

ONE—FIVE OF SPADES

The goddamned nightmare hadn't ended, after all.

Kallie Rivière shuffled the blue Bicycle cards she used for divination, their worn edges flipping against her palms. Drawing in a steady breath, she closed her eyes and focused on her cousin Jackson Bonaparte, desperately hoping that the last words he'd said to her wouldn't become his last words, period.

"Gotta go. See you on Sunday. Love ya."

After not seeing his pickup in the driveway, Kallie had assumed Jackson had tossed his Siberian husky into the bed of his Dodge Ram and had driven into town for a couple of beers—despite the fact that she'd asked him to stay put, to keep him safe from the man stalking their family.

Then she'd discovered Jackson's protective mojo bag in the grass in front of their *ti-tante's* house—its leather cord torn as though it had been ripped from around his neck—along with the baseball bat he kept beside the back door in case of trouble.

As Kallie picked up the mojo bag from the grass, the woodsy scents of sandalwood and dog rose wafting up from its red flannel, dread had dropped like stones into her belly. She'd *known*. Felt it down to the marrow.

Jackson *hadn't* driven to the Hair of the Dog Tavern. He was missing.

"An eye for an eye is never enough," Doctor Heron whispers.

And the long nightmare Kallie thought had just ended—one she had barely survived—was still very much in play and had just swept over her cousin.

A nightmare that had begun damned near twenty-four hours earlier in her blood-soaked bed at the Prestige Hotel in New Orleans and had ended on the banks of the bayou behind her *tante* Divinity's house in Bayou Cyprés Noir.

All because her hoodoo aunt had stolen the identity of another conjurer and had, therefore, brought revenge-seeking, soul-killing, Jean-Julien St. Cyr—Doctor Heron—the bogeyman of hoodoo, into their lives.

And had nearly cost Kallie her own—body and soul. Or would've if she *had* a soul—and that was another goddamned matter altogether. Another matter for another time. Right now, she needed to find her cousin.

Kallie shuffled the cards, Jackson's words looping through her mind like a mantra, a fervent prayer.

Gotta go. See you on Sunday. Love ya.

She pictured Jackson as the cards ricocheted against her palms—eyes the color of heated honey and brimming with laughter, slightly tilted like her own; sun-bronzed skin; coffee-dark hair brushing against his muscle-corded shoulders in thick waves; lips slanted into a pirate's wicked smirk; he stood just a whisper under a lean-muscled six feet.

He was the same age as she, twenty-three, but just a couple of months ahead of her. And in love with the restless sea he had once called—in a rum-sodden moment—his briny bride.

Kallie saturated her cousin's image with her desire to find him. Alive. Intact.

Love ya back, and I'm goddamned holding you to Sunday, Jacks.

She'd finished shuffling the cards, and Kallie's fingers stilled on top of the blue deck. She opened her eyes. Her pulse raced through her veins. Her heart kicked hard against her CPR compression-injured and aching ribs. She felt the weight of each set of eyes settling like anxious doves along her shoulders.

Her *tante* and hoodoo teacher, Divinity, stood behind her along with the woman whose identity Divinity had stolen, a woman Kallie had met only an hour or so ago—Gabrielle LaRue.

Kallie didn't know whether Gabrielle was a rootworker like her and her aunt or a voodoo mambo. But it was Gabrielle LaRue who Doctor Heron had blamed for his time in prison; Gabrielle LaRue he'd blamed for poisoning his clients and leaving him to take the blame.

"An eye for an eye is never enough," Doctor Heron whispers.

But the bastard had gone after the wrong woman, the wrong family, because of that goddamned stolen identity.

Kallie's throat tightened. Several people had died because of that mistake, more than one in her place. Gage had been the first.

He lies on his belly, his face turned to the side. Blood masks his fine features, glitters in his black curls. All color has drained from his espresso-brown skin, leaving his blue-inked clan tattoos stark on his muscular back, ass, and thighs.

The sexy conjurer from one of the freewheeling nomad clans—a pagan blend of biker and Gypsy—had died body and soul upon her hex-poisoned hotel bed in New Orleans after a night of sweaty, bendy, hot-blooded play, while she'd been in the bathroom sick on too much champagne.

Then Lord Basil Augustine, the leader of the Hecatean Alliance—a fraternity of magicians, conjurers, and rootworkers—had taken a bullet meant for Kallie, a bullet fired in desperation by Doctor Heron's doomed, crazed daughter, Rosette.

Rough hands latch onto Kallie's shoulders and spin her away. Augustine's suit jacket whispers against her robe as he twists his body past hers. Thunder cracks through the room. Augustine grunts. He stumbles against Kallie . . .

And Dallas. Kallie drew upon a deep well of relief when she thought of the hard-drinking root doctor and how he'd survived Doctor Heron's murderous attack—a knife across the throat—thanks to the skill of the Hecatean Alliance surgeons and healers who'd saved his life. He was currently hospitalized at the medical center on the twentieth floor of the Prestige, fresh out of surgery, and hopefully drugged to the gills.

Oh, and let's not forget Belladonna—poppet-bound and kidnapped.

And speaking of whom . . .

Belladonna Brown, mambo-in-training and Kallie's best friend, sat straight-backed on the floral-patterned sofa Kallie was kneeling beside, her face with its flawless chocolate-colored skin composed despite the worry flickering in her startling hazel eyes.

"You okay, Shug?" Belladonna asked. "You look like you're about to start throwing punches."

"Not a bad idea," Kallie said. "Just wish I had someone to throw them at."

"Mmm-hmm," Belladonna sympathized.

She'd been snoozing on the sofa after the night's events when Kallie had awakened her with a frantic shake of her shoulder.

It's Jacks. And his ass is in the fire, for true.

Hellfire. Then we gotta pull his fine ass out.

Goddamned straight.

“Take a deep breath, Shug, before you turn over that card,” Belladonna murmured. “I can see the pulse pounding in your throat. Try to relax.”

“Focus on yo’ cousin, you,” Divinity urged.

Kallie gritted her teeth against the urge to tell them both, *No goddamned shit. Now shut the hell up and let me do what I know how to do already.*

Closing her eyes, Kallie drew in a deep breath of air scented with beeswax, the perfume of her aunt’s side-yard roses drifting in through the screen door, and the earthy odors of patchouli and frankincense from the herb and root-cluttered work table, and drew them deep into her lungs, ignoring the pain twinging through her sternum.

Her pulse eased off the throttle. She brushed her fingers across the deck’s slick back, then cut the deck into three stacks on the sofa cushion beside Belladonna.

Kallie flipped over the first card on the first stack.

She wasn’t surprised when she saw the king of spades—bad luck coming from a man or with men. Okay, then. Was the late Doctor Heron responsible for Jackson’s disappearance or had a posse of unhappy outlaws decided to put a stop to her cousin’s Robin Hood-style bayou thefts of illegal goods?

Jackson had been skating on thin luck for some time now.

Grasping the sharp edge of the first card on the second stack, Kallie turned it over. Her blood chilled. The goddamned queen of spades. Bad luck coming from a woman or with women.

“Hellfire,” Belladonna breathed. “Both the king and queen. Jackson’s in deep.”

“*Beaucoup* deep, Bell,” Kallie said. “Deep enough to drown.”

“We ain’t gonna allow dat, girl,” Divinity said, voice tight. “Boy ain’t gonna drown, no. Now turn over de next damned card.”

Kallie touched the back of the top card on the third stack, drew in a deep breath of sandalwood and sage fragrant air, then flipped it over. Her heart sank. The five of spades.

“Sweet Jesus, dey all be spades.”

“At least we haven’t seen the ace of spades,” Gabrielle soothed.

“True dat,” Divinity agreed. “*Mauvaise partance, bonne arrivée.*”

A bad beginning brings a good ending. Kallie mentally crossed her fingers,

wishing those words true.

“Delays, setbacks, maybe defeat,” Belladonna said. She shook her head, her black and midnight-blue curls shivering like a flower in the breeze. “Maybe,” she added hopefully, “that’s meant for whoever *took* Jacks and not for those of us *looking* for Jacks.”

Kallie blew out a breath and nodded, even though she thought the prospect unlikely. She gathered up the three piles and merged them into one stack again. She was just about to lay down the first row of six cards, when the *whang* of the porch door slamming against the house jolted her up onto her feet and spun her around.

Wondering why Cielo hadn’t barked a warning, Kallie remembered with a sudden pang that Jackson’s Siberian husky was also missing.

Two men wearing black ski masks, jeans, and black T-shirts dashed into the living room, shotguns in their black-gloved hands. The ominous *shuh-shunk* of rounds being pumped into place echoed throughout the room.

Kallie’s heart launched into overdrive, racking a round of adrenaline into her veins. She eyed the cards still clutched in her hands. *Welcome to a setback. Hello, delay. Goddamned five of spades.*

TWO—HOUSE FULL O' HOODOOS

“Don’t none of y’all make a fucking move!” The taller of the two men yelled as he halted beside the coffee table, his shotgun swinging between Kallie and Belladonna at the sofa and Divinity and Gabrielle at the cherrywood rockers opposite. Kallie noticed the back end of a blond mullet poking out of his ski mask. “Or I’ll blow your fucking brains out!”

“Cash, man, tone it down a little,” his partner said, voice low and uneasy. “I ain’t real comfortable with that kinda language around women.”

“What the *hell* have I fucking *said* about using my *name* on jobs, asswipe?” Cash grated through clenched teeth. “How many goddamned times do I hafta tell you, *Kerry*? There. How does it feel, Kerry-Kerry-goddamned-fucking-Kerry?”

“You don’t hafta to be such a dick about it,” Kerry muttered.

Belladonna made an odd snorting sound, like she was choking. Kallie risked a quick glance and confirmed that her friend had clasped both hands over her mouth, trying to trap the laughter inside.

“Cash and Kerry?” Kallie questioned, speaking for them all. “Y’all kidding?”

“Shut the hell up,” Cash snarled, pointing the shotgun’s dark mouth at her. “And sit your ass down.”

Kerry glanced at Divinity and said, “Apologies for the language, ma’am. My mama always told me to be respectful around womenfolk.”

Divinity’s hands dropped to her lavender-skirted hips as she drew herself up to

her magically looming five-seven and lifted her chin, the expression on her light cocoa-colored face forbidding.

“Yo’ apologies ain’t accepted, boy,” she said. “Breaking into a house is a sight more disrespectful dan de language. And I’m sure yo’ mama would agree dat aiming shotguns at de people inside dat house be even *more* disrespectful. And dis ain’t just a house full o’ women. Dis be a house full o’ hoodoos.”

“And mambos,” Gabrielle added, folding her arms underneath the bustline of her carnation-red blouse and giving a curt nod of her red-scarfed head for emphasis.

Kallie glanced at her. Well, one question answered.

Kerry’s ski mask-encircled eyes widened. “Hoodoos? Mambos?”

Cash snorted. “Hoodoos and mambos. Different names for the same thing—con artists. Kerry-man, if brains were leather, you wouldn’t have enough to saddle a damned june bug.”

“Ain’t true,” Kerry protested, shaking his head. “I ain’t the stupid one here. At least I know that hoodoos handle juju and potions and medicines and mambos are like voodoo priestesses—all about the religion and the *loas* and shit. *You’re* the one who ain’t got enough brains to saddle a june bug.”

Kallie offered Kerry a sweet-as-pecan-pie smile and held up the deck of cards. “And y’all happened to interrupt a reading.”

“I don’t think the *loa* are gonna care much for that, you messing with their *gris-gris*,” Belladonna said, her voice a soft, velvety purr—a sound as ominous as shotgun shells being chambered. “Especially since you didn’t bring a gift.”

Kerry’s entire body twitched. His gaze squirrel-skittered around the room, darting from ceiling to dark corners as though he expected the spirits to drop on him like a weighted net or a nest of tree-dwelling snakes, and finally coming to rest on Divinity’s herb and root-cluttered table. His pupils expanded as he took in the jars and bottles, the candles and empty mojo bags, the half-finished poppet with purple button eyes.

“Jesus,” he whispered. And backed up a pace.

“I don’t believe in that juju bullshit,” Cash declared. But his uneasy stance and shifting feet made a liar of him—or at least a partial liar. His fingers white-knuckled around the shotgun’s grip and gleaming steel barrel. “So y’all just shut your fucking

mouths and tell me where the hell that bastard Bonaparte hid our shit.”

Belladonna snorted. “Outlaw, please. Which is it? Shut up or talk? Because you sure as sin can’t have both.”

“He’s sounding like an eat-his-cake-and-have-it-too kinda guy,” Kallie said, switching the cards to her left hand and leaving her right empty. If he got close enough for her to throw a punch, she wanted to hit him with her strongest. She might not get a second shot.

Belladonna’s curls bobbed. “Mmm-hmm. That he is.”

“Christ,” Cash muttered. “I got a feeling *shut up* is beyond y’all.” He raised the shotgun to chest level and aimed the barrel between Kallie’s breasts. His old-sweat-and-tobacco odor deepened. “You’re that fucking thief’s hot little cousin, ain’tcha?”

“Sounds like you got all the goddamned answers,” Kallie replied, lifting her chin. “Why don’t you tell me?”

Cash’s gaze, burning with a fire stoked by a self-righteous wrath, scorched a path from the top of her head to just past her cut-offs and back up along her snug black tank to her face. A smirk tugged up one corner of his ski-mask-framed lips.

“A pretty little thing with that long, dark hair, and them purple eyes, ain’tcha? Yeah, you’re Bonaparte’s cousin, all right.” His smirk vanished. “So sit your pretty little ass down and tell me where the hell the sonuvabitch stashed our shit.”

Kallie narrowed her eyes. “What makes you think I’d know?”

“Ain’t playing games here, sugar,” Cash said, glancing pointedly at the shotgun in his hands. “Y’all live in the same house. Can’t be many secrets.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” Kallie muttered, lancing a dark look at her aunt.

Keeping her attention on Cash’s nervous ceiling-scanning buddy, Divinity tsked and shook her head. “Stop yo’ pouting, ungrateful child. I did what had to be done and dat’s de end of it.”

“No, that ain’t the end of it, goddammit,” Kallie said, knotting her right hand into a fist. “We’re just getting started. But later, I mean. Not now.”

Thunder boomed through the house, ricocheting off the walls and Kallie’s eardrums. She winced in pain. Chunks of plaster from the ceiling exploded against the hardwood floor. The pungent scent of cordite peppered the air.

“We are now officially back to SHUT! THE! FUCK! UP!” Cash screamed, neck tendons cording. Smoke curled from the shotgun’s barrel. “If anyone makes a fucking peep, except to tell me where that goddamned Jackson Bonaparte hides all the shit he steals, I ain’t gonna be blowing holes in the ceiling! Y’all got that?”

“Jesus Christ, Cash!” Kerry yelled, hands over his ears. “You trying to make us all deaf?”

“You can shut the fuck up too,” Cash snarled. “You ain’t been no kind of help, you fucking superstitious mama’s boy.”

“Hey,” Kerry protested, yelling, an injured expression on his face. “Ain’t no call to be like that. I’m watching your back, ain’t I?”

“I don’t know—are you?”

“I got a stake in this too, dammit! I just don’t wanna get my ass hexed, that’s all.”

Kallie felt the tap of fingers against her calf. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Belladonna nod at the floor as she mouthed: *Look*, the urgency in her hazel eyes directing Kallie’s gaze down.

The eight of clubs rested on the hardwood floor between the sofa and the beer bottle and candle-cluttered coffee table, bits of white plaster sprinkled across its surface. It’d slipped free from the deck in her hand. Her heart thumped against her chest.

Go ahead with the situation or person. Take the chance.

From over Cash’s tension-taut shoulders, Kallie noticed her aunt sliding a hand into the pocket of her long, Gypsy-style skirt, her fingers no doubt seeking a powder or potion she’d tucked inside. Anything would work on twitching Kerry. Hell, baby powder would probably scare the man into a dead run out the front door.

Eight of clubs. Take the chance.

Kallie looked up. Kerry stood on the other side of the table, close to her aunt and Gabrielle, while Cash stood on Kallie’s side of the coffee table, his smoking-barreled shotgun once more aimed dead center at Kallie’s chest now that he and his partner were done quibbling.

“You’d better pipe up with something useful, darlin’!” Cash shouted. “I’m all out of goddamned patience!”

Needing to lure Cash into right-hook range, Kallie decided to go for demure and

helpless. She lowered her eyes, then bit her lower lip. “I don’t know anything about my cousin’s doings,” she lied, speaking in a whisper and hoping his ears were ringing as bad as her own. “His business is his own. But . . . he *does* have a storage unit.”

“What?” The floor boards creaked as Cash took a step closer. His battered cowboy boots came into Kallie’s downcast view. “Repeat that. He’s got a what?”

Kallie lifted her gaze. “A cousin who ain’t gonna put up with this shit.”

She flipped the deck of cards in her left hand at Cash, while simultaneously swinging her adrenaline-cocked right fist into the bastard’s ski-masked nose as he flinched away from the hailstorm of sharp-edged cards. Bone crunched beneath her knuckles.

Kallie grabbed the shotgun barrel, wrenching it free from Cash’s grip despite the pain rippling through her chest from her injured ribs, and aimed it at him as he staggered backward, both gloved hands cupped over his broken nose.

“Fuck!” he screamed.

From the other side of the coffee table, Divinity yelled, “You put dat shotgun down, boy, or I’ll be hexing you and yo’ future offspring down to the seventh generation!”

Kallie heard the clunk of metal against wood as Kerry wordlessly—as far as she could tell with all the goddamned ringing in her ears—rested the shotgun on the floor. Followed a heartbeat later by a jarring thud.

Divinity tsked in disapproval. “Dey don’t make men like dey used to.”