed. His body slammed against the bedpost. He whimpered, going stiff as she man-handled him.

“You just couldn’t leave...”

Elysia’s eyes went wide as she felt something push against her. She looked down and saw the same knife that had been used to kill her lover now protruding from her chest.

Justin's head snapped up as if he was coming out of a daze. His eyes met those of his wife's.

The manipulator to the very end, Elysia cocked her head to the side. "Why?" she asked in a child-like voice.

Justin looked down at his blood soaked hands. "Elysia...what...?"

She fell to the floor still reaching up to him and Justin took her in his arms. Elysia closed her eyes convulsing for just a moment before she went limp in his arms.

"Elysia," he said, his voice tortured and confused. He shook her. "Elysia!"

Trey found himself back at the scene he'd witnessed before.

Justin Rousseau holding his treacherous wife, with seemingly no recollection of what had truly occurred. No clue to how evil his wife truly was. He was the only one left alive, with fragmented memories and feelings of remorse and guilt.

"Justin?" Trey heard from down the stairs.

A flurry of footsteps made their way up the stairs. Trey turned and saw Nicole Devereux standing at the doorway.

"Oh...my...God..." she whispered, witnessing the bloody scene in front of her.

Justin looked up at Nicole.

"Why? Why did you give me that knife? Look what I have done?" he cried holding onto Elysia, stroking her pale face.

"No, Justin. They were going to hurt you. My mother told me they bought fire powder from her friend. They were going to kill you," she explained.

"Instead, I killed them," Justin whispered.

Trey watched as Nicole looked around the room.

Taking a deep breath she began to clean up the room, calmly making it look as if nothing had occurred. She took the jewelry and put it back into the secret compartment in the vanity.

She saw the blood-soaked lace now stained with Elysia and Jarek's blood as well as Justin's, lying on the ground. Hastily she picked it up stuffing it in a small pouch and shoving it in a drawer.

"We have to get you out of here," she said.

"No, let the police come. I deserve to die."

Nicole knelt down.

"No, Justin, you're a good man," she insisted softly, tears falling from her eyes. "Please, let me help you." Reaching out, she touched his face, cupping it in her hand. "Please."

Justin blinked.

Nicole rose to her feet and reached out for him again. "Walk away with me now, Justin."

Justin looked at his dead wife lying in his arms. He felt Nicole's small hand take hold of his, willing him to his feet. She pulled him toward the door. Finally, he conceded and allowed her to usher him out. Trey watched Nicole wrap an arm around Justin as she guided the broken man down the stairs.

Trey bolted upright coughing and trying to catch his breath. He found himself back in the present. Hunched over on the floor he saw Elysia standing over a candle, lighting it. Slowly she took the lit match to her lips and blew it out.

"I don't know about you, but I prefer candlelight," she said, running her hand through the flame.

Trey rose to his feet, repeating to himself over and over that the person he was dealing with was not his love, but an evil, conniving creature.

"Let her go."

Elysia laughed wickedly. "Now why would I go and do a thing like that?"

She spread her hands out as if she was presenting herself to Trey.

"After all, I am used to this form. So sad that she had the misfortune of looking so much like me. It was so easy."

"How so?"

Elysia cocked her head to the side. "We're all trapped here, a piece of us tied to this room. By blood and magic. By fire powder and blood. Her fate was sealed from the moment Jarek saw her. All I had to do was wear her down. A friendly gesture like the jewelry," she said running her fingers across the choker. "A few scares, some seduction by my lover."

Trey flinched at the thought.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk... Didn’t like that did you? Does it make you angry? She thought you would hate her. That’s why she didn’t tell you. Guilt is such an ugly emotion, leaves you open to all kind of nasty little things.”

Elysia crossed her arms over her chest. “It was only a matter of time with her, but you, you were the hard one. All that extra energy, strong beliefs. It was very hard for Jarek to get in. Tried several times. Finally, it came to us. The one thing that would leave you open, the one thing you hide deep within you.”

Trey took a step back. “Really, and what’s that?”

Elysia smiled evilly and closed her eyes. She reopened them and this time they were green.

“Trey?”

“Gabi...”

She closed her eyes again and blinked returning to Elysia’s unnaturally black irises.

“Fear. You fear for her. You fear losing her. She’s your anchor. The only one who’s ever believed in you. Without her, you would be lost.”

Trey swallowed the lump in his throat.

“You were frozen with fear, weren’t you? Seeing me standing atop the stairs looking down at you. You knew you were too late. You felt helpless, so helpless that it was easy for Jarek to slip in.”

Trey balled up his fists. “I could kill you.”

Elysia opened the vanity and took out the same bone-handled knife from all those years ago.

“By all means,” she said throwing it at Trey. She eyed the knife for a moment her dark countenance looking even more sinister. “Nicole, stupid, insipid little bitch,” she spat out. “She was always in love with Justin. Pity he did not see that. Could have saved him a lot of heartache.”

Elysia glided up to him, her eyes fixed on his.

“So, go ahead, Trey. Do it. Kill me. Release me again. I have all of eternity. Another woman will come along, another victim, a few practiced tricks. I’ll just have to start all over again. You, however, you lose the one thing that means everything to you.”

Trey gripped the knife and pressed it against her stomach. She blinked and her eyes turned green again.

"Please do it," Gabrielle begged. "Save yourself."

Trey's hand trembled as he began to push the knife at her. Gabrielle continued to stare at him. The same adoration in her eyes as always. His determined grip went lax for a moment. He swallowed hard, staring into his lover's eyes. Pleading with her.

"You can beat her, Gabi. I know you can. I love you so much."

"I can't...I tried... You can't let them win. It's all right, just do it. Then, get out of here. Please," Gabi begged.

"Not without you."

"Trey, let me go. You have to."

Gently she took his wrist in her hand and guided it to her heart. "I love you, always," she whispered.

Trey pressed forward as Gabi's hands slipped around his shoulders. She rested her head against his chest waiting for the knife to slip into her. He closed his eyes and began to move. He felt her breath against his neck. His eyes gazed down at her catching site of the knife nearly piercing her beautiful olive skin. He gasped, pushing himself back, shaking his head vigorously.

"No, I'm sorry," Trey cried. "I can't." He barely felt the knife fall from his sweat-stained fingers. He only knew he'd released it when he heard it hit ground.

Gabi blinked again, her eyes turned black and Elysia smiled.

"I knew you would see things my way."

## **Chapter 28**

Trey took a step back in an effort to put some distance between the two of them. Again the feeling of helplessness washed over him. He could not kill Gabi - there was no way he could live with himself if he did that. He stood there waiting, completely at the dark woman's mercy.

"One question, why now? After all these years?"

Elysia chuckled. "As long as Justin lived his blood kept us at bay, but when his blood started to run cold it gave us a bit more power. This is all so boring, aren't you going to ask me what I want from you?"

"Getting there," Trey smirked bitterly.

Elysia cocked her head to the side studying him. "Do you really want to live without her?"

Trey thought for a moment. A life without Gabrielle, no smiles, no laughter, never again being able to look in her eyes. The thought of it was unbearable. He could tell Elysia relished his torment. She fed off it. A part of him wanted to find a way to anger her, punish her for her cruel game. But the truth of the answer to her question reverberated through his mind.

A life without his Gabrielle... "No," he said in an anguished whisper.

"Well, we are at an impasse then. Because this life just would not be as fun without Jarek at my side. "

"Then just leave, wait for some other victim to terrorize and let Gabi go."

Elysia sighed and shrugged her shoulders. "All right, if you insist."

She shut her eyes. Trey watched the airy image separate from Gabi's physical body. Elysia stood at Gabrielle's side smirking as Gabrielle began to heave, trying to catch her breath.

Trey watched in horror as Gabrielle turned a sickly grey color and sank to the ground. "Gabi? Gabi," he screamed, shaking her violently. He looked up realizing that the ghostly figure was still hovering, watching....

"What have you done?"

"Not me, her. I'm too much a part of her now. Her spirit is too weak to resist this."

Gabi's eyes fluttered open trying with all her might to keep her gaze on the man she loved. "Trey," she whispered.

"Gabi." Trey choked on the word.

"Let her have me," she begged. "Save yourself."

Trey shook his head violently. "No," he said, lightly kissing her near-white lips.

"I love you."

"If you love her, then you will concede!" Elysia screamed.

Gabrielle began to shake.

"You're playing *Russian Roulette* with your love's life," Elysia screamed.

Trey closed his eyes again. He could literally feel Gabrielle fading away in his arms.

"*Alright!*" he bellowed.

Elysia smiled and hovered over Gabrielle's prone form, merging with her once again. Trey watched Gabrielle's green eyes change. He fought back the rage within. Praying that it was not the last time he would see them, the alluring, entrancing color of her eyes, the color that sent his world spinning out of control.

Now they were replaced with darkness, a deep and evil thing, the color that had deceived him. Elysia was back looking up at him. He wanted to shake her, make her go away. Guilt tore through him. She'd deceived him, made him think she was innocent, a hapless victim just like the rest of them. When in all reality she was the mastermind in all of this. Weaving her wicked web, just as she had done in life.

This was his fault, he should have been smarter, been able to protect his love.

Trey pushed her away as if she was made of acid.

Elysia laughed loudly. "There, that was not so bad."

She rose to her feet again opening the palm of her hand. Within her grasp was a piece of tattered lace. The same scrap of lace used to wipe up the blood of all the secrets that were created that night so long ago.

"Silly Nicole. In her quest to protect Justin she left a little piece of him here. She carried it everywhere and did not even know it. It was almost laughable."

Trey looked toward the vanity as another scene unfolded in front of him. There was Gabi sitting there in a daze. Stuffing the piece of lace into a film container and placing it in her duffle bag as Bootsie was looking out the window.

All the horrid, frightening pieces were falling into place. How they were able to terrorize her. Why they'd had their blissfully undisturbed two days at the hotel. The atrocious item was nowhere near Gabi. Therefore she'd been free of them.

"Don't go kicking yourself. Just get on with this."



Trey took a deep breath. "So, what's the deal. We give up our lives and you and Jarek get to live happily ever after?"

"Something like that," Elysia said smugly. "Ideal solution, wouldn't you think?"

Trey looked past Elysia to see Justin sobbing on the floor, caught in his tragic state.

"What of him?"

"He's none of your concern!" he snapped. "He deserves everything that is coming to him. He should have died that night. Instead, he got a near-lifetime of happiness with her! He will pay for all of eternity!"

Trey looked at the evil woman again. "What do I have to do?"

Elysia held up the scrap of lace and placed it in his hand. She reached down and picked up the knife. Keeping her eyes focused on him she pierced the knife through his palm, admiring the deep cut she created. Trey gulped hard biting back the pain, refusing to give the evil woman the pleasure of knowing she had inflicted him with more torture. Taking the scrap of lace she pressed it on the oozing cut.

"Unlike Gabi, you must give yourself over to him willingly now since you stupidly fought back."

"Fought back and won," Trey said, his voice trembling.

"Of little consequence now. Just let him pass. Let him in."

Trey glared at Elysia one last time. His eyes began to drift shut. Just then Nicole appeared standing behind her husband still sitting on the floor shaking and tortured with guilt. Nicole placed her hands on Justin's shoulders as she stared at Trey, silently pleading to him with her eyes.

Trey suddenly remembered Nicole's anguished words...

*He needs to be free.*

"I'm sorry," he whispered to no one. Knowing he had failed them, all of them. That he had failed Gabi.

As he pressed the lace to his bloodied hand and began to let go, he felt himself being pulled away. More memories of his time with Gabrielle flooded his mind.

*"Do you believe in fate, Mr. Fairfax?"* he heard her melodic voice say.

His response coming what seemed a lifetime later. Lying in her arms, basking in their love.

*"No, never. Not until the moment you walked into the room. Not until the moment I saw you."*

He saw the two of them walking into the Le Salon, their arms entwined, to meet his father. Remembering how he felt. Because she loved him, because she believed in him, he no longer needed his father's approval. She'd freed him from all that. Now, all he wanted to be, all he needed to be, was hers.

*"Thank you," he whispered*

*"For what?" Gabrielle asked.*

*"For finding me. For helping me find myself. You are the best thing that ever happened to me. I love you so bloody much."*

*She blushed hiding her face against his chest. He smiled and kissed the top of her head as they made their way to his father.*

Gabrielle's voice whispered to him once more.

*"I love you Trey..."*

Love...

Like the way Nicole loved Justin. She'd fought for him, protected him. Saved him.

That was love, not this. Not this abomination before him. Jarek and Elysia were everything that was wrong and evil in the world. He shouldn't let this happen. Shouldn't let them win, let the love of four people be lost forever. He could not fight for Gabi anymore, he could not even fight for himself. So he did the next best thing. He would fight for Nicole and Justin.

He concentrated on Elysia's words.

*"Just let him pass. Let him in."*

Trey let go and reached out for him, allowing him into his mind. Into his memories, into the secrets that were kept until this night. Allowed him to see what had occurred, all the roles played by everyone that night.

When Trey reopened his eyes, Elysia wrapped her arms around him and kissed him. "Jarek," she murmured.

Trey gripped her shoulders.

“Wrong.”

Elysia’s head snapped up. “We made a deal!” she snarled.

“Wrong again. We didn’t make a deal, we made a vow. Till death to due us part, Ellie.”

Elysia pulled away from Trey. “Justin?” she asked, confused.

He slowly stalked her.

“For years I tortured myself thinking I’d killed you in a fit of passion. Nicole kept telling me it was not possible, I was a better man than that. I didn’t believe her. I wouldn’t. I saw what happened Elysia. I saw you for what you are.”

“No, Justin please. I loved you, I was just so confused.”

“Confused? Were you confused when you went to the swamp and got that blasted powder? Were you confused when you and your lover conspired to kill me? It’s over Elysia, I’m free.”

Justin grabbed the candle hearing Nicole’s voice somewhere within Trey’s memories.

*Find the thing that binds them all together.*

“Justin, don’t!!” Elysia cried.

*The truth will burn through this room tonight.*

Justin took the scrap of lace and watched it burn in his hand.

Elysia screamed and, with a jolt was pulled from Gabrielle’s body. Gabrielle sank to down to the ground as Justin staggered, falling to his knees.

Suddenly, Trey was there in his own body, watching the whole scene unfold. He saw Elysia’s ghostly form begin to fade as she screamed out in agony. Trey was slammed, face first, into the ground as Justin’s spirit was violently yanked from his body. He coughed, trying to catch his breath. Slowly, he saw Justin appear in front of him.

Trey looked over and saw Gabrielle sprawled on the cold wooden surface. Her face was ash-white.

“Gabi!” he screamed. Using what little strength he had to crawl over to her, he hauled himself up leaning against the vanity, pulling her into his lap listening for her breath.

Nothing.

Trey frantically blew air into her mouth watching the rise and fall of her chest. Praying with everything he was that the next breath she took would be of her own volition.

“Please, love, no,” he whispered

He held her tightly, rocking her back and forth for a moment before trying one more time, continuing his desperate attempt to revive his love.

A hovering shape broke into his awareness. He tore his eyes away from Gabi and looked up to see Justin standing there, watching them.

Nicole appeared next to him. Justin looked adoringly at his wife.

“My love, my salvation. You gave me peace yet again.”

Nicole took her husband’s hand gently in hers. He tilted her head up and kissed her forehead, his lips trembling.

She smiled then stood on her tiptoes, kissing him softly on his cheek.

“It’s time, Justin.”

“Walk away with me now,” she said, just as she had the night she’d saved him. The night she’d freed him from the nightmare that was his life. The night that had held him in his horrid state since his earthly departure.

He smiled at her and took her hand. The ghostly couple looked at Trey one last time, then turned away.

Trey looked down at Gabi. She lay perfectly still in his arms and he knew she was gone. Had it been worth it? His belief? His faith? What had his strength in his convictions got him if he wasn’t even able to save the one thing that meant everything to him?

Nothing made sense for him anymore as he sat there, holding her. Except for one thing. As Trey cradled Gabi in his arms, he was struck by the inevitable logic of the situation. He almost laughed out loud at the irony of it. There he sat, just like Justin had on the night Elysia died. The difference was, though, that Trey understood perfectly what love was. He knew that Gabrielle loved him more than anything in the world.

Suddenly, he remembered Justin’s journal entry and the words he’d burned into his memory. They both comforted him and tortured him all at once.

It was worth it, she was worth it.

And all he could do was remember his father's words, as tears tracked down his cheeks.

*Hold on Trevor, and do not let go.*

## **Epilogue**

### ***Six Years Later, Cardiff Castle Keep, Cardiff, Wales***

Trevor Fairfax looked down at his EMF alarm as he walked around the ancient castle's third floor, the place where the most paranormal activity was usually reported. He had a hunch, a feeling that something was here.

He'd learned to trust his instincts more and more over the last six years. Gabrielle had given him the confidence he'd needed to truly be himself. An old pain shot through him as he thought of the beautiful woman who'd bewitched him six years ago. Her love and belief had made him what he was today. What she'd sacrificed made her sacred to him.

He bit back the tears forming in his eyes and the lump in his throat as he thought about how her lifeless form had felt in his arms. Even in that state, she'd been beautiful. He'd etched that memory, along with so many others, in his mind. It defined him. No longer was he shy or ashamed by his beliefs. He voiced them proudly and was taken seriously, too. He owed it all to her. His beautiful enchantress.

Trey walked slowly around the room, feeling a tingling on the back of his neck. It was here. The EMF alarm caught something. Trey stopped and listened.

There - he heard it, the faint airy sound of laughter in the air. Trey followed the signal as the air around him got cooler and cooler. Another bout of laughter sounded as he stepped into a small chamber

Trey put the EMF alarm on the ground and took a deep breath.

"It's all right. I know you're here," he said softly. I just want to talk to you."

Another bout of giggles - as if the entity was too shy to be seen.

"Don't be shy. Please." Trey stopped when something moved in the shadows. Slowly he stalked forward. "It's all right," he said trying to soothe the hiding spirit. "You can trust me."

Trey felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise slightly as he neared a large curtain. He stopped short, waiting for just the right moment. The curtain suddenly shifted. Swiftly he grabbed it, yanked it back and lunged for the form behind it. It squealed as he captured the giggling would-be spirit.

“Gotcha,” he exclaimed in triumph, holding the wiggling form to his chest.

“Papa, stop it!” it giggled.

Trey continued to hold on while tickling the playful little spirit. Finally, it stilled in his arms and threw its tiny hands around his neck.

“You lose again!” Trey said triumphantly.

The little girl cast her sorrowful eyes down.

“No fair Papa, you said you wouldn’t use your work stuff.”

“I’m sorry, my sweet little thing. I had too. We have to go now.”

“But we’ve only been here a few days,” the girl pouted.

“Don’t you want to see your Grandfather Owen?” Trey asked.

The girl sighed, much like her father and nodded.

“Come on, Siobhan,” he said, reaching down and grabbing the EMF alarm. He hoisted his daughter onto his shoulders and held up the device. The little girl squealed in delight, she loved it when her father let her play with his work things.

“Let’s go find the rest of the bunch.”

Siobhan held the device in her hands, guiding her father, using the signal being picked up. After walking down two flights of stairs the beeping got louder and louder indicating that what they were looking for was in the room in front of them.

“They are here, Papa,” she whispered.

“All right then, be quiet, don’t want to scare them off.”

They entered the room, all thoughts of stealth flying out the window as his daughter clapped her hands. “He’s awake! He’s awake!”

Trey took his daughter down from his shoulders, smiling at the sight before him. There, sitting in the center of a small quilt was a tiny, drooling, baby boy. His blue eyes found his father and began to coo up at him proudly. The little tyke had recently learned to sit upright all on his own and was showing off his accomplishment for the world to see. Trey heard the familiar clicking sound nearby.

He turned to look for its source as Siobhan skipped over to the little boy, picking him up.

“Come on Owen, let’s see what else Papa brought with him.”

“Be careful with him love,” he instructed, watching his daughter scoop up his chubby little son in her tiny arms. Most parents would be fearful, but Siobhan was always careful. She treated her little brother like gold, something he suspected in later years would not be the case, but for now he decided he would just bask in it.

“Damn,” he heard in the distance

Trey turned and saw someone hunched over in a dark corner fiddling with something in their hands. He walked quickly across the room and snagged her in his arms.

“Trey!”

“Don’t you think you have enough, love?” Using his chin to nudge at her face, Trey kissed his wife passionately.

She giggled, much like their daughter did. “Oh, no, you don’t!! The last time you got all randy on one of our business trips Owen was conceived.”

“Randy?” he asked with a smirk in his voice.

“Oh, God, tell me it’s not happening? I’m going to get one of those annoying, fake British accents Americans get when they spend too much time abroad.”

“Well, might as well go for the genuine article. Your daughter has one.”

“Only because she worships her father and tries to be like him in everyway. She would do anything for him.”

“And her mother?”

His wife smiled, granting him a small kiss on the lips before bucking against him and demanding that he release her.

Trey set his wife down on her feet and looked into her kelly green-gray eyes. Still, after all these years, he could drown in them.

She raised her eyebrows giving him a knowing look. A look that had been much practiced through the years. It was soft, but stern, silently chiding him for his obviously mischievous and aroused state.

“You know how much I love it when we work together, Gabi. Can’t blame a man for being a bit greedy,” he said in defense, lowering his eyes then raising them back up.

Batting his eyelashes and throwing her his best *I'm irresistible and cute so do not be mad at me* smile.

Completely defenseless against him, Gabi shook her head slowly and sighed.

"No, suppose not. However, remember we promised Bootsie and Millie we would stop traveling and spend more time at home if we had another. It kills them that we spend half the year in England, as it is."

"And you think it is easy for me? All I hear from Father is how Siobhan does not know enough about her heritage. About how odd it is that she calls me Papa.

"That's not fair, almost everything else about her is British. She had to have some Southern quirks. Bootsie would have had a field day. At least she doesn't call him Pap-paw."

Trey flinched, thinking of how his father might have reacted to such a term of endearment. Thank God Sam did not mind such an odd title.

"I suppose you are right. At least I finally got him to stop harping about how we should consider Oxford for Owen."

"He's not even a year old, Trey."

Trey cocked his eyebrow. "Yes, something I have to remind you of constantly. You have more pictures of our children than they have days in their short, young lives."

Gabi giggled. "Can I help it that they are the most beautiful things in the world?"

Trey kissed his wife's forehead. "Two of the three most beautiful things in the world," he corrected.

He gazed down at his wife. Six years ago, he'd almost lost her. He'd really thought she was gone and had sat there for what seemed like an eternity when suddenly Nicole had reappeared and taken Gabrielle's hand. It still scared him when he remembered.

*"Gabi?" he looked back at her lifeless form, then to her spirit floating above him.*

*"Come back, please, or take me with you. Don't leave me here," he said, not caring how pathetic he sounded.*

*"It's not her time yet," Nicole said simply.*

*The next thing he knew Gabrielle was coughing in his arms. All the color rushed back to her cheeks as she stared up at him in awe.*



*"Trey," she whispered smiling up at him.*

*Trey held her covering every inch of skin he could reach with kisses.*

*Nicole smiled down at them.*

*"I told you that if you helped me, I would help you. I know what it feels like to be without love. That, I believe, is a fate worse than death. I watched Justin from a distance for so long, destroying himself over Ellie. Loving him the entire time. When he needed me I was there. Then when he died, I watched him torture himself all over again. I couldn't bear it. No one should endure that kind of suffering, not when there is so much love to be shared."*

*In the distance Justin appeared holding out a hand to his wife. She smiled down at the amazed couple.*

*"Be happy," she said before turning and joining her husband in the near-blinding light. Trey and Gabi watched as the couple before them stood face to face kissing until they became part of each other and the shining aura surrounding them. In a flash, they were gone.*

*Leaving Gabi alive and whole in Trey's arms.*

*The next few months were a blur. They were married in the Carousel Gardens just like her parents had been. Trey's entire family actually flew over from England. Both Gabi and Trey had to beg Bootsie to play nice. It seemed the woman was just as fiercely protective of Trey as she was Gabi.*

*"Stodgy, uptight, close-minded old farts," she muttered when they stepped off the plane.*

*It did not take long for Bootsie to be worn down. Especially when it was evident that the elder Fairfax adored her Gabrielle. She even took Trey's mother to Red's arguing that if the Duke of Gloucester's daughter had been there then it should be all right.*

*Much to Trey's amazement, his mother was surprisingly good at darts.*

*Two months after their wedding Gabi found out she was pregnant. Four months after that, Trey's book was published and topped the best seller list. Albeit not what he'd ever had in mind for his first printed work, still, something he was quite proud of.*

*Using his vast knowledge and recently acquired experience, Trey wrote a ghost story. Fiction of course, at least that was what everyone else thought. No one needed to know his characters were all loosely based on real life occurrences. His first story being about a young man haunted by an elderly woman seeking her dead husband. That one he dedicated to Henrietta, the first of his now-many ghostly encounters.*

*The second was about a young man finding love with his best friend, a voodoo priestess and having to fight off various forms of evil in order to keep their love alive. It was as close to their own tale that Trey wanted to get. Besides, he felt he owed it to Justin and Nicole for showing him what true love was.*

*Not that he need much help. Not when she was in his arms like this.*

*Over the last years, Gabi and Trey had decided they would do a few collaborations - tour books of famous haunts. Trey would give the facts, Gabi would take the pictures. With some convincing from his agent, his publisher gave Trey carte-blanche to explore any venue he wanted.*

*After Owen was born, the young couple made the decision to finally take a crack at Trey's greatest ambition. Haunted Britain.*

Gabi hugged her husband. "We have not found much, are you disappointed?" she asked.

"Maybe a bit. But I would rather publish the truth than lie about it."

They both turned when they heard something hit the floor. Standing there looking very guilty was their young daughter. She looked down and placed the EMF meter on a small table. "I was just showing Owen how it worked," she said trying to exude a confidence beyond her young years

"Perhaps you can write another novel about a little girl who gets into trouble every time her parents are trying to work," Gabi said, watching her daughter dropping her act of remorse to resume playing with their young son.

"We can't help it if she's too smart for her own good."

"I suppose she gets that from you?" Gabi teased.

"Well, she gets her stunning looks from her mother so that leaves me the brains."

"Nice save, Mr. Fairfax."

Siobhan ran over to the radio and turned the dial all the way up.

"Siobhan Melissa Fairfax, turn that down right now!" Trey said with a mock scowl.

Siobhan looked at her father with her sad little eyes. Eyes that were an identical color to her mother's.

"But Papa, it's yours and Mummy's song."

Trey's face fell when he saw the look on his daughter's face.

"She gets you every time with that look."

Trey chuckled as Lavern Baker filled the air. The song they'd first danced to all those years ago. Charlie and Missy's song. Just like the couple before them, it too had been their wedding song. He swayed his wife in his arms burying his nose on the top of her head, taking in her scent. He smiled and tilted her head up so he could look in her eyes.

"You really did, you know?" Trey whispered.

"What?" Gabi asked.

"Set my soul on fire."

Gabi smiled, kissed her husband and chuckled.

"What is it?"

"I was just remembering something Missy told me."

"What's that?" Trey asked, always excited to hear any snippets about the incredible woman that his wife revered.

"Something about the way a man holds a woman. She said that he should hold her like he adores her. A girl needs a little adoration."

"Gabi, you know I do," he said, still awestruck by her gaze, even after all these years.

"I know, but when you hold me I don't feel adored."

Trey snapped his head back in shock.

"Not adored," she clarified, unable to resist teasing her husband. "You make me feel cherished."

Trey's face broke out in a brilliant, boyish smile looking much like their cherub of a son. Again unable to resist her dashing husband, Gabrielle placed a kiss on his lips.

They swayed to the music slowly becoming more lost in each other.

"Owen, what are you looking at?" Siobhan's voice broke the magic around them.

The two parents looked at their young son as he happily babbled at the wall, apparently carrying on an incoherent conversation with some unseen participant. They looked at each other with questioning eyes, then laughed.

*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

Gabi gathered up their things. She watched Trey pick up their son and reach out to take the hand of their precocious daughter. Depositing their son in his pushchair, Trey wrapped his arms around his wife as they walked out of the castle. Siobhan skipped beside them listing all the things she wanted to do once they got to her Grandfather Owen's. Trey looked down at his wife and then at her ring.

"Perfect, flawless." Two words he now used to describe his wife and children rather than the bauble on her finger. Everything he was, everything he had become was because of her, because of her belief in him.

He watched his daughter run ahead of them, waving at a local man passing by, letting him know she was on her way to her grandfather's house. Trey smiled, thanking God for her, the second of the three most precious gifts Gabrielle had given him. The third, of course, was his son.

But the first gift - he could never discount the first. The first being the most precious, the thing that made the other two possible.

Her love...

He remembered the words in Justin's diary. The words he'd burned into his mind.

*It is said that you can tell the kind of person a man is by the woman that he loves. I look at her, and I see so much. I see belief, faith, hope, peace. Most of all love. I don't know what happened. All I know is that she saved me from darkness. She saved me from my reckless dreams. How? Because she loved me. Who knew that in the blackness of that wretched night I would find an answer so simple and so true. The thing that I could hold onto, the thing that saved me from despair, the thing that lay between dreams and darkness, guiding me out of the shadows was...her love."*

The End

*Claire Michaels*  
Between Dreams and Darkness

**Claire Michaels was born and raised in Hollywood, California.**

**Growing up she was told constantly that she had her head in the clouds. Little did everyone know that her daydreams were not just random, everyday day fantasies, but seeds of what was to become a life long passion and obsession...writing.**

**After traveling the U.S. and settling everywhere from Florida, to New York, to Indiana, to Arizona, and then back to California, Claire discovered her quest leading her home to Los Angeles...the place her heart and spirit had been all along.**

**Recently settling back home and enjoying the single life, Claire has been devoting her time to perfecting her craft and deciding to go for the gold and live her dream. To become an author.**

**Her first novel pays homage to one of her favorite places on the globe: New Orleans, Louisiana. This city holds a very special place in her memories and remains near and dear to her heart.**

**Claire loves a good book or movie, and she especially adores those that can spin her into a new world and incite emotions deep within her.**

**She hopes you enjoy her first release and crosses her fingers that it is one of many.**

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