THE GHOSTS OF BOURBON STREET

An *InCryptid* Story
The Ghosts of Bourbon Street

by

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“There’s nothing wrong with pausing to catch your breath every so often. It’s best to live a balanced life when you can, and that means enjoying yourself. You only live once, after all.” -- Alice Healy

*An empty field just outside of New Orleans, Louisiana*

*Now*

“Verity?”

“Mmm?” I kept walking along the edges of the circle I had drawn in the loose red earth, dripping candle wax into the furrows. The original ritual wanted tallow mixed with human blood, not organic soy wax and saline solution, but it’s important to move with the times. Besides, finding a place high and dry enough to cast the spell had been difficult, and had used up most of my ability to be picky about the little things. New Orleans is not a city that prides itself on its high local water table.

“Experience has told me that I will regret asking you this question, and yet I feel the need to ask it anyway. What, precisely, are you doing?”

“Classic road ghost summoning circle. It’s sort of like lighting a big neon billboard in the twilight—that’s the default road ghost afterlife—that says ‘hey, come on over here, I’d be happy to buy you a cup of coffee.’”

Dominic’s expression turned even more dubious. He was backlit by the sunset, standing tall and disapproving and a little bit uncomfortable in his jeans and white T-shirt, and he couldn’t have looked more like a member of the Covenant of St. George trying to masquerade as a tourist if he’d been trying. We were going to have to work on that. There were people I wanted to stop off and visit on the western side of the Mississippi, and most of them would run screaming if the Covenant showed up on their doorsteps.

“Verity, I have no experience whatsoever in asking my next question, and yet I am absolutely sure that I am going to regret it.” Dominic paused. “Why are you drawing a, ah, ‘classic road ghost summoning circle’? Are we planning to perform an exorcism?”

“What? No!” I jerked upright so fast that hot wax splattered onto my hand, making me suck in a breath through my clenched teeth. That sort of thing was always a risk when you were conducting a ritual that required candle wax. That was one of the many reasons we had switched to using soy candles, which melted at a lower heat and were thus a lot less likely to actually scald the people who were holding them.

Not that the Louisiana heat wasn’t already doing a fine job of scalding me. How people lived here full time was something I would never understand. The sun was going down, and it still felt like high noon. High, horribly humid noon.

I let my breath out slowly, focusing through the pain, and resumed sketching the circle as I said, “Don’t use the ‘E’ word again, okay? You remember when you said you wanted to meet my family, but were nervous about doing it all at once? Well, this is the solution to your nerves. I’m going to introduce you to my aunt.”

“To your aunt.”

“Yes.”

“Who cannot be reached on the telephone.”

“Not so much, no. She’s sort of outside the service area a lot of the time.”

“But who can be reached via a summoning circle.”
“Yup.” I reached the point in the circle where my wax dribbles began. I poured more wax on top, just to make sure the thing was sealed, and then rammed the base of the candle down into the hardening mess. The flame guttered, but didn’t go out. “She’s old fashioned that way.”

“Verity?” Now Dominic was starting to sound a little strained. Poor guy. Every time he thought he had a handle on what he was getting himself into, I went and upped the ante on him again.

“Yeah?” I picked up my box of unlit tapers, lighting the first one off the candle that was already burning, and began my second trip around the circle, placing lit candles every few feet.

“Is your aunt by any chance deceased?”

I looked up long enough to flash him a sunny smile. “And people say that Covenant boys don’t understand logic. Yes, Aunt Rose is a posthumous American. She died in the 1950s. We try not to talk about it too much, since it tends to make her cranky.”

Dominic looked at me blankly. “I see. Your aunt is dead. Added to your cousin, the telepath, and your grandmother, the wanderer in distaff dimensions, is there anything else I should be aware of before we get to Oregon?”

“Dad snores.” I jammed the last candle into the dirt. “There. Done. Now we just need to make the connection. Can you get me that bag of hamburgers from the truck?”

“You can’t possibly be hungry,” he objected. “We ate an hour ago. You ate a club sandwich the length of my forearm.”

“I’ll be hungry if I want to,” I said primly. “Burgers, please.”

Dominic looked at me for another few seconds, apparently waiting for the punch line. It didn’t come. I raised an eyebrow, making a “hurry it up” gesture with one hand, and he sighed before turning and heading back toward the truck. I smirked. I was going to get that boy accustomed to what it meant to be a Price before we made it to Oregon, where he would be facing the ultimate challenge to his tolerance, flexibility, and sanity: my parents.

My name is Verity Price, and up until quite recently, I was trying to make a name for myself as a ballroom dancer in Manhattan. The name I was trying to make was “Valerie Pryor,” since it’s not exactly safe to be a Price girl these days, on account of how there’s an ancient order of monster hunters called the Covenant of St. George trying to wipe us all off the map. My boyfriend, Dominic de Luca, was a member of the Covenant, again, until very recently, and has had to do a lot of adjusting since he decided to choose love over the systematic slaughter of hundreds upon thousands of innocent beings. We’re a real modern Romeo and Juliet, except for the part where neither one of us is dead, and I don’t think Romeo was prone to standing on the roof of Midwestern Holiday Inns, doing his best doleful Batman impression.

Dominic still has a lot of work to do if he wants to socialize into normal human society, is what I’m saying here.

He returned from the U-Haul that was our current home on the road with the bag of Jack in the Box burgers and fries that I had stopped for three exits back held gingerly in one hand. “Your burgers,” he said, thrusting it toward me.

“Thank you.” I took the bag before stepping carefully over the candle wax line and walking to the center of the circle. Once I was sure I was in exactly the right place I put the fast food goodies down. Straightening up, I cupped my hands around my mouth, and called, “Aunt Rose! It’s Verity! Soup’s on!”

“Jeez, Blondie, you don’t have to yell.” The voice was sweet, female, and young—no older than sixteen
—with the broadly softened vowels that had been common in the Buckley region of Michigan some sixty years ago. Dominic made a startled noise, somewhere between a yelp and a curse. And I smiled, turning slowly to face the dead woman who had appeared out of the air behind me.

Rose Marshall—aka “the spirit of Sparrow Hill Road,” aka “the Girl in the Diner,” aka “trouble in a green silk gown”—was standing with her arms crossed and one hip shot casually to the side, like an advertisement for vintage hooliganism. As was her wont, she was dressed in the timeless hitchhiker’s style: blue jeans and a white tank top, sturdy white tennis shoes just dirty enough from the road that hopefully no one would look at them twice, and thus no one would notice that the grass under her feet wasn’t bending. She displaced nothing; she was air and memory and a smirk you could have used to power an entire army of rebellious teens.

I answered her smirk with a smile, and said, “I thought you might be hungry. All of that endlessly wandering the earth looking for the man who murdered you and everything.”

“Way to make me sound like some kind of fucked-up teen drama, Blondie.” Rose shot a longing look at the bag of burgers sitting in the center of the circle. If I squinted, I could see the field clean through her, unplanted soil stretching out until it met the encroaching horizon. She wasn’t wholly here. Not yet. “It’s nice of you to think of me and all, but you know the rules.”

“I do.” I turned to look across the circle to Dominic, who was staring at the two of us with the poleaxed expression of a man who had just seen his last hopes for a rational universe torn down in front of him. He met my eyes, pale and blinking. I sweetened my smile until it wouldn’t have been out of place in an international waltz competition, all gleaming teeth and dimples. “Honey, can you grab me a coat, please?”

“I—what?”

“My Aunt Rose here,” I indicated Rose, who raised one hand in a quick wave, “is what we call a hitchhiking ghost. Her big parlor trick is rejoining the living for short periods of time, but she can only manage it when she has an article of clothing borrowed from someone who isn’t dead.”

He blinked again, before looking faintly alarmed and saying, “I am not giving my jacket to a dead woman.” He paused. “Ah, no offense, miss, I’m sure you’re very pleasant for an unquiet spirit condemned to walk the earth eternally.”

Rose threw her hands up in disgust. “Oh my God you found one who’s just like you.”

“No, Aunt Rose, I didn’t,” I said. “He actually means that. Dominic, I don’t want your coat—although that would be hysterical, she’d be swimming in it—I want you to get my coat out of the front seat of the truck.”

“Oh.” Dominic looked abashed. “I will…ah. I will be right back.” Turning, he strode off toward where we’d parked the U-Haul. He even managed to make that look overly dramatic. The boy had a gift.

I wasn’t the only one who watched him go. Rose observed his retreat before turning to me and saying, “You could have had the coat out here and waiting for me.”

“True,” I agreed.

“The last time you drew a summoning circle, you had the coat out and waiting for me.”

“Also true.”

“Should I conclude that you didn’t bring the coat because you were messing with the boy? Because Very, I gotta tell you, messing with boys is fun, but if you do it for too long, they’re likely to get pissed about it.”
I shook my head, sobering. “I know, but there are extenuating circumstances.”

“Like what?” Rose folded her arms, frowning at me, and I was struck once again by the incongruity of her eyes. They were so old, and her face was so young, and always would be. “You must be getting pretty serious about him, if you brought him out here to meet me. That usually signals the end of the messing with period.”

“It would have, except that when we met he was an active member of the Covenant of St. George.”

Rose whistled, a high, descending note that sounded almost like a whippoorwill’s cry. “You do not fuck around when it comes to making things hard on yourself. Shit, girl, your family hasn’t been on their radar since Tommy boy. Is he really worth risking everything for? Does he have a magic dick or something?”

Most of us got used to Rose by the time we were out of our teens. She was our friendly family ghost, and if she was a little more profane than Casper or Betelgeuse, that was just part of her charm. I still felt my cheeks go red at her last comment. “That’s none of your business, okay? I just want him to get used to us before I take him home to meet the parents.”

“Which is why you’re crossing the country the slow way—smart.” Rose nodded approvingly. I stared at her. She snorted. “I’m a road ghost, remember? I can tell when someone’s been traveling slow and steady. You feel like a few hundred miles of easy riding, and that’s not normal for you.”

“U-Haul,” I admitted. “Me, Dominic, the mice, and a roadmap of America. I figure we’ll make it back to Oregon before the end of the year. Maybe. If we don’t decide to stop off in Ohio and visit with the grandparents for a little while.”

“I’d point out how that’s in the wrong direction, but I have the odd feeling you already know.” Rose looked at me solemnly. “If you’re taking him that far out of your way, do yourself a favor and stop off in Michigan before you turn toward home. He deserves to see where his people ran yours to ground.”

“He made his choice,” I said. “It’s too late for him to back out on it.”

“Maybe the Covenant won’t have him back, but that doesn’t mean you have to keep him.” Rose shook her head again, harder this time. “Your family has always been in the habit of taking in strays. Hell, you took me in. I’m about as stray as it gets. Just make sure this one isn’t going to bite before you go taking him home, okay?”

I opened my mouth to answer, and stopped, smiling with relief as I saw Dominic approaching, the denim jacket I’d bought for just this occasion held in one hand. “He’s back,” I said. “Now be nice, okay, Aunt Rose? I’ll buy you something hot and covered in cheese if you’ll just be nice.”

“I am easily purchased with cheese,” said Rose, and turned to face Dominic, holding her hand out toward him.

He glanced at me uneasily. I nodded, and he handed her the jacket.

“Thank you,” said Rose, and smiled guilelessly as she swung the tattered thrift store denim over her shoulders and slipped her arms into the sleeves. The weight of the jacket settled on her thin frame, and her feet settled on the ground, suddenly displacing the grass. There was no drama to the transition, no special effect that would win the universe an award: just one suddenly solid teenage girl standing in the middle of a circle drawn in wax and dirt and prayer.

She brushed her hands against her jeans before tilting her head back and taking a deep, slow breath of the sweet summer air. “Damn, that’s nice,” she said. “I always forget how warm it is in Louisiana this time of year.”

“It’s always cold in the twilight,” I said to Dominic, by way of explanation. He nodded, trying to look like
my statement held any real meaning.

Rose lowered her head and grinned at him. She smiled like the teenager she was always going to be, sharp and sweet at the same time. “It’s okay, big guy. You don’t need to understand the ins and outs of the American afterlife on your first encounter. You just need to follow one basic rule for dealing with the dead and you’ll be fine.”

“What’s that?” asked Dominic warily.

This time, there was nothing but sugar in her smile. “When a dead girl asks you to buy her a drink, you do it.”

Thanks to the tourist trade and the ever-looming specter of Mardi Gras—which never fully went away, not even in the late spring—New Orleans was a city rich in bars, taverns, and other forms of drinking establishment. Not even the still-visible scars left by Katrina could keep their doors closed for long. We parked the U-Haul in the secure garage of a creepy little motel my family had an understanding with, owned by a friendly nest of harpies who didn’t really care what we wanted to store on their property as long as we also rented a room and left them a good Yelp review. Getting a room for the night seemed like the best possible idea no matter how we sliced things. Drinking with Aunt Rose is an experience best savored, sipped slowly and carefully like good cognac, rather than being slammed down like a cheap beer. Not because she’s a classy dame—she isn’t—but because getting drunk fast in her presence is basically inviting trouble.

The mice cheered as they poured into the motel room. They would doubtless have decimated the local rat and June bug populations by the time we got back, and that was more than fine with me. If there’s one thing about New Orleans I can’t stand, it’s the vermin.

Rose walked between us as we strolled down a gently curving avenue which either had no name or had somehow lost its street signs, probably to vandals. She linked one arm through mine and one through Dominic’s, forming a weird Wizard of Oz-style processional. “We’re going to have a blast tonight, kids,” she said blithely. “Just remember that you’re buying, and everything will be just fine.”

“Hitchhiking ghosts can temporarily rejoin the living under the right circumstances, but they can’t taste anything that wasn’t given to them freely and without payment,” I said, catching Dominic’s bewildered expression. “So Rose can’t buy her own drinks, but we can buy them for her.”

“Oh,” he said slowly. “Has anyone ever tested this concept? It sounds like the sort of thing someone would invent for the sake of getting other people to supply their alcohol.”

“Since basically everything we know about hitchhiking ghosts comes from Rose…” My voice tapered off as I turned to give my honorary aunt a hard look.

Rose laughed. “Oh, I like him, Verity. You should keep him, and he should buy the first round.”

“I like him too,” I said.

“Where did you kids meet, anyway?” The incongruity of someone who looked almost ten years younger than me calling me and Dominic “kids” was mostly eased by the fact that I had known Rose for as long as I could remember. She was my family’s lost girl, never growing up, never growing old, and never getting the opportunity to go home.

She wasn’t our only ghost. Aunt Mary—otherwise known as “Mary Dunlavy,” and nothing else, because unlike Rose, Aunt Mary had never decided to become an urban legend in her spare time—died when she was around the same age, just a few years sooner. But she’s never seemed as lost as Rose. If I
wanted to stretch the metaphor, I’d have to call her Wendy, trying to do as right as she could by the lost ones who surrounded her. A little older, a little wiser, and a whole lot more resigned to her fate.

“Manhattan,” I said. “It was totally romantic. A boy, a girl, a rooftop in the moonlight, a snare…”

Rose crowed amusement. “Oh, man, you snared him? That’s not how you catch a boyfriend!”

Dominic’s cough was small and discreet, almost swallowed by his hand. “Actually, I was the one who snared her. In my defense, I had no reason to expect human foot traffic in an area I expected to be transversed only by monsters.”

“Do they teach you Covenant boys how to talk like characters out of old gothic novels, or is that some rare talent that you just happen to possess?” Rose sounded genuinely curious, which was almost the worst part of all. “Because I gotta tell you, kid, if Alice ever turns out to be right about Tommy boy still being among the living, I want to be there for the snooty-off.”

“I’m trying not to terrify him by dumping too much of the family weird on him at once,” I cautioned.

“So you take him drinking with me? Verity, honey, we need to have a talk about what ‘normal’ means, and how anything that involves the phrase ‘let’s summon my dead aunt’ doesn’t fall into that category,” said Rose, tugging us off the street and into a narrow alley that looked like it might collapse inward on us at any moment. Doors were open every ten feet or so, and the enticing sounds of jazz and laughter drifted out into the alleyway.

“Baby steps,” I said. I pointed to a nearby door. “How about that one? I like the window décor.” It was all skulls and decoratively colored glass bottles, and it had the faintly warped sheen that I associated with carnival glass and age.

Rose followed my finger, and shook her head. “No can do, sweetie. You can’t afford the cover charge.”

“What?”

She stopped dead, leaving us with the choice of either stopping with her or yanking our arms out of hers. We chose the more polite option, even though it meant that the three of us were completely blocking the alley. “Close your eyes.”

“What?”

“Close your eyes.”

Dominic and I exchanged a glance, and then did as we were told. Rose pulled her arms out of ours. The sound of music faded like someone was twisting the knob on a radio, replaced by the distant sound of shouting and traffic.

“Open them,” said Rose.

I did.

The alley was empty. There were no open doors. Half the windows that had been there only a moment before were gone, and the ones that remained were dark. The nearest window—the one that had been filled with strange lights and decorative bottles only a moment before—had been broken and poorly repaired with a sheet of water-stained plywood that covered the damage but did nothing to conceal it, turning the empty pane into a blind and staring eye. Something scurried past, low to the wall, moving with the quick anxiety that I associated with rats and tailypo.

“What—” I began.
“How—” Dominic exclaimed.

Rose shook her head, cramming her hands down into the pockets of her borrowed coat. “You’re walking with the dead. You’re walking with the dead in New Orleans, which is sort of like dipping yourself in steak sauce and strolling through a dog pound. All the animals come quick as a whistle to check you out.”

“Are you implying that those were…what, ghost bars?” asked Dominic.

“Nah, big guy, implication is for the living. Wastes too much time for the dead. I’m saying that those were ghost bars. I’m saying that when you walk with the dead, you see the dead; it’s a side effect of standing too close to the boundary. Only since neither of you is even sick, you can’t tell what’s happening when the twilight begins bleeding through. Most healthy people would never see the bars around us.” She gestured to the blank brick walls. “They’d see a shortcut that was sometimes a little chillier than it ought to be, and if they heard a saxophone blowing where there wasn’t supposed to be a jazz band, they’d dismiss it. Illogic is hard. The closer someone is to the dead, the more they’ll see. The really close—mediums, people who are dying, people who have loaned a coat to a hitcher and then stuck with her for some reason—may see the bars as we see them. Might go in. Might even buy a drink, if the hitcher they’re with is vindictive and petty.”

“Persephone and Hades,” I guessed, winning me a confused look from Dominic.

Rose nodded. “Persephone and Hades, the Goblin Market, all the old stories about eating food in Faerie—that is where they connect to the modern world. Don’t go drinking with the dead in their own places. Bring them into the places of the living and they can show you great kindness. They can make your world infinitely better. But if you go to their places, if you drink their casket-brewed spirits, you’ll never be seen in the lands of the living again.”

“You know, Aunt Rose, there are easier ways to say you’d rather go to a fancier place,” I said. The hair on the back of my neck was standing on end, and I was suddenly aware of just how cold and damp the air in the alley was. It felt like we had somehow wandered into winter, in a place where winter didn’t belong.

“Then let’s go to a fancier place,” she said, pulling her hands out of her pockets and once more linking her arms through ours. She pulled us toward the mouth of the alley and we went willingly. Somewhere in the dark behind us, a lone saxophone played a slow, sad series of notes. Neither Dominic nor I looked back.

It seemed to be for the best.

Half an hour later, we were firmly ensconced at Marty’s on Bourbon Street, which was either exactly the kind of bar people went to New Orleans for, even down to the purple gel skulls covering the overhead lights, or was exactly the kind of bar that made the natives of New Orleans curse the tourist trade. (Again, see the purple gel skulls covering the overhead lights.) Despite—or perhaps because of—the terrible décor, Marty’s had some of the best prices on Bourbon, and their selection of rum-based drinks was not to be sneered at.

I was staring into the sweet depths of my second mai tai when my phone began to ring. I dug it out of my purse, glared at it, and brought it to my ear. In my sweetest reality show voice, I said, “This is an unlisted number. Now hang up before I call the police.”

“Hello to you, too, Very,” said my brother’s voice. He sounded harried, which was normal, but not panicked, which meant this might actually be a social call. “Where are you?”
“Alex?” I said, eyes going wide. “Is that you?”

“In the thankfully un-petrified flesh. Do you have a minute?”

Anything that involved the phrase “thankfully un-petrified flesh” sounded like something I needed to worry about. I glanced across the table to Dominic and Rose, and pitched my voice a little louder. “Sure! We’re just rolling into New Orleans to check out a party that Rose told us about, but I can always make time for you.” That wasn’t technically true—we were already in New Orleans, and there was no party—but goading my big brother was my holy duty. A party would upset him way more than having drinks in a public place.

Rose turned away from her attempts to cajole Dominic into ordering another drink, frowning in bemusement. ‘Party?’ she mouthed.

‘Later,’ I mouthed back.

“Rose as in Rose Marshall, the hitchhiking ghost?” asked Alex.

I nodded vigorously, even though he couldn’t see me. “Uh-huh.”

“Very…” Now he sounded even more harried. It was good to know that some things never changed.

Making my voice even perkier, I said, “It’s a dead man’s party. Don’t worry about it. Everybody’s welcome.”

Rose snorted with amusement, clearly realizing what I was doing.

There was a long pause before Alex said, “Okay, well, try to keep your soul inside your body, I don’t feel like going wandering around the afterlife trying to put you back together. Is Dominic there?”

Out of all the things he could have said, that was possibly the one I had expected least. “What?” I asked.

“What do you want Dominic for?”

“The girl I’ve been sort of dating is in the kitchen right now, and she says she’s with the Thirty-Six Society,” said Alex. I froze. There was nothing I could think of to say in answer to that, and quite a few things that weren’t really answers to anything at all. He continued, “Since I don’t have any contacts in the Society right now, I just need to confirm that she’s not Covenant. So please, can you put Dominic on the phone?”

“Oh, um, sure. One sec.” I put my hand over the phone. “Uh, Dominic? My brother wants to talk to you. Are you cool with talking to him?”

“Your…brother?”

“Yup. Guess you’re getting more of my family this trip than you were expecting.” I held the phone out toward him, eyebrows raised, and waited for him to take it.

Dominic hesitated before reaching out and plucking the phone from my hand. He raised it to his ear and said, briskly, “Hello?” A pause. “Yes, Verity told me. What did you need to discuss with me?”

The second pause was longer. Rose leaned toward me, asking softly, “What’s going on?”

“Alex banged a girl from the Thirty-Six Society.”
“Whoa.” Rose whistled, impressed. “An Aussie, huh? They’re supposed to be demons in the sack.”

“Everything is about sex and booze with you,” I said mildly.

Rose shrugged. “I play to my strengths.”

“No, because there are no Australian Covenant agents.” Dominic’s voice brought our attention crashing back to him. “Not unless they’ve managed to recruit an expatriate—and that would be unusual enough that I would have heard about it if it had happened before I quit the Covenant. Since I didn’t hear about it, any Australian recruits would have to have joined quite recently, and would not have completed training, much less been given field assignments. Why?”

The third pause was shorter. “Well, I can assure you she’s not one of o—one of theirs.” He winced. I leaned over and put my hand on his arm, and he flashed me a strained but grateful smile. “Miss Tanner may not be who she claims, but she is not Covenant.”

“Only one member of our generation is that stupid,” I said. Dominic’s smile broadened, turning indulgent. That was all I’d really wanted.

He chuckled into the phone. “If the Covenant knew you were there, you would have more than a lone pseudo-Australian agent to contend with, and if they were going to try something so complicated, they would have sent her to Australia, not to the middle of nowhere.” A pause. “It is only the truth. She cannot be one of the Covenant’s agents. It makes no sense.”

“Did he just call Ohio the middle of nowhere?” asked Rose.

“Could’ve been worse,” I said. “Could’ve been Michigan.”

Dominic was still on the phone. “You’re very welcome. Now, if you will excuse me, a dead woman is trying to convince me to drink something that comes in layers.” He sniffed. “I expect to be carrying your sister back to the motel.”

That appeared to conclude the conversation. He stayed on the phone just long enough for Alex to say his goodbyes, and then held the phone out to me, saying, “He hung up. It is almost a relief to learn that you come by your phone technique honestly, and not because you have decided to conduct a one-woman vendetta against civility.”

“Says Batman,” I said, making the phone vanish back into my pocket. “Alex is really good at getting himself into trouble.”

“Says Catwoman,” said Dominic. I blinked at him. He blinked back. “What? I thought she was Batman’s nemesis. Am I doing this wrong?”

“No, but when I tell my sister I met a man who makes Batman jokes, she’s going to try to seduce you. Don’t worry about it, Annie’s methods of seduction generally consist of offering to loan you comic books and trying to drop you down pit traps.” A waitress walked over to us. I stopped talking. She began taking drinks off her tray and placing them on the table. I blinked before raising a hand to signal her to stop. “I’m sorry, not our table. We didn’t order anything that green.”

“Or that served in a souvenir skull mug,” said Rose.

“They’re from the gentleman at the bar,” said the waitress, sounding tired. She finished unloading her tray. “He sends his compliments.” Her mood improved when I tipped her generously. I’d been in her shoes, back when I worked at the Freakshow, and I knew she wasn’t paid enough to put up with this bullshit.

“Bartender to waitress, waitress to us,” I said, claiming the electric green cocktail with the bits of kiwi
floating in it. “Drinks are unlikely to be drugged, and thus must be consumed for the sake of furthering our understanding of the people of New Orleans.”

“Damn straight,” said Rose, pulling the skull mug toward herself. She lifted it, took a sip, and froze. Literally froze: nothing living can go as still as a dead person who suddenly feels threatened.

I lowered my green cocktail untasted. “Rose?”

“The man who sent us these drinks isn’t alive.” Rose pushed her drink away again, turning to scan the bar with narrowed eyes. “Fuck.”

“How can you tell?” asked Dominic.

“Because it’s smoking and full of chunks of fruit and at least three different types of hard liquor, based on the color, and it tastes like water,” spat Rose. “Nothing the dead have to give me has any flavor. That’s part of what it means to be a hitcher. If the bartender gives me a drink, that’s one thing, but when a dead man buys it for me? Unless he’s another hitcher in a borrowed coat, or something else that bridges the lands of the living and the dead—PS, this guy isn’t—then I get nothing. I get water.”

“Should we be worried?” I asked. Mentally, I was reviewing the items I had in my pockets—a little salt, the stub of a candle, a lot of knives. I hadn’t been expecting to go ghostbusting while I was out on the town with my dead aunt, which might have been a tactical error on my part.

“Dunno,” said Rose, rolling her shoulders in an elaborate shrug. She raised her hand and waved to the man at the bar, signaling for him to approach our table. Dominic and I both stared at her, and she shrugged again, seemingly unconcerned. “What? The fastest way to find out if someone’s messing with you is to ask him.”

“Aunt Rose, I know you’ve been dead for a long time, so maybe you’ve forgotten what it’s like to worry that someone is going to murder you for funsies? But we’re the living.” I pointed between Dominic and myself. “Living people worry about whether the dead guy in the bar is trying to get them drunk so he can wear their skins like an ill-fitting leisure suit.”

Dominic snorted.

I turned to frown at him. “What? You don’t agree with me on the ‘let’s be faintly concerned about the dead guy buying us drinks’ issue?”

“Verity, I love you, but the day that I become concerned someone is going to wear your skin like, ah, ‘an ill-fitting leisure suit’ will be the day I become convinced that you have been secretly replaced by some sort of doppelganger,” he said. “You carry more knives than many high end cutlery stores. No one is going to skin you without your permission.”

“This is all very charming, in a disturbing sort of way, but zip it,” said Rose. “Dead boy is on his way over.”

I zipped, and we all turned to watch our deceased benefactor’s approach.

Like Rose, he looked young. Unlike Rose, he looked like he’d died after he was legally allowed to enter places like this one—early to mid-twenties maybe, no older, but definitely no longer a teenager. His skin was dark enough to make his teeth seem very white, and his hair was cut close to his scalp, a style which didn’t tell me much about his date of death. He could have died any time in the last hundred years with that hair. His clothing was up-to-date, combining tight denim jeans with a button-up blue striped shirt, but again, that didn’t have to mean anything. A lot of ghosts, like Rose, have the ability to change their clothing to look like anything their hearts desire. She had a tendency to revert to what she’d been wearing when she died if she was startled or hurt in any way—and yes, it’s possible to hurt the dead—
but otherwise, her wardrobe was limited only by her imagination, and her imagination was surprisingly flexible.

He was tall and slim and handsome enough that I would have given him a second look if I hadn’t known that he was dead. He stopped a few feet away from our table, close enough to talk while still giving us our space. I respected that even as I continued to study him intently, looking for any sign of his ghostly nature. There are a lot of different types of dead people. Some are essentially harmless, again, like Rose. Others…

There’s a reason that ghost hunters disappear sometimes. Not the ones who get the television deals. The real ones, the ones who work quietly and publish books through academic presses or small “kook” houses, the ones who go into places where no one smart dares to go. The problem with believing in ghosts is that sometimes the ghosts decide to believe in you, too, and sometimes those ghosts get lonely, and decide to start keeping pets.

“Howdy,” said Rose. “Thanks for the drinks.”

“Howdy,” he said. His voice was rich and deep, with the distinct roll of a Louisiana accent. He was probably a native then, given how young he’d apparently been when he died. “I hope you don’t think I’m being forward. I just wanted to offer you a welcome to our fair city, and hoped that some fine beverages might earn me the right to ask you a question.”

“Howdy,” said Rose, holding up her original drink—the one that had been bought by Dominic, and thus had actual flavor to it.

To my surprise—and Rose’s, judging by the way her eyes widened—the man turned to Dominic, cleared his throat, and said, “Good evening. My name is Jermaine Favre. I understand that this may be an awkward question, given the company you are currently keeping, but…are you a member of the de Luca family?”

Dominic went very, very still. Carefully, he put his glass aside, and asked, “Favre? To what are you sworn, sir?”

“That’s a difficult question to answer, given my current circumstances,” said Jermaine. He spoke slowly, obviously choosing his words with care. “There was a time when I was sworn to the sword and the secret, and to the covenant made between mankind and our Father. I am afraid that my faith has wavered since then, due to certain unavoidable changes in my perspective.”

I frowned, suddenly realizing what was striking me as strange about the whole conversation. Jermaine had spoken to Rose, and was speaking to Dominic, but he hadn’t acknowledged me at all. I leaned forward, and saw him stiffen slightly, his body shifting to be just a little further away from me. Interesting.

“Are you going to introduce me to your friend, Dominic?” I practically purred, leaning closer still.

Jermaine shot an alarmed glance first at Dominic, and then at Rose. Also interesting. Finding no assistance in either quarter, he finally, reluctantly, looked at me, and said, “I apologize for my rudeness, ma’am, but I wasn’t sure you would want to have any part in this conversation.”

I blinked at him. “Uh, what? You bought us all drinks. You came to our table. Why wouldn’t I want to be included?”

Jermaine looked at Dominic pleadingly. Dominic sighed.

“The last known member of the Favre family died in the late 1800s,” he said. “Previous to that, they had sent some of their members to the United States to attempt to assist in establishing the Covenant presence here. That would have been long before your grandparents met, and quite probably long before
your family’s initial migration. I would have to see the records to be sure, and we both know how very
unlikely that is, under the circumstances.”

“Oh—oh!” I said, realization dawning. I offered Jermaine what I hoped was a non-threatening smile. I
wasn’t as practiced with “non-threatening” when the very shape of my face made me look like a danger.
The Healys had never been forgiving of deviation from the norm, which meant that Jermaine’s…
posthumous condition could have been taken as a good reason to host an exorcism by one of my
ancestors. Dominic’s ancestors had apparently been more tolerant. That was a change. “Yes, I’m a
Healy. Or well, I’m a Price, because there was a marriage a few generations back and it turns out ‘cute
little blonde’ is mostly dominant over ‘tall, brooding, cheekbones that can cut glass.’ But we’re not with
the Covenant anymore, and even if the rest of the family was, I wouldn’t be, because Aunt Rose would
smack me stupid.”

“She’s right,” said Rose. “I would.”

Jermaine looked confused, and then relieved. “So you do know the nature of the woman you’re drinking
with,” he said. “I was…unsure.”

Rose raised her eyebrows. “Hey. I’ve been drinking in New Orleans since the seventies—it took me a
while to get here.” The explanation was directed at me and Dominic. Dominic looked nonplussed. He
would eventually come to realize that Aunt Rose would go anywhere for a beer. “I hadn’t been a drinker
yet when I died, and there’s an adjustment period for new road ghosts. We don’t tend to go too far from
home for the first decade or so, while we figure out what we can do.” Her attention swiveled back to
Jermaine. “So given that you almost certainly know who I am, you wanna stop with all the vagueness and
‘I was clearly a Covenant member when I died, but I got better as soon as I became the sort of thing I
used to destroy,’ and tell us what you need?”

“Leave it to the Angel of the Overpass to cut straight to the heart of things,” said Jermaine. He smiled
broadly for the first time since he’d approached us. The smile made him even more attractive, which
wasn’t a thought I needed to have when I was sitting next to my boyfriend. I leaned over and slid my arm
through Dominic’s. He gave me an amused look. Jermaine reached out and touched the back of our
table’s remaining chair. “May I sit?”

“If you’re solid enough to plop your butt, then plop it,” said Rose, shifting the chair toward him with her
foot.

“Many thanks.” Jermaine pulled the chair the rest of the way out and slipped into it. “I must say, I was a
little bemused when the Angel of the Overpass walked into my bar with a de Luca and a Healy in tow. I
thought the end times were finally upon us.”

“No,” said Dominic gravely. “Merely a slow but growing movement toward sense.”

“He means he defected,” I said. “I didn’t defect. I was born defective.” Dominic snorted.

“And I died ignorant of all this bullcrap, which would have been an awesome way to continue my
afterlife,” said Rose. “You people are why we can’t have nice things.”

“I was misguided in life,” admitted Jermaine. “I’m glad to see that some among us can come to that
conclusion without needing to die first.”

“Are you about to ask us to solve your murder?” I asked.

Jermaine and Rose exchanged a startled glance. Then, to my surprise and mild annoyance, they started
laughing like that was the funniest thing they’d ever heard. Rose slid down in her seat until her nose was
nearly level with the table, while Jermaine propped his forehead on his hand. The sound of their laughter
was nearly drowned out by the ruckus in the rest of the bar, but the people at the nearby tables still
glanced our way, presumably looking for a joke they could be in on.

I blinked. “What the hell’s so funny?”

“I have no idea,” said Dominic. “Might I remind you that drinking with the dead was your idea? I would have been perfectly happy watching television in the motel while the mice composed heroic eddas about the sights they had seen since our last stop.”

“I did like the wording on the Holy Ritual of Look It’s Another Goddamn Cattle Ranch,” I admitted, before kicking Rose under the table. “Hey! Want to tell the living why the dead are laughing at us?”

“Oh, man, Verity, you are so alive,” gasped Rose, pushing herself back up into her seat. “Most dead people who know that we’re dead don’t need anyone to solve our murders. ‘How did I die?’ is one of the first big questions on every ghost’s mind, and we have a lot of time on our hands. Plus asking the living to solve your murder is sort of, well. Tacky?” She glanced to Jermaine to confirm her word choice.

He nodded. “It is the height of poor taste to ask a living person to involve themselves so intimately in the affairs of the dead.”

“I thought murdered people wanted justice,” I said.

“Haunting is a form of justice,” said Rose. “Plus, when you know who murdered you, you can spend decades getting ready for them to kick the bucket and come into slapping range. It’s like waiting for Christmas. You always know there’s going to be a delicious gift box of throat punching on the other end.”

“I am really glad I never had Christmas at your house,” I said. “Okay, sorry I assumed you’d want us to investigate your murder, Jermaine.”

“No harm done,” he said. “My killer was a very sweet young girl who just wanted my money. I wouldn’t have given it to her. I was a living man, I still thought of myself as virile, even if I wasn’t young anymore, and I had uses for what I had. But she kissed me after she poisoned me, and she said she was sorry, and she cried hardest of all at my funeral. I couldn’t stay mad at my own granddaughter. She sings Sundays at a bar down on Deadman’s Alley. Sweetest nightingale you ever heard. We’ve made our peace.”

“Granddaughter?” said Dominic.

Jermaine grinned again. The flesh of his face seemed to flicker, and for just a moment an old man was sitting at our table and smiling at us. What hair he had was snowy white, and his clothing drooped around his skeletal frame. Then he flickered again, and he was young and handsome and straight-backed. “I’m older than I look,” he said.

“We’re all older than we look, but some of us died while we were young and pretty,” said Rose. “What do you want, Jermaine?”

He took a deep breath, which would have seemed odd to me, except for the part where lungs need to be inflated before they can push air across vocal cords. As long as he was wearing a flesh and blood body—or the simulacrum of one—he would have to play by flesh and blood rules. “You know the ghost krewes?”

Rose suddenly stiffened. “Keep talking,” she said.

He did.
The krewes of New Orleans were a sacred tradition: people who formed loose social clubs—or sometimes tight occult societies—with the sole stated duty of putting together floats for Mardi Gras. Their work wasn’t the candy-ass sort of thing you’d see in a high school Homecoming parade. No, they organized huge, elaborate rolling castles, hiring teams of dancers, drum lines, and everything else it took to transform an ordinary night into an incredible spectacle. They’d always been there, and they always would be, because without them, Mardi Gras might as well have been the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade (which had its own power, although that power was more corporate, and less chaos). Bearing all that in mind, why would the people who ran and lived for those krewes want to do anything else after they died?

The ghost krewes, according to Jermaine, were associations of dead men and women who believed that the annual Carnival festivities helped to keep New Orleans standing, redrawing mystical lines across the fabric of the city. “We figure we may even be more use than the living,” he said. “We don’t have budgets to pay or permits to file. We just work all year to make the best float we can and then we roll it through the ghostroads, and the world keeps on turning.”

“Everybody needs a hobby,” said Rose.

Jermaine’s expression soured. “Seems not everybody thinks so. Someone’s been breaking into our places lately, smashing our floats before we can finish them. If this keeps on, we’re not going to make it to Mardi Gras. It would be the first year the ghost krewes had missed since Carnival began. Even when the living can’t roll out, we do, on Mardi Gras day. It’s part of what makes this city what it is. Our wheels wear down the walls between worlds.”

“Isn’t Mardi Gras in like, February?” I asked.

“How can anyone smash a dead man’s float?” asked Dominic. “How does it have substance?”

“We work with the ghosts of things that were loved,” said Jermaine. “Or hated—same difference, and sometimes you need a little hatred to keep things spicy. We gather them from the city, and we take them to the ghostroads where we can do our work. Anything can be broken, if you know what you’re doing, and where to aim your blows.”

“Let’s not get too metaphysical here,” said Rose, with a warning glance at me and Dominic. She had always been like that, trying to keep us from learning too much about the lands of the dead while we were still among the living. My Aunt Mary was even worse. She was a different type of ghost than Rose, and her afterlife seemed to be a lot less sunshine and roses. “So someone’s been messing with the ghost krewes. What are we supposed to do about it? I’m a hitcher, so it’s not like my strengths are geared toward anything beyond getting out of dodge, and my niece and her boyfriend are alive, which makes them useless.”

“Not so useless,” corrected Jermaine. “They can go places the dead cannot.”

Rose frowned. “Say that again without the portentous.”

“We think we know the source of the disruptions,” he said. “But there are barriers keeping the dead from entering. When I saw de Luca I thought…” He trailed off.

“You thought he’d still be so into hunting anything ‘unnatural’ that he’d jump at the chance, and not ask too many questions about how someone who looks alive could be pointing him at a haunted house, apartment building, or whatever else weird-ass thing your harasser has decided to haunt.” Rose yawned, putting her empty glass aside. “Dominic, be a good boy and get your Auntie Rose something with an umbrella and a lot of unnecessary garnish.”

Dominic raised an eyebrow, but to my great relief, he didn’t argue. “As you wish,” he said, pushing his chair back, and walked toward the bar.
As soon as he was out of earshot Rose turned to Jermaine and said, with the utmost sweetness, “The Queen of the Routewitches knows my name, little ghost. She has me over for tea on the Ocean Lady on the regular. Dominic is my niece’s boyfriend, and that means he’s under my protection. Are you trying to screw him? Think really hard about your answer.”

“Not trying as such, ma’am, but I won’t deny that some people could get screwed, if things go badly,” said Jermaine. “We need your help. No more, no less. If you’re so concerned about the living, why aren’t you worried about your niece? She’s as alive as he is.”

“Maybe more so,” Rose said. “I don’t worry as much about Verity because she doesn’t need me to worry about her. She looks out for herself. Dominic’s still in the shallow end of our weirdness pool.”

“I do recreational SCUBA,” I said blithely.

Jermaine looked unsettled. Good. If we could keep him off-balance, he’d be more likely to spill any nefarious plans that he might have involving me, my boyfriend, or my dead aunt. Rose might have been in her grave decades before my I was a glimmer in my mother’s eye, but I was still fond of her, and I wanted to keep her around to irritate the crap out of my children.

Dominic was coming back, a drink in either hand. One was a horrifying concoction of fruit chunks, umbrellas, and multiple straws. The other was the color of cartoon nuclear waste. Naturally, that was the one he put down in front of me. I eyed him. He smiled.

“You seemed to enjoy the green drink so much that when I saw them add the contents of an actual glow stick to this one, I knew that it was meant to be yours,” he said.

“I can’t tell if you’re an alcohol genius, or if you’re trying to fuck with me. Either way, you’re the one who gets to sit in the bathroom with me while I’m puking and crying.” I took a sip of the nuclear cocktail. It tasted like rum, pineapple, and regret.

“I have a swizzle stick shaped like a little monkey,” announced Rose. “Let’s help the dead man with his problem.”

Jermaine looked even more unsettled. “That was all that was required? Simian accoutrements for your drink?”

“I’m a simple girl,” Rose said. “Let us finish our cocktails, and we’re all yours. It’s not midnight yet. We have hours to go before the dawn.”

Somehow she made that sound like a portent, rather than the sort of thing teenage LARPers say when they’re trying to be cool. I offered her a silent toast with my nuclear cocktail, and got down to the serious business of becoming drunk enough to make ghost hunting in New Orleans seem like a good idea.

An hour later, we staggered out of the bar and onto the suddenly silent sidewalk. I could dimly hear the parties still raging in the bars to either side of us, and there were people on the other side of the street, happy, laughing, living people with drinks in their hands and smiles on their happily drunken faces. There was no one else on our stretch of sidewalk. A black coach, drawn by two equally black horses, was parked illegally in front of a fire hydrant. A pale woman with lips painted tawdry drugstore red sat in the coachman’s position, her back held ramrod straight by her pinstriped overbust corset. There was even a veil on her little ornamental top hat, hiding everything but those glaringly bloody lips from view.

“What the fuck is going on?” I demanded, eyes narrowing. I was feeling more sober by the second. Adrenaline will do that for a person.
“We’ve been slipping into the twilight since I came to join you,” said Jermaine. “I thought you knew. Drink with ghosts, drop beneath the surface of the world you know.”

“I tried to tell them, but you know how the living can be,” said Rose, rolling her eyes. Jermaine shook his head, and for a moment the two of them were united, a perfect front against the scourge of people who hadn’t yet had the decency to die. Then Rose straightened a bit, breaking their momentary accord, and said, “But Verity has a point. Why are we getting into a coachman?”

“Because my darling lady Amelia has offered to give us a ride to where we’re going, and it will be faster than traveling either on foot or in that monster of a vehicle my messengers tell me you brought with you.” Now all three of us turned to frown at Jermaine. His smile was quick, cool, and professional. “You don’t think I would have come to speak to you without at least doing the basic surveillance, do you?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “You thought I was a Healy. That implies a few holes in your network. So uh, what’s a coachman? The way Aunt Rose said it, I don’t think she was talking about the people who drive the horses around Central Park.”

“Amelia is a coachman,” said Jermaine, indicating the woman sitting atop the black coach. She turned toward us, and somehow the thin veil still obscured all but the broadest outlines of her features. “She drives straight and true, and always gets her passengers where they’re going.”

“And we’ll be riding in her belly, don’t forget to mention that fun little fact,” chimed in Rose. “Amelia is the woman, and the horses, and the coach. She’s the seats and the reins. They’re rare these days. I haven’t seen a coachman in years.”

“Most of us moved on years ago.” The voice came from the direction of the lady-carriage, although her bloody lips didn’t move. “With each passing day, the world grows a little farther away from the road that made us. Maybe someday it will decide to start making us again, and won’t that be charming?”

“Yeah, I can’t wait to meet my first trucker who’s also a truck,” said Rose. She folded her arms, eyeing Jermaine. “Do you swear that she’s on our side?”

“Not in the slightest,” he said. “But she’s on my side, and for the moment, that should be good enough, shouldn’t it?”

“I do not like this,” said Dominic.

“Welcome to the club, I’ll have laminated badges printed up next time we’re near an Office Max and not dead.” I put my hands on my hips and studied Amelia. “You are quite a thing.”

“Thank you,” she said. There was still no motion from beneath her veil, and I realized that the sound of her voice wasn’t even associated with her face. It was coming from inside the carriage. “I promise not to consume you, little living girl, or your companions. Is that good enough for the troubled hitchhiker, or shall I also offer to tell you the location of my grave?”

“Aunt Rose?”

“Welcome to the club, I’ll have laminated badges printed up next time we’re near an Office Max and not dead.” I put my hands on my hips and studied Amelia. “You are quite a thing.”

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“Aunt Rose?”

“We’re good,” said Rose, sounding faintly disgusted. “Get into the digestive tract of the hybrid dead woman. Everything’s fine.”

“It’s a good thing I’ve had a lot to drink tonight,” I said cheerfully. “Hey Amelia, can I ride up front with…er, on you?”

There was a pause during which I thought that I might actually have startled the lady-carriage. Then she began to laugh. “Oh, yes, please,” she said. “Who knew this night was going to be fun?” The coach doors swung open.
Dominic shot me a look. “There is only room for one outside the carriage,” he said.

“Yup.” I leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. “Listen to what Aunt Rose and the dead guy discuss. I’m going to pump the conveyance for information.” It only took me a hop and a prayer to seat myself next to the human-seeming portion of Amelia’s body. The others climbed into the waiting carriage. The door swung shut of its own accord, she flicked the reins, and we were off, riding silent and unseen into the New Orleans night.

Amelia, it developed, not only had a wicked sense of humor, but she was addicted to terrible romance novels, the kind that even the library book sales usually wound up pricing at a dollar a box. “They fall into puddles, they are abandoned in the gutter, and their frail ghosts come to us, for a time,” she confessed. “I have to read quickly, before they dissolve completely, but their stories are so stirring, don’t you think?”

“I’ve enjoyed a romance novel or two in my time,” I allowed, trying not to think too hard about where a woman who was also a carriage and a pair of horses—stallions, no less—would get a “stirring.” Since I wasn’t aiming to date her, it was really none of my business. “I tend more toward the non-fiction side of the shelf.”

“Ah,” she said, sounding mournful. “A realist. How sad and adventureless your life must be.”

It would be rude to laugh at her, and so I swallowed the urge, holding it in my belly like a ball of butterflies until it disappeared. “Yeah,” I said finally. “It can get a little dull sometimes, but I’m pretty good at finding things to occupy my time. You know, drinking with dead women, going for rides in haunted coaches…how are you a haunted coach, anyway? Was there some sort of post-death career fair, and this is what you chose?”

“My father disliked the man I chose for myself. He was not rich, nor did he come from an excellent family, but he loved me. We would have been happy together. On the night we ran away, we were pursued. Our carriage took a turn badly; one horse broke his leg, the other, his neck. I was trapped inside while the whole thing burnt.” She spoke as calmly and dispassionately as if she’d been describing the weather. “When I awoke, I was among the dead, in the place they call the twilight, and I had become the carriage that was meant to be my conduit to freedom. The universe never tires of little ironies, does it?”

I stared at her veiled face, too horrified to look away. “How…how long ago was that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Long ago. Everyone who knew me is dead and dust and buried, and my kind are rare in this age, as your little road ghost so delicately observed. But New Orleans is my home, and what of my horses? They are both of me and apart from me, and I can’t be sure we wouldn’t be separated in whatever lies beyond this afterlife. Having spent so long together, it would be hell to be apart.”

I blinked. A lot. “Death is more complicated than I thought it would be.”

“Oh, little living girl. You have no idea.”

She drove on, through the shadowy streets of the city. There weren’t enough people; it was like being back in Rose’s alley, where half of what I saw didn’t seem quite right, and other half was only shadows. We were driving through whatever layer of the ghost world was accessible to the living, and while part of me thought that was the coolest thing ever, most of me really, really wished I hadn’t had quite so much to drink before I allowed myself to be drafted by the dead. This seemed like the sort of thing that was absolutely destined to end badly.

I had said that I was going to ride up front so I could pump her for information, but as we drove through the dark, I couldn’t think of a single question. All I could do was watch the world go by, shrouded in
Amelia reined her horses in and brought us to a stop in front of a crumbling house with Victorian lines and caution tape strung around the porch. I heard the carriage door swing open, and looked over the side to see Rose emerging onto the street, closely followed by Dominic and Jermaine.

“Your destination,” said Amelia. Those too-red lips curved into a smile. “I enjoyed our talk.”

“I’ll see about burning some really juicy romance novels for you before we leave town,” I said.

She smiled brightly. Somehow, the expression wasn’t as disturbing as it should have been, even though the rest of what should have been her face was only an empty veil. “I would like that very much. Thank you, little living girl. If you ever need a ride in New Orleans, you need only throw a silver dime into the nearest pool of standing water and say my name.”

“Cool,” I said, hopping down to the sidewalk. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” The carriage doors slammed. With a gust of hellish laughter, Amelia went tearing off down the street, disappearing into the side of a wall.

I turned to the others. Dominic looked horrified. Rose looked annoyed. Jermaine just looked confused, like this was the one potential outcome he simply hadn’t banked on. “She’s nice,” I said. “A little creepy, in that ‘dead for centuries and my butt is a carriage’ sort of way, but nice.”

“Your momma raised you right,” said Rose with a smile, and turned to face the boarded-up, caution-taped deathtrap in front of us. The houses to either side weren’t in much better condition. I guessed that we weren’t in one of the better parts of town. “All right, Jermaine. Talk to me about the house.”

“Condemned after bad storm flooding—the final straw in a series of final straws for the poor old dame. She was a beautiful home in her prime. I think she may haunt herself for a time, when she finally finishes struggling to stay alive.” Jermaine’s voice had an almost reverent tone to it, like the history of New Orleans and her houses was the most important thing in the universe. “Sadly, her owner didn’t take the order to vacate very well.”

“Suicide?” guessed Rose.

Jermaine nodded. “Pills and liquor. The coroner said it was quick; he had little time to suffer, and less to change his mind.”

“Verity, is the dead man implying that he has regular conversations with the city coroner?” murmured Dominic, leaning close in an effort to keep his words between us.

Too bad for him he didn’t realize that the dead have excellent hearing. “She’s the great-great-grandniece of a close friend, and why shouldn’t I have conversations with her?” asked Jermaine. “Besides, it’s in my best interests to keep up relations with the friendly living. I am one of the oldest ghosts in this city. The ways in which people die are relevant to me. They impact how those people may manifest in the city’s twilight.”

“Man’s got a point,” said Rose. “So let me guess: he killed himself because he didn’t want to leave his house, and after he died, he didn’t leave the house. Has he become the house?”

Jermaine shook his head. “Thankfully, no. He haunts it, but hasn’t merged with it. I think that, in his affection, he never considered that he and the house could be one.”

“Do a lot of dead people merge with inanimate objects?” I asked warily, the image of Amelia still fresh in my mind. No member of my immediate family has left a ghost in at least three generations, but that didn’t make the idea of becoming a permanent part of a lamppost or something very appealing.
“Usually it’s only if they really, really loved those objects while they were alive,” Rose reassured me.
“Amelia probably didn’t love her carriage, but I bed she loved her horses. Most ghosts just get what I
got, the ‘these are the clothes you died in and they’ll come back any time you’re stressed or in danger’
package. Don’t worry about it, honey, I’m sure if you decide to stick around after you die, you’ll stay
bipedal and pretty.”

“Your aunt has a very strange idea of what constitutes ‘reassuring,’” murmured Dominic. I just laughed.

Jermaine didn’t share my levity. “We construct our floats in the ghost of a warehouse that used to stand
near here. Since this man died, we’ve been having break ins, vandalism…always during the day, always
when we have gone off to our duties or our resting places. He does not like what we do. He never cared
for Carnival, and thought that once he joined the dead, he would get some peace.”

“Instead, he got a party that doesn’t have to follow civic regulations,” I said. “Okay, but why do you
need living people? He’s a ghost, breaking ghost stuff; and this is outside our jurisdiction.”

“He has dwelt in this home for seventy years,” Jermaine said. “He buried his wife while he lived here. He
greeted four children and watched them all leave the city that he loved behind them. He married his
abode in all ways but the legal, and she does not want him to be bothered.”

“The house won’t let you in,” I said.

“Correct.”

“The haunted house with the angry dead dude in it won’t let you in.”

“Yes.”

“And so you want us—” I gestured between Dominic and myself “—to go in and convince him to stop
breaking your shit, because you can’t do it.”

“Yes.” Jermaine glanced toward Rose as he added, “All three of you. You walk among the living. That
puts you in a much better position than any of my people.”

“You don’t have anyone who can borrow flesh for a night? In New Orleans? I call bullshit, especially
when you’re walking around looking all solid and human and crap.” Rose folded her arms, looking at him
levelly. “You just didn’t want to risk yourself, or any of your people, and when you saw a stranger who
looked like she might fit the bill—”

“No. Stop.” Jermaine’s image flickered again, young man becoming old and foreboding before returning
to illusory youth. “You are not a stranger here, Angel of the Overpass, Girl in the Diner. You haven’t
been a stranger here in fifty years. I would have come to you even if you hadn’t been in the company of a
living man who looked like he might be…useful.” There was a speck of shame in the word. It faded
quickly, replaced by a look of lecherous appreciation that probably went over well with the drunk bar
girls. “I always wanted to meet the girl who thwarted Bobby Cross.”

It didn’t go over well with Rose. “I don’t know how fast the gossip network runs these days, but I’m
taken, and while our relationship has its negotiable points, it doesn’t include dead boys,” she said. “Are
you denying that you wanted to talk to me because you didn’t want to risk your own people?”

“No,” Jermaine admitted, after a long pause. “They are dear to me. You may be a legend, and a beautiful
one at that, but your afterlife has no personal value for me or for my city.”

“Great. Just wanted to clear that up.” She turned to me and Dominic. “Wanna go meet the cranky old
man who’s trying to clear the dead kids off his lawn? It probably won’t be fun, but it definitely won’t be
Old Man Smithers in a rubber mask.”
Dominic stared at her blankly.

Rose sighed. “Honey, I died before that show even came on the air. How is it that I can make the references and you don’t get them?”

“Covenant,” I said. “He had a sheltered childhood. And I’m always game for walking into certain danger, as long as you promise to find me something solid enough that I can kick it in the crotch.”

“Works for me,” said Rose. She looked back to Jermaine. “Did you leave anything out? Keep in mind that I can haunt you so hard you’ll think you’re back among the living.”

“I have told you all we know, save for his name,” he said solemnly. “You are entering the home of Mr. Benjamin Georges.”

“Great,” said Rose. “Let’s go be Ghostbusters.”

The walkway leading to the front door was cracked and broken, with tufts of grass shoving their way between the brick until we might as well have been walking on the lawn. Jermaine stayed on the sidewalk. I glanced back once, when we reached the porch; he had gone half-transparent, visible only in the way he bent the light. I looked back to Rose.

“Okay, are we in the lands of the living or the lands of the dead right now? Because that seems like the sort of thing it would be good to know.”

Rose mounted the porch steps with calm ease, stepping onto what appeared to be empty air. It held her weight. “You can’t think of things as being black and white, not here,” she said. “The twilight comes in layers. Right now, we’re in one of the top layers, almost back into the daylight, but not quite. You’re close enough to the dead that they can see you. Also, mind the missing step. I don’t think you’d enjoy finding out what’s under the porch.”

“Great,” I muttered. “Ghost physics.” The porch steps groaned and shifted as Dominic and I climbed them, careful to avoid the broken places. They didn’t give way. That was something, at least. I’m pretty nimble, but it’s hard to dance the cha-cha with a broken ankle.

“I do not think I enjoy ‘ghost physics,’” said Dominic.

“No one does,” said Rose. The front door was blocked by a strip of caution tape but standing slightly ajar. It was also closed.

I blinked. The strange double-image remained. The door was open, showing a slice of mold-encrusted hallway beyond, and the door was closed, showing nothing but itself. The fact that it was happening at the same time didn’t seem to matter. “Aunt Rose…?”

“I’ll get one, you get the other one.” She reached out and grasped the doorknob on the closed door, turning it until something clicked, almost sub-audibly. Slowly, she pushed the closed door open. It melded seamlessly with its double. She let go of the knob and looked to me. “Your turn.”

I reached out. The wood felt normal under my fingertips: damp from the night air, but firm and solid. I pushed. It swung inward, revealing more of the moldy hallway. There was a threadbare carpet running down the middle of the floor. Mushrooms and muck covered the edges. “Ew,” I said.

“She’s a beauty,” said Rose, and stepped inside. Her jacket—my jacket—remained on the porch. She spun toward us, her eyes wide and startled in her suddenly pale face, and I had time to see her clothing unravel into a green silk gown that would have been daring in 1952 but was old-fashioned now. Her hair
grew out until it was long and the color of straw, hanging in curls past her shoulders—and then the door slammed by itself, and Rose was gone.

“Rose!” I flung myself at the door, grabbing the knob and twisting as hard as I could. It refused to budge. “Oh shit oh shit oh shit did I just get my dead aunt killed oh shit my parents are gonna murder me—”

“Let me try.” Dominic pushed in beside me, pulling a knife from inside his shirt. I blinked at him. He shook his head and said, grimly, “We always carry a few silver blades. It’s policy. Silver distresses the dead, does it not?”

“Not if the white ladies with the jewelry fixations are anything to go by, but please, be my guest.” I stepped aside.

Dominic inserted the tip of his silver knife into the keyhole and twisted. Nothing happened. He twisted harder. There was a cracking sound, and when he withdrew the knife, it was sans point. He scowled. “As you wish,” he said, apparently to the house, pulled back his leg, and kicked the door clean off its rotting hinges.

“That’s one way to take care of things,” I said, and barreled inside. “Rose?!”

There was no response. The hallway was empty, and smelled like the underside of a rock, all dampness and mold and unpleasant surprises. It was impossible to tell what color the walls had originally been; between the low light and the things growing out of the plaster, I had the impression of unvarying gray.

“Rose?” I said, more hesitantly.

“Is this normally how things go when you get together with your family?” Dominic asked. The hinges creaked. We both turned to see them swing back into a closed position, which would probably have been terrifying, if they had still been connected to a door. The splintered remains of the door itself twitched a little, but didn’t fly off the floor and reassemble themselves.

“Well,” said Dominic, sounding nonplussed. “That was profoundly anticlimactic.”

“Go team anticlimax,” I said. “Anticlimaxes keep you breathing.” Unless you were never breathing to begin with. I turned to look back down the mold-encrusted hall. “We need to find Rose.”

“There is a second floor,” said Dominic.

“Yeah, but without her, we don’t have access to ghost physics, and without ghost physics, one or both of us is going to plummet through those rotten-ass stairs, which could mean falling all the way down into the cellar. There’s no telling what’s down there.” I paused. “But maybe there’s another way.”

Dominic gave me a dubious look. “Am I going to like this?”

“Nope,” I said cheerfully. “Come on back outside. We need to find a jacket, and a brick.”

And that is how I wound up half-drunk and dressed for a night on the town, clinging to the outside of a decrepit New Orleans house in the middle of the night, with a brick shoved into the pocket of my borrowed jacket. Jermaine hadn’t been pleased about giving me his coat. Once he’d figured out why I wanted a dead man’s jacket, Dominic had decided not to be pleased by the thought of me scaling the side of the building. I was doing it in order to smash my way through one of the second-story windows, so I figured the coat was among the least of my impending relationship problems—and besides, I was the one suffering through wearing the damn thing in the New Orleans summer. I glanced down. Dominic was standing in the remains of the lawn, and while I couldn’t see his expression from where I clung, I was
pretty sure he wasn’t smiling.

“I am so good at dating,” I muttered, turning my attention back to the climb. “I am like a goddamn ninja master of not upsetting my significant other.”

At least the house wasn’t trying to shake me off, and while I’d stuck my fingers into a few rotten boards and patches of mold, nothing had started bleeding or developing unnecessary teeth. My guess had been right: Mr. Georges might have a degree of control over the interior of his house, but it didn’t extend to the outside—hence why Rose had been able to keep her grip on my coat until she crossed the threshold.

The roof was tiered to keep rain from building up. I swung myself over the lowest tier, only scratching my hands a little on the tarpaper shingles, and found myself looking into the dead black eye of an upstairs window. I smiled. “Ninja master,” I repeated, pulled the brick out of my pocket, and bashed the crap out of the glass.

No one ever said that I was subtle. When you spend your life figuring out what shade of sequins best sets off your eyes, “subtle” is one of the first things dumped out of your toolbox. But when it comes to making an entrance, I’m your girl.

The brick cleared out most of the glass. A few quick hits with the heel of my right foot while I dangled from the top of the window frame took care of the rest. It was all very fainting Gothic heroine of me, and I was feeling pretty smug as I slithered through the now glass-free opening and into the waiting house. Glass crunched underfoot as I settled my feet gingerly on the floor…

…and which promptly gaped wide beneath me, sending me plummeting down into the darkness. I shrieked despite myself. No amount of training or preparation can completely quiet the primitive human hindbrain, which knows full well that falling into the dark is never a good thing.

The shriek lasted longer than my fall did. I hit the floor butt-first, landing hard enough that I was going to have a bruise, but not hard enough to break anything, thank God. With as many buildings as I’ve jumped off of, I did not want to wind up with a broken ass because I got swallowed by a haunted house. Dust and splinters rained down on me as the ceiling closed up again.

“Ow,” I complained. There was no point in trying to be quiet. Mr. Georges clearly knew that I was here, if he was ordering his house to eat me.

“T ook you long enough.”

“Aunt Rose?” I straightened and turned toward the sound of her voice. Rose—still in her green silk prom dress, with her hair snarled around her face and falling out of its careful ringlets—was sitting in a straight-backed old kitchen chair behind me. Not voluntarily, either: she was tied in place, which was no small trick, considering that she was dead. “Aunt Rose!”

“In the not-so-solid flesh,” she said sourly. “Asshole yanked me right out of my coat.”

“We noticed,” I said, picking myself up and half-walking, half-limping over to her chair. I reached for the rope. My hand went straight through it, and wound up somewhere in the vicinity of Rose’s kidneys. I stopped, blinking.

“Get your sticky fingers out of my internal organs,” Rose snapped. “Did you forget the whole ‘dead’ part? You can’t touch me.”

“Can’t you, you know, turn solid?” I asked. My interactions with Rose had always involved her becoming incarnate. I knew she was dead. I’d seen her walk through walls and disappear into thin air. But I’d never really considered how inconvenient that could be.

“Not without a coat,” Rose said. She sighed. “I can’t even put your coat back on. It’s a one-use per
night situation.”

“That’s good, because I left my coat outside with Dominic; the pockets were too small,” I said, starting
to shrug out of my borrowed duster.

Rose gave me a dubious look. “Too small for what?”

“Bricks. Have you noticed how girls never get good pockets? It’s like the people who design women’s
clothing think that purses fulfill all our carrying-heavy-shit needs, and I, for one, feel like that’s just not
true.” I slung the duster over Rose’s shoulders. “Ta da.”

She didn’t flicker, but she became suddenly more present, the weight of her making the chair she’d been
tied to groan and settle more determinedly to the floor. “Why the hell were you carrying bricks in your
pockets?” she asked. “Hang on, I don’t want to know.” The rope that had been used to tie her down
had been intended to hold a girl with neither skin nor substance. Rose stood easily, ignoring the phantom
knots etched against her skin.

The rope held its position for a moment before falling to hang limply all around the chair. Then it
disappeared, going back to wherever it was ghost ropes went when they weren’t in use.

“Nice trick,” said Rose approvingly. She slipped her arms into the duster’s sleeves. It hung around her
like a leather tent. “Think your Covenant boy is losing his shit by now?”

“Let’s see. The house took you, and then the stairs looked unsafe, so I climbed up the side and smashed
in one of the windows with a brick. Yeah, he’s probably pretty upset.”

Rose gave me a flat look. “You thought the stairs looked unsafe, so you climbed the house?”

“What makes that so surprising? You’ve met me.” I looked around the room, shivering a bit. “Is it cold in
here?”

“Yeah. It is.” Rose’s eyes narrowed as she focused on the corner of the room. “You can show yourself
now, Mr. Georges. You’ve milked the ‘I am a scary ghost ooo’ routine about as far as you can, and I
am out of patience with your theatrics.”

“Let an old man have his fun, huh?” asked a voice out of nowhere. A figure began assembling itself in the
corner, fading into view so slowly that every time I blinked, he looked just a little bit more solid, a little bit
more like a person, and not a trick of the light. It wasn’t at all like the way Rose and Mary would
appear, going from nothing to something in less than a second. This was slow, and I got the feeling it was
painful. Anything that looked so impossibly hard had to be painful.

Footsteps alerted me to another presence in the house. I turned to see Dominic standing in the doorway,
a cross between exasperation and relief on his face. “You are not dead,” he said.

“I could be,” I said. “All the other dead people we’ve met tonight have looked perfectly alive, unless they
were part carriage.”

“But you’re not,” he said, walking over to me.

“I’m not,” I agreed. I pointed to the corner, where Benjamin Georges had almost finished the long, slow
process of materializing. “We found our host.”

“Mm.” Dominic narrowed his eyes. “Does your host want to explain why you were screaming? Or how
you got down to the first floor without using the stairs?”

“I don’t think we’re allowed to punch the dead,” I said.
“No, but I am,” said Rose. She had apparently decided that Georges was solid enough to start answering questions: she strode across the room, her green silk gown rustling around her feet, and stabbed a finger at his translucent chest. “Hey, asshole, what do you think you’re doing? This is not good neighbor behavior.”

“You came to my home without an invitation,” he replied, his mouth moving only slightly out of synch with his words. “I’m allowed to defend my home.”

“There’s a line between self-defense and assault, and you crossed it pretty fast,” Rose said. “What is your deal? We were coming to ask you to stop trashing other people’s stuff, which is basic manners for the living and the dead, and then you go yanking me into your little haunted house and tying me to a chair? Like, on what planet is that how you say ‘hello’?”

“You were an unfamiliar ghost, I had to defend myself,” Georges answered, taking a step backward. The movement put his shoulders into the wall, which was bizarre looking. “I’m allowed to defend my home,” he repeated, mulishly.

“You’re a ghost too, sir,” I said. “Maybe it’s time for you to start making friends with the other dead people.”

He glanced in my direction and frowned. “No. They say I am dead because they want me to leave my home. They want me to let them tear her down. She doesn’t suit their beautiful new city, their modern New Orleans. So they tell people I have died, and they send ghosts to disrupt my peace, and it changes nothing. I will close my doors against the dead, I will smash their infernal machines, and I will endure. That is what I do.”

I blinked and looked first to Dominic, then to Rose. A picture of what was going on here was slowly beginning to form, and it wasn’t pretty. “The man who asked us to come here said that you were destroying the floats because you didn’t like Carnival, and you wanted some peace and quiet. Is that true, sir?”

“I hate Carnival,” he groused, and leaned forward, out of the wall. His edges seemed to become clearer as he moved. Like Jermaine, he looked younger than he was: he’d supposedly lived in this house for seventy years before he died, but I wouldn’t have placed him at more than twenty-five. “Just an excuse for tourists and vagabonds to drink and tear up the streets. They moved in right next door to start building their damn floats, what did they expect me to do? A man’s got the right to—”

“Defend his home, I got that part,” I said. “Aunt Rose?”

Rose sighed. “Yeah, I follow. You’re going to need to find me another coat. I am going to need so much beer after this. Beer, and bourbon, and then we’ll start drinking.” She shrugged off Dominic’s coat, letting it fall to the floor, and her body took on the faint translucency that meant she was no longer pretending to be among the living. Benjamin Georges gave her a wary look. This was his worst fear, after all: a ghost inside his home.

The poor man had no idea.

Rose stepped closer to him, speaking softly and making short, sharp gestures with her hands. I darted in long enough to grab Dominic’s coat before walking back to his side, taking his hand in mine, and starting to lead him out of the room.

“What about your aunt?” he asked.

I glanced back over my shoulder. Benjamin Georges was staring at her in disbelief. Rose was still talking. I couldn’t understand a word she said. That was good. There are some things the living just aren’t meant to know.
“She’ll be fine,” I said, and pulled Dominic with me into the hall.

Dominic and I sat on the half-rotten porch, waiting. Jermaine stood on the path nearby. He had finally agreed to approach the house after I swore that Rose had things well in hand, and he still looked uneasy about being that close. I eyed him.

“You’re the dead one,” I said. “What can he do to you? Wave his hands around and make spooky noises?”

“The dead are perfectly capable of harming one another, I assure you,” he said, frowning at me. Apparently, I wasn’t taking things seriously enough for him.

That was his problem. “Yeah, well. My money’s on Rose.”

“I sincerely hope your luck will hold.”

“Me, too.” I leaned over to rest my head against Dominic’s shoulder. “My butt hurts. We should have stayed at the bar.”

“Truer words were never spoken,” Dominic said.

Footsteps behind us. I lifted my head and turned. Rose was standing on the porch, once more dressed in her preferred tank top and jeans, her long blonde curls replaced by a short, shaggy brown bob. In short, business as usual…except for the nervous-looking man who stood beside her. Benjamin Georges still looked twenty-five, but he was dressed like an old man, in suspenders, loose tan trousers, and a plain white T-shirt. His fashion sense hadn’t caught up with his self-image.

It would, if Jermaine was anything to go by. “Jermaine Favre, I’d like you to meet Benjamin Georges. Benjamin has something he wants to say to you.”

Benjamin frowned at her. Rose elbowed him in the side. The blow clearly hit its target, because he winced: I guess ghost-on-ghost violence really was a thing.

“I’m sorry I damaged your things,” Benjamin said reluctantly. “I was confused. I didn’t understand my situation.”

“And?” prompted Rose.

“And it won’t happen again,” said Benjamin.

“Then all is forgiven,” said Jermaine. “Providing, of course, that you are willing to help us redo the work you have undone. There’s only so much time between here and Carnival, after all.”

“I used to be pretty handy with a hammer,” Benjamin said slowly.

Jermaine smiled.

An hour and another rousing discussion of romance novels with Amelia later we were back at the bar, Rose now wearing a coat Jermaine had purchased from a drug dealer in a nearby alley, Dominic clearly trying not to think too hard about the fact that all of the people we were drinking with were, technically, dead. Or not so technically, really: the only living people left in the place were me, him, the staff, and the city coroner, who had come straight over from work after Jermaine called her. Benjamin Georges was
sitting with a table full of new friends, regaling them with tales of how he’d haunted his own house. Jermaine was flitting from group to group, smiling, shaking hands, and demonstrating clearly how he had glad-handed his way into being one of the city’s most influential dead people.

“So this is what it’s going to be like,” I said to Dominic, watching Rose demonstrate the trick to tying a cherry stem in a knot with her tongue. “Tonight was pretty extreme, but in general? This is what it’s going to be like.”

“What what’s going to be like?” he asked.

“My family. Being with my family.” I waved a hand to indicate the room. “We’re not weirdness magnets, but we’ve spent a lot of time collecting weird stuff, and sometimes it follows us home.”

“Ah.” He smiled around the bottle as he took a swig of his beer. “I think, all things considered, that I can live with this.”

I smiled back, clinking my bottle against his in a half-toast, and sat back to watch the living—and the dead—party the night away in New Orleans.