

CHAPTER 12

Chances remained. The precious card – the very last card – had been accepted, and she could feel that it was the right woman who now held it.

The line would begin anew.

It must.

Madame Claudine carefully stowed the silver box in its pearl-lined niche behind the counter, trying not to dwell on its emptiness. Once a dozen cards had waited to be claimed. Now, only two lines endured, the one claimed by Giselle and the unused card, that was in limbo or perhaps lost, somewhere in Paris.

Giselle had left confused, but she also sense she had felt estatic, envigorated, alive... changed.

Madame Claudine had no doubts she would pass the card on to another worthy woman, and soon.

Her fingers stroked the warm silver in one last thank you for the charms wrought, and then turned her attention to settling Maison du Fantasie for the night. Straightening the line of jewelry, scents and spices, refolding the delicate panties and bras, returning a mislaid mask to its rightful place, chanting the words of realignment and power, she wove through the rooms. She ended at the front door, locking it with her ritual blessing.

A ripple of heat and a faint noise spun her around, searching the store for the source. When a man strolled in from the back, she smiled. “Armando, you closed up early.”

“I am just more efficient.” He held up a bottle of red wine. “The best Spain has to offer calls. Join me in the courtyard.” He left through the back door as quickly as he had appeared.

She smiled. He felt no more comfortable in the sheer femininity of her shop than she did in powerful masculinity of his.

She traversed the room, pausing to grab two crystal wine glasses she kept by the rear exit, a

door as hidden as the rose-colored entrance to fantasy, before she stepped into the sultry night. Heat and humidity and sensuality, the essences of New Orleans, caressed her as she crossed the patio to sit at the wrought iron table.

Armando poured the wine, a Rioja Gran Reserves of brilliant burgundy. Claudine sipped the wine. “Excellent as always.”

“Would I offer anything less than perfection?” Armando smoothed the black silk of his trousers as he settled into the opposite chair.

The glass-topped table was only big enough for two, the chairs they used the only other furniture. No one came here but the two of them. The sole entrances were from her shop on Royal and his housed on the raunchier Bourbon Street, and in this juncture of male and female neutrality they met as equals. They were surrounded on all sides by the bricks and ivy; the substantial buildings muffled the noise and sometimes overly joyous harmony of the city. This was their oasis, a private retreat, although too many nights they were too busy to enjoy such precious moments.

“You had a fantasy claimed tonight,” Armando observed. He was the yang to her yin. As proprietor of an establishment that catered to male fantasies, he was deeply aware of everything that touched her. As aware as she was of him and the men who sought the gifts Armando’s club offered.

Tonight, the soft afterglow of magic lingered like the lovemaking that had generated it. She wouldn't be surprised if a normal human could see its glow.

“One of great power,” she said.

“That is good.”

“You did not have one claimed tonight.”

“No.” He stared into the wine glass, swirling the liquid a little to aerate the liquid before he sipped it.

Something troubled him. She studied him a moment, watching with eyes that had loved him for nearly three centuries. Loved him and knew both his faults and his strengths. They had met, and

bonded, in their individual fantasies, and when they had emerged, changed and empowered, their destinies had been set. She smiled a little. All these years, he had kept the small beard she'd teased him about. Of course now, those hairs were streaked with silver. Even magic doesn't grant immortality.

Still, he was the most handsome and charming man she had ever known.

Neither had questioned their linked destinies those many decades ago, when New Orleans was still in its wobbly youth, when sexuality was confined to the brothels and "dirty" women. Despite the times and the need for utter discretion, they had created the two shops, and, under many different disguises – dress shops, notions, gentleman clubs and so on – the magic had thrived.

Until now.

"What's on your mind, my love?" she asked.

He smiled at the endearment; those were not terms either of them used lightly. Then, his pleasure faded. "You are also down to one card, one line."

"Not so. The card that was returned has been claimed and redeemed. The magic tonight was strong, the connections forged were deep and branched. It gives me great hope, more than I have felt in a long time."

"That is good." He looked up from the wine. With his dark and silver hair, black shirt and trousers, he blended into the night. Only the surprising brilliant blue of his eyes shone pierced the darkness. "But the card in Paris is no more. That line has died."

She knew the woman he referred to; she never forgot any of the women who came through her doors. That woman had been passionate, fiery 18-year-old Parisian, and had come to the shop – then a fine linen and lace shop – in 1941, just before World War II broke out and contaminated the magic. The card went with her to Europe. Despite the nagging feeling of darkness that often plagued here these days, Claudine still hoped that the card had survived the war, and the woman, now in her 70's, would somehow pass it on to one who would return and use it.

He shook his head, reaching into his pocket to pull out his cell phone. He scrolled until he

found a picture and showed it to her. “I wish I did not have to show you this, but you must know. I found this on the Internet.”

Her heart squeezing, she read through the small article. The woman – and the line – had died. She had fought through cancer and won, but she been unable to combat the small pneumococcus virus. Her end was swift, painless, and unexpected.

The news was difficult to accept. Yet, in her soul, Madame Claudine knew that the card had been passed on. Some woman held it in trust, unused. Maybe never to be used..

“At least her last days were lived fully.” Saddened, she returned the phone to him. “We are both down to a single line.”

Armando took another sip of his wine. “Did we choose right, Claudine?”

“Accepting the magic?”

He shook his head. “That I have never doubted.”

“Neither have I.”

“I know.” His smile this time was fully warm, fully sensual. “I meant how we have managed the business.”

She knew to what he referred. She cast her spells wide. Her boutique was open to any woman, whether they claimed the card or not. Her merchandise encouraged the smaller and easier fantasies, in the hopes of finding the rare women strong enough, courageous enough to seek more.

Armando had the opposite problem. Men who sought power were legion. He winnowed out the harsh and vindictive by keeping his club small and exclusive. But it was not an exclusivity that could be inherited or bought by riches or claimed by influence. Only men with the necessary character and need of the magic located his burgundy door, despite its massive size.

“No, we have managed as it must be.” Or, if they had not, then too bad. Neither of them could have worked any differently, of that she was sure. “This is merely part of the natural rhythms of time and earth.”

“Is it? Things are different now. Nearly 300 years is a long time to watch the world change around you. Wars, nuclear bombs, Terrorists. Internet, Facebook, Twitter. People claim they are more connected than ever, but they have substituted breadth and superficiality for depth and heart, and have nearly lost their souls in the process.. These are not the type of connections that join hearts and souls and destinies and grant the power we need.”

“We, you and I, use all those tools, but we still crave and fulfill those other needs. We are not alone.”

“I pray you are correct.”

They finished their wine with a final sip, setting their glasses to the table at the same time. Armando leaned over and kissed her. She sighed with pleasure and melted into the caress. Only their mouths touched, but she was surrounded by his spicy scent and the desire radiating from him.

“Be with me tonight,” he murmured against her lips. “I have a need to remember. I have need of you.”

“I will.” She slowly lifted. “In a moment; I have something I must do first.”

He nodded in understanding. “I shall be waiting.” Picking up the half full wine bottle and the two glasses, he left for his apartment.

Madame Claudine returned Maison du Fantasia surveyed her surroundings. So rare. So needed.

The boutique must survive.

When she turned out the overhead lights, for a moment she was plunged into darkness, the magic before her erased. Only featureless shapes hunched like demons in the shadows. A shiver passed through her, as the cold finger of death touched her throat. Her joints ached, she suddenly felt the many years of her stewardship.

Was this the end? The future remained so precarious. Only the card in Giselle's possession offered her hope.

Then, her eyes adjusted, and the warm night lights of the shop glowed, tinting everything in rose and gold. Her instinctive sigh, this time, was one of pleasure.

Her time might be nearing an end, but the fantasies must endure.

In the darkness of the shop, a shadow peeled itself from the wall. The demon shivered in pain, and quickly dissipated her form, becoming a thick fog that could easily slide out under the heavy wood door. She shimmied into human form, and conjured a tight pair of jeans and an equally tight midriff top onto her body.

Madame Claudine's magic was still substantial, more than enough to make her miserable inside the shop, but not enough to keep her out anymore. Every night, she became stronger, and could stand Claudine's wards better.

Soon. The challenge would come soon.

But for now, she was hungry, and the streets of New Orleans were full of feasts, walking on two legs, swilling rum-filled punch drinks into their bellies, and full of bawdy laughter and fun... high energy.

A delicious combination of energy found no where else in the country.

She walked less than a block before finding a fragrant young couple, drunk and daring, hidden in a dark doorway engaging in sex.

“Dinner is served,” she whispered and she joined them.