

## CHAPTER 1—CROSSED DEAD

“C’mon, scoot your gorgeous ass over, Gage,” Kallie Rivière whispered, climbing onto the shadowed bed. Pain hammered at her temples with hundreds of too-much-fun mallets. “I feel like shit. How much goddamned champagne did we—” She froze when her fingers touched the hot, wet sheets.

She blinked in the dawnlight filtering into the New Orleans hotel room. Not shadows. She caught a faint whiff of coppery blood. Something else altogether darkened the sheets.

Nausea flipped through her belly. Swallowing hard, she lifted her hand and forced herself to push the blood-soaked sheets back from the man they covered. Gage. The good-looking and hard-bodied nomad conjurer she’d hooked up with last night after the May pole dance.

Playing with him had been a bend-y, bouncy, naked trampoline act; a freefall into pleasure. One part Gypsy-styled outlaw biker, one part pagan conjurer, and one part hot-blooded explorer—all sexy nomad. Man was beaucoup skilled.

Or had been.

Kallie stared at the dead man in her bed. He lay on his belly, his face turned to the side. Blood masked his fine features, glittered in his black curls. It looked like blood had poured from Gage’s eyes, nose, mouth, and—given the blood staining the sheets beneath him—from elsewhere, like a spigot turned on full-blast. All color had drained from his espresso-brown skin, leaving his swirling blue-inked clan tattoos stark on his muscular

back, ass, and thighs.

Kneeling on the bed, Kallie reached over, intending to touch her fingers to his throat and check his pulse, but her hand stopped just a few inches above his blood-streaked neck.

Just a few hours ago, he'd devoured her lips with rough and hungry kisses as they had tumbled together on the carpeted floor, her legs wrapped around his waist—so white against his dark skin. The thought of his skin cold and lifeless beneath her fingers kept her hand in the air, motionless.

His empty, unblinking eyes told her he was dead. Gage was gone. She didn't need to touch him. Kallie stared at her trembling hand, wondering if she even could.

She'd seen plenty of dead things at home in Bayou Cyprés Noir, but never a dead person, let alone one she knew.

Well, hey, Kallie-girl, that isn't quite right, now is it? Shouldn't keep lying to yourself like that.

Memory tugged at Kallie, spun her like the pointer in a game of Twister, reminding her of another morning nine years ago.

Mama pulls the gun's trigger and the side of Papa's head explodes in a spray of blood and bone. He slumps down in his chair, a bottle of Abita still in his hand.

Kallie stands in her bedroom doorway, frozen—just like now. Mama turns and faces her, aims the gun carefully between her shaking hands. Her hands shake, but her face is still, resigned.

Sorry, baby. I ain't gotta choice.

Mama pulls the trigger again.

Kallie touched trembling and blood-sticky fingers to the scar on her left temple. Traced the lightning stroke of the bullet's path, just as her gaze traced the contours of Gage's face. Pain and shock had widened his hemorrhaging eyes, had twisted his fingers into the sheets.

How had he died? When had he died? While she lay curled on the bathroom floor, sick on too much wine and champagne?

She hadn't heard a goddamned thing.

Kallie reached up and closed her fingers around the pendants her aunt had hung around her neck nine years ago—a tiny onyx coffin marked with a silver X and a medallion for St. Bernadette—and closed her eyes.

It was too late to call 911, but she needed to contact someone. Report this. Maybe the coordinators of the oh-so exclusive May Madness Carnival would know what to do, especially when it came to dealing with a dead member of one of the free-wheeling ain't-bound-by-your-squatter-laws nomad clans.

Maybe, yeah, but she thought a friend's calming advice might be the way to go first. She gave her pendants a quick squeeze for luck before releasing them, then opened her eyes.

Kallie's gaze fell on the little stylized fox black-inked beneath Gage's right eye—the tat naming his clan. She wanted to grab a clean section of the sheet and wipe the blood away, wanted to smooth his eyes shut, but her hands remained knotted on her thighs.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, the sound of her words hollow and inadequate even to herself. "Eternal rest grant unto him, O bon Dieu. And let perpetual light shine

upon him. All flesh must come to you with all its sins; though our faults overpower us, you blot them out. Baron Samedi, I ask you please to accept this man into Guinee. Guide him safe from the crossroads and from the land of the living.”

Course, it might be nice if God and the loa actually listened to prayers without needing a rum-soaked bribe first. Kallie sighed. Still, old habits and all that bullshit.

Kallie scooted off the bed and, not sure where her cell phone was, grabbed the room phone. Her finger shook as she punched in the number to Belladonna’s room.

“Whazz?” Belladonna slurred, her voice thick with sleep.

“It’s me.” Kallie cupped her hand around the receiver’s mouthpiece like she was trying to keep her conversation private or trying curl her fingers around something normal and real. “Something bad’s happened . . . beaucoup bad, Bell. I need you to come over right now.”

All the sleep evaporated from Belladonna’s voice. “I’ll be right there. You alone?”

“Yes and no.”

An exasperated snort. “Which is it, girl? Do I need to bring muscle or a spell?”

“Just you, dammit. Please.”

The line went dead. Kallie re-cradled the receiver, then sat down on the carpet, amid the wreckage of her clothes and Gage’s, her arms wrapped around her bare legs. She shivered, teeth chattering, caught in a cold trembling that vibrated up from her core.

Mama’s hands shake, but her face is still, resigned.

Sorry, baby. I ain’t gotta choice.

Kallie thought she’d put all that aside, all the darkness and fury and tight-throated

hurt, when she'd gone to live with her Ti-tante Gabrielle; had sworn she'd never let her goddamned mama steal another moment of her life.

Looks like I just broke that promise.

Knuckles rapped against her door and Kallie's heart jumped into her throat.

"Hold on," she said, unfolding her shaking limbs and climbing gracelessly to her feet.

Belladonna must not've even bothered to dress, must've just thrown on a robe and hustled her ass into an elevator.

Padding to the door, Kallie unlocked it and eased it open. "Thanks for getting here so—" The words withered in her throat.

Not Belladonna in a robe, but a tall and fine-looking guy wearing a hastily tugged-on sage green tank, jeans, and scooter boots with painted flames licking up from the soles. Blue-inked Celtic tattoos swirled from beneath the shoulders of his tank and down his arms. Thick, honey-blond dreads coiled nearly to his waist and sideburns, stiletto-thin and sharp, curved along the lines of his jaw.

A shock went through her as she met his pine green gaze. For a second, everything quieted inside of her as though he'd pressed a soothing finger against her lips and whispered, Shhh. His eyes widened a little as though he felt the strange connection too, then Kallie noticed the small black fox inked beneath his right eye and her heart sank.

"Hey, you must be Kallie, Gage's hoodoo honey, yeah? Sorry to bug you so early, but is he still here?" the nomad asked. His gaze slid past her and into the room. "I really need to talk to him."

"Now?" Ice sheared off from the glacier encasing Kallie's heart and flowed into

her veins. Froze her thoughts.

On pure instinct, she stepped into the hall, pulling the door shut behind her. Too late, she realized she wore only her red lace please-undress-me bra and bikini-cut panties. Face burning, she pulled one dangling strap back up onto her shoulder.

An appreciative, but teasing smile curved the nomad's lips. "Rosy cheeks to match the undies. You wear 'em well, sunshine. I'm Layne, by the way."

Kallie opened her mouth, unsure of what to say, but knowing she needed to say something, anything. But before a single word could emerge from between her lips, the nomad's gaze locked onto her hands. He sucked in a sharp breath. She looked down. Blood smeared her fingers. Her pulse thundered in her ears.

"I don't know what happened," she stammered, lifting her gaze. "He was dead when I—"

Layne stared at her, all expression gone from his face. "Dead?"

Temples throbbing with insistent put-us-back-to-bed hangover pain, Kallie nodded, holding his blue-green gaze, unable to think of a single worthwhile word to say.

"You're kidding me, right?"

"I wish I was," Kallie said.

Shoving past her, the nomad pushed open the door and walked into the sunlight-laced room.

"Wait, hold on." Kallie hurried into the room after him. Her belly knotted as she drew in a breath of air tainted with the coppery scent of blood and, underneath, something she'd missed earlier—the faint brimstone stink of discharged magic; scents that seemed to register on Layne too.

He swung left and stopped in front of the rumpled and blood-drenched double bed. The color drained from his face. “Gage. No. Oh, shit. Shit.”

The shocked grief on Layne’s face tightened Kallie’s throat. “I’m so sorry.” She desperately wished her hungover brain would toss her words a little less trite, give her a verbal lifeline. But no. The only other thing it coughed up was: Sorry for your loss.

“You’re sorry,” Layne repeated, voice flat. “My draíocht brúthair—my brother-in-magic and my best friend—lies dead in your bed. And you’re fucking sorry?”

“Look, I had nothing to do with Gage’s death.”

Layne spun around and grabbed Kallie by both arms, his road-callused fingers clamping around her biceps. “Nothing? Ain’t that his blood in your fingers?”

“Get your goddamned hands off me before I forget you’re grieving.” Kallie met Layne’s gaze, glare for glare, her hands knuckling into fists.

“Or what? You’ll hex me to death too?”

“Too? Oh, hell, no. Is that what you think? I told you—I found him like that. I sure as hell didn’t kill him!”

“I smell spent magic. If you didn’t kill him, who did?”

“I don’t know, dammit!” Kallie wrenched free of Layne’s grip, suspecting—given the strength of his hands—that he’d let her go. Chin lifted, she held his gaze, and pulled her bra strap back onto her shoulder again.

Layne folded his arms over his chest. “So where the hell were you when it happened, anyway? The only blood I see on you is on your hands, so you couldn’t have even been in the goddamned bed with him.”

“We never made it to the bed, per se, not together, because we downed a ton of

champagne and wine, and I passed out in the bathroom. When I woke up . . .”

“Passed out. Pretty damned convenient, huh?”

“A damned relief at the time, truth be told, considering all the puking.”

“You okay, Shug?” another voice said, all purring velvet tones; a voice Kallie knew well. “Or am I looking at a soon-to-be-dead nomad?”