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ZOMBIES
ANONYMOUS

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COLT



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DEDICATION

Trust in the lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understandings and he will make your paths straight. I've been listening and you've blessed me, I am grateful. To all my incredibly supportive friends, family, and readers, you're amazing! I couldn't do this without you. Oh and I can't forget Sam and Dean who've ridden shot gun many late nights.

ZOMBIES ANONYMOUS

Shyla Colt

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“Hi, my name is Cezelia and I’m a zombie. It’s been six months since my last use of dark magic.” My eyes darted around the room, my stomach knotting as I wiped my palms on my skirt. There were zombies of all shapes and sizes here. Your traditional “feed me flesh or shit gets real quick, fast, and in a hurry” type, vamps gone wrong who weren’t human or fully fanged, and those like me, victims of Hoodoo curses.

“Hi, Cezelia.” A monotone chorus of voices chimed in unison.

“I was under the spell for four years until my Master died two years ago. Adjustment has been... difficult. I wake up every day and feel like the world is about to come down around my ears at any second. After I talk myself down, I peel myself off the sheets and try to figure out what I want to do with my life.”

“We’ve been asking you for years to come here. What made you change your mind?” Jarek, the group’s leader, asked.

My gaze stuck on Paul who had been imprisoned by the priestess along with me.

“A good friend of mine helped me see I had nothing to lose. I haven’t been able to make much progress on my own, and here at least I could talk about what I’ve been through.” I shrugged, unsure what else they expected. “That’s pretty much all I got.”

A loud wave of applause rose in the room. Jarek raised his hand and the claps tapered down before silencing.

“It takes a lot of courage to make that first step. Welcome, we’re glad to have you.”

I ducked my head and took a hasty seat beside Paul who squeezed my knee. “I’m proud of you, Zelia. You did great.”

“Thanks.” I offered up a shaky smile. I always strove to please him, mostly because I’d let him down so much in the past. When the spell had broken, he’d taken to freedom like a duck to water; me, not so much.

As a free agent, I worked by doing magic for hire. I sold my services to the highest bidder in order to get my hits of dark magic and feel the bonds of ownership, if only for awhile. I was like an addict. It wasn't a surprise really; my family had a pension for dark magic. It took down the best of us.

Hell, it's how I ended up in servitude. Mom made a bad deal, and like a fool, I'd rushed to her rescue, agreed to the ridiculous terms necessary to save her and bam, that was all she wrote.

Bitterness and anger swirled together to form a potent brew in my belly. I couldn't bring myself to face her, and New Orleans was a small city. You could spit and hit the person you wanted to avoid. I was still coming to terms with the fact that her poor judgment landed me into servitude in the first place. You understand? A clever little spell took care of that problem for me, a binding spell done to keep the person away instead of connect them to you.

"Hi, my name is Steve and I'm a zombie."

The decaying man in front of me was hard to look at. The skin on his face was sallow and saggy while the rest of his body seemed bloated, bruised, and straining at the seams. His hair had fallen out in large clumps, leaving a graveyard of bald patches. He should've been tall, but there was something I couldn't put my finger on about his posture as he slumped. I narrowed my eyes. *Perhaps his bones have begun to break down?*

"It's been a year since I tasted living fresh. I've been on the raw meat diet. It's hard but I'm managing."

My eyes bugged. *They could do that?*

"Great job, Steve!" A man with dark hair and too pale skin called out. Hands came together to show their support and pride at his massive accomplishment.

"What's he?" I whispered to Paul as I nodded toward the attractive man with the slender face, Roman nose, and dark gray eyes.

"A Traditional."

"How?" He looked perfectly normal to me, albeit a little pale.

"It's the human flesh that breaks down the zombie's cells, and then the prion, the infectious agent composed of protein in a misfolded form in the brain, make them go insane. It also makes them crave more."

"So, if they never taste live flesh?"

“They live like a regular person only with a special diet, pale skin, above average strength, and extended life expectancy.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.”

I listened as we went around the tiny circle. Dan and John were Traditionals on a meat diet, and had been so for the past decade. Their skin was tinted a slight yellow, like a person who had bad kidneys or hepatitis. They had relapsed a few times, but they got a handle on it swift enough to allow them to mingle in among the normal folks. Jennifer was an in-between, not human and not vamp. She'd never fully transformed. She had fangs and a lust for blood, but no power or strength to note. Instead of being a lonely shut-in, Jen volunteered at the hospital, worked a job as a suicide counselor, and existed via blood banks. Theresa was another victim of Hoodoo, a fledgling just a few months out from servitude. She was hanging in there but the temptation was strong. Finally, *his* turn came.

“Hi, my name is Martine and I'm a Traditional. I've never tasted live flesh and I have no plans to. I've been living with this ailment for seven years now. Coming here gives me a place to vent, be myself, and be inspired. I sponsor others like me, and work a wicked boring job as an accountant during the daylight hours.”

We all laughed.

“Thank you for sharing that, Martine. Anyone have something they need to talk about?” Martine's words echoed in my head. *I sponsor others like me*. My hand shot up in the air, almost of its own accord.

“Go ahead, Cezelia.”

“I'm having a very tough time resisting black magic and bonding spells.”

A sympathetic *aw* passed through the group.

“That must be pretty hard after, how long in bonds of servitude?” Jarek asked.

“Four, and I feel horrible because Paul is my best friend and feels responsible for me all the time. It's not fair. I want to kick this, not only for me, but for him too. Black magic has corrupted the majority of my family, it's in our blood. There are times when I think I should just... let it take me over and be done with it.” Tears welled in my eyes. “I'm just so damn tired of fighting.”

Paul wrapped his arms around me. “You're family, it's okay.”

“In this case I have to agree with Cezelia. You’re too close to her to be a sponsor, Paul. Is anyone here willing to step in for Paul? Assuming that’s what you want, Cezelia.” Jarek’s gaze met mine.

“I do.” I sniffed.

“I’d like to help.” Martine’s voice was deep, soothing, and assured. *Is it even possible to have Zombie Swag?*

“Is that agreeable to you, Cezelia?” Jarek asked.

Fuck yes!

“If it’s not too much trouble,” I said.

“Okay. We can get together after the meeting to go over a few things.” A light flickered in Martine’s eyes, and unless my senses were off, he desired me just as much as I did him. He smirked and a moment of understanding passed between us. Tonight wouldn’t simply be an exchange of numbers. It’d be some pussy damaging sex too. I hadn’t been this excited about anything since my return to regular life. Shifting in the chair, I rubbed my thighs together to ease the ache that was growing more insistent with every second.

“Wonderful,” Jarek said, clapping his hands together. “I think now’s a good time to break for snacks and mingle on our own. For anyone new, the raw meat is available in the cooler on the end. We’ll start the circle back up in say, fifteen minutes or so.” It was clear that he loved what he did. It made me wonder what his story was. I guess that would wait for the second portion of the meeting.

I stood from my seat as Martine made his way over. Well over six foot three with shoulder length dark brown hair, he had a broad forehead, strong jaw line, and kissable, Cupid’s bow lips. His height alone was enough to make my panties damp. His pale skin enhanced the classic features that made up his face. It was all I could do to feign calmness when he reached me.

“I thought maybe we could step away from the others and talk about sponsorship.”

“That’d be great.” I turned to Paul. “I’m going to step outside with him, if that’s alright?”

“Sure. I’m going to go help myself to some food.” Paul walked off with a small smile of approval.

“Shall we?” Martine offered his arm.

“I like a man with manners.”

“A woman as beautiful as you deserves nothing less.”

Hummingbirds beat their tiny wings in my stomach. The Traditional had game. We exited out the back door into a dark alley. The locations for the meetings were always in shady areas, because society didn't want someone to see a Traditional and freak out.

As the metal door closed behind us, he ran his hands over my body, tugging my hips against his. The impressive bulge in his jeans made me whimper.

"If I'm out of bounds, please tell me."

"No." My voice quaked.

"I haven't felt this intensely about someone since I caught the virus."

"Me either, what is this?"

"I—I don't know, but I want to explore it."

His large body covered mine. I could feel his taut muscles flex, causing his thick length to twitch. *Would it feel as cool as his skin?* My center wept, hot liquid soaked my underwear and ran down my inner thighs. He sniffed.

"You're drenched."

My heart palpitated. "You can smell that."

"Yes." A growl rumbled in his chest. "Tell me now if you want me to back off."

"N—"

He swooped in and our lips smashed together. Teeth nipped, tongues tangled, battled, tasted, and tempted. His hand slid under my shirt, rolling a stiff, sensitive, bud between his fingers. We pulled apart for air, and he lifted the cloth of my shirt, exposing my heated skin to the cool night air. I shivered as his mouth latched onto a hard peak through my bra.

"Martine!" I buried my fingers in his thick hair, arched my back, and pushed my breast further into the moist cavern of his mouth in search of more.

He sucked harder and continued to manipulate its twin with his clever fingers before abruptly pulling away.

"No!"

"Someone's coming," he said, smoothing down my shirt, and moving us to the side of the door. "Act normal." He struck a casual pose, leaning against the wall a safe distance away from where he'd propped me up. I liked it when he gave orders. It gave me a sense of purpose again.

The door swung open and Jarek appeared. “Hey guys, we’ll be starting soon.”

“Okay, we’ll be in,” Martine offered.

“This is insane,” I whispered. The words were meant more for me than him, but he heard them anyway.

“There’s something between us. I want to discover what it is and why.”

“Well you are stuck being my sponsor now.” I smiled.

“We’ll have a thorough introduction tonight.”

“I look forward to it.”

I came to the meeting looking for a change, and I certainly got that.

The impromptu make out session in the alley frayed my nerves. I was ready to bend Cezelia over and fuck her in front of everybody in the group. Like a powder keg ready to blow, I jumped up from my seat when the clock struck nine, said my goodbyes with lightning fast speed, and quickly guided Cezelia from the building toward my car by her elbow.

“Eager?”

“If I’m not inside of you in the next five minutes, I’m going to come in my pants. You wouldn’t want me to embarrass myself, would you?”

“It’s a good thing you can’t reproduce because I don’t have protection.”

“The benefits of being undead.”

She laughed as we reached my black SUV, and I hit the alarm.

“I promise we’ll look into this thing between us, but right now...” She grabbed my collar and pulled me close, planting a blistering kiss on my lips. “Shut up and fuck me, zombie boy.”

I opened the door and we fell into the back seat in a tangle of limbs. I yanked up her skirt and hissed as heat rolled off her in waves that scorched my skin. Since I caught the virus I’d been cool to the touch, similar to a vampire. I craved the warmth she had in spades. As I rubbed her through her silky red knickers, a fresh gush of liquid soaked through onto my fingertips.

“Damn, you’re so wet.” I slipped a finger inside the side of her panties and into her slick entrance. Her walls clenched me tight.

“Fuck, you’re so tight Zelia. I can’t wait to feel your cunt wrapped around me.”

“Less talking, more action.” She moaned.

“Eager aren’t you?”

“It’s been a long time.”

“How long?”

A moment passed before she answered.

“Four years. I thought my libido was broken until tonight. It happens sometimes after being under the influence of someone for such an extended period of time.”

“Damn, then I’m like your first.” The thought made my dick hard. “I can’t wait to pop your cherry,” I teased as I circled my finger inside her, exploring her walls.

“I have to make sure you’re ready for me, so open those legs wider.”

She purred as her thighs parted, her feminine musk tickling my nose and heightening my arousal.

“You like that?”

“Yes.” Her voice was husky, her eyes half lidded.

“Then move for me, pretty girl. Fuck my fingers with that delectable pussy of yours.”

Her blue eyes dilated, and her full pink lips parted as she drove her hips up to meet my hand. Tipping her pelvis up, she ground down on my fingers.

“Oh, Martine.” Her voice was shaky, as her muscles twitched, contracting and gripping my fingers tightly. She was beautiful as she strained up against me to seek her pleasure. She deserved more than a quick fuck in a car. Images of her beautiful brown skin splayed against my white sheets flashed through my mind, becoming an obsession. I curled my fingers and she cried out, jerked and digging her fingers into my forearms. I reached down between us, thrumming her clit like a guitar, while listening to the music she made as she came apart. Her body seized. Sticky wetness flowed across my fingers and I bent down, capturing her lips with mine, drinking the passion directly from her lips.

She peered up at me with glassy eyes.

“I want to take you for the first time in my bed. Will you come with me?”

A bashful expression crossed her face. “You want me to come to your house?”

“Oh yes. We’re nowhere near finished and I want more than a one night stand. This is the most alive I’ve felt since the virus. I’m not sure what’s between us, but I plan on fighting to keep it, if that’s okay with you?”

“Very Okay.”

“Good.”

I freed my fingers, popping them in my mouth, and groaned. She was a rich, bittersweet dessert I wanted to sample more of. “You’re exquisite,” I said as I smoothed down her skirt and helped her sit up, anticipation slithering in my belly like a hungry snake.

Butterflies flapped their feather-light wings in my belly as I watched Martine undress. He was lean, with no unnecessary fat and just enough muscle. I licked my lips. His dusky, pink nipples were rigid, standing out against his pale skin. My mouth watered.

Perched on the edge of the bed, I rubbed my thighs together, anxious to feel him move inside me. The dull ache morphed into a pounding pulse as his boxers hit the floor with a whisper of cloth, his cock jutting out, fat, pale, and swollen at the crown.

“Look at what you do to me.”

“Come here, and let me have a taste,” I said, crooking my finger at him.

He palmed his cock, stepping forward to rub the tip across my lips.

“Lick it for me.”

My tongue darted out, flicking over the salted mushroom-shaped tip. I opened my mouth and took him deeper, savoring the full-bodied flavor of man and pre-cum. I hummed.

“Damn.” The gravely tone of his voice did funny things to my tummy. I hollowed my cheeks, slurped, and took him to the back of my throat. His girth made me gag and caused my eyes to water, but I kept going. There was a drive inside to please him, to drain him dry, fuck him raw, and start the whole process over again. I tightened my throat as his fingers buried themselves in my hair.

“Shit, I’m going to fuck that hot mouth of yours.”

I groaned my approval. The vibrations unleashed a beast inside of him as he clutched my hair and thrust into me fast and hard. I gripped his ass cheeks, and dug my nails in.

“Fuck!”

I moaned, determined to win this battle. His body shook. I smirked.

“I’m going to come.”

He shot off like a geyser. The tangy, sweet fluid filled my mouth and I gulped it down, careful to swallow every precious drop. His guttural cry went straight to my clit. As I released his flaccid member, I threw my head back and screamed as the world around me narrowed to my pleasure.

“You okay?” He caressed my face with the tips of his fingers. The tenderness in that gesture brought tears to my eyes.

“You know, whatever this thing between us is, I’m looking for more than a fling, aren’t you?” Martine asked.

I looked down, embarrassed. Had the need in my eyes been so easy to see?

“Don’t look away.” He tilted my chin up and our gazes clashed.

“Am I alone in that feeling?”

“No.”

“Then never hide from me. I want to learn all of you, every facet, emotion, want, and need. I won’t be satisfied until I’ve experienced your soul, and in return I will do the same for you.” He knelt on the floor between my legs and peered up. “I’ve been alone for so long, I can’t let you walk away.”

“We don’t even know what this is.”

“Does it matter?” He moved his hands to the insides of my thighs and stroked. The muscles in my stomach jumped.

“What if it fades?”

He traced the seam of my sodden panties.

“What if it doesn’t? I promise you we’ll get to the bottom of this, but why not enjoy the ride and hope for the best. I need some good in my life, Zelia... and I get the feeling you do too.”

Can I do this?

He rubbed my clit. The rough strokes and soft fabric mixed and blended to create something wicked and delicious. I circled my hips in search of more friction. He stilled his hand.

“No!”

“Admit it,” he said as he pressed down and applied pressure to my clit. I jerked.

“Admit what?” My voice cracked.

“Admit that we’re good together. That it’s worth the risk.” He slipped a finger in the side of my underwear, stroked my entrance, and I caved.

“Yes!”

“Good girl.”

He removed my underwear and bra in a flurry of motion that made me dizzy.

“Contrary to popular belief, Traditionals are pretty damn fast.” My chuckles were lost to his searing kiss.

“I’ve waited too long for you to go slow. I’m sorry.” As he flipped me over, I scrambled for purchase on my hands and knees.

“All I can think about it dominating that pussy, searing my name on you till I’m encoded in your D.N.A.”

His thrust inside and I screamed. My walls resisted briefly before they yielded. Suddenly I was full of his engorged cock. I clutched the sheets in my hands and pushed my ass back against him, my face resting against the cool sheet.

“Harder, Martine!” My body bucked beneath him. Fuller than I’d ever been in my life, I surfed a wave of both pleasure and pain.

“You’re so tight and hot, Zelia. This pussy was made for me.” He slapped my ass, causing a fresh rush of juices to flow.

“Say it.”

Three more slaps landed, each harder than the one before. A stinging burn flamed over my skin.

“My pussy was made for you.”

He delivered another firm smack.

“Oh God.” Tears welled in my eyes.

His balls slapped against me. Sweat dripped down my body as I strained against him.

“I can’t hold on much longer Zelia. You gonna come with me, *Cher?* Rub your clit baby.”

I reached down and caressed my wet button. My muscles quivered, clamped down on his cock, and once more my world exploded in a blaze of bright white light followed by a steady flow of heat that coated my insides.

Spent and drained dry, we lay together on the bed.

“What is this thing between us?” Martine asked as he nuzzled my ear.

“I don’t know. But I have an idea where we could find out.”

“The Quarter?”

“No, a house on the bayou. I know someone.” I’d avoided my sister for long enough.

“Tomorrow.” He nipped my earlobe, and pulled me back to mold against his frame. “Right now we have more making up for lost time to do.”

It took an entire pot of coffee to get us going the next morning, but it was worth it. I peered over at the curvaceous beauty with her honey colored skin and blue eyes. Her dark brown hair was slicked back into a ponytail and she looked damned good in a pair of my black jogging pants and white t-shirt.

“Tell me more about this woman we’re going to see.”

She sighed. “Dolucila is my older sister, a powerful priestess.”

“You sound reluctant.”

“We haven’t spoken in over a year.”

“Why?”

“She thinks I should forgive my Mom, and I don’t find I possess that ability. She was the reason I was enslaved in the first place. She wrote a check her ass couldn’t cash and I paid the price to keep her in one piece.”

“Why you?”

“Because I’m the one in the family with the most power.”

His jaw dropped. “You practice?”

“No, it’s inherited. Unfortunately for my mother, it seemed to have skipped a generation. What she got wasn’t much to write home about. But when we were born and she thought it was open season.” The bitterness in her voice saddened me.

“We can go to someone else.”

“No, she’ll know. Besides, I suppose it’s time I make my peace.” She placed her hand over mine and smiled. “Thank you for caring. It’s been a long time since anyone other than Paul did that.”

“How do you know Paul?”

“We were imprisoned together. It forms a bond between people.”

“I can imagine.”

“How did you catch the virus?”

“Bite from a client. I thought it was the stress of tax season. Next thing I know I’m showing symptoms I only heard about in horror movies.”

“How did you keep from...”

“Feeding?”

“Yes.” Color bloomed in her cheeks like a rose.

“I spent my whole life saving people, volunteering at shelters, giving blood. The thought of harming someone was repugnant. I damn near starved to death until a co-worker came to my apartment to check on me. He’d been living on the raw diet for years, and taught me everything I needed to know.”

“You must be very strong willed to do that.” Her voice was full of awe.

“You know us Nawlin’s folk, stubborn to a fault.”

She laughed, nodding her head with a grin. “Too true. You ready to head out?”

“Yes. Hell of a situation to be meeting your family in for the first time.”

“You were serious last night? About us being something more?”

“I don’t waste my time saying things I don’t mean. I never have.” I took her hand in mine. “I know it’s hard for you to trust me, seeing as we just met. But in here,” I gestured toward my heart, “it doesn’t feel that way.”

“For me either. But it scares me. It’s not natural, and I’ve learned that everything comes with a price.”

“Perhaps this is our reward for going through hell.”

“It’s a nice thought.” I could see the skepticism in her eyes. It was like a physical kick to the chest.

What would I do if she walked away?

It was an unfathomable thought. She came into my life like color to a black and white television. I couldn’t go back to that dreary existence of rote function and drudgery. Anxiety hit me with a one two combo and I stood to take my mind off the downward spiral it was headed for.

“Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.” She issued a tentative smile. I let go of her hand, wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her close to my side. “We got this.”

I lead her outside to my black truck, opened the door like my late parents had always taught me to for a woman, and came back over to climb into my side. Then I started the car.

“You direct and I’ll drive.”

Twenty minutes later we were in the heart of the bayou on foot. If I wasn’t already technically dead, I’d be worried.

“It’s just up here.”

We emerged from a cluster of trees and I spotted a quaint looking mid-sized log cabin with a porch.

“Don’t let the exterior fool you. Be respectful, and don’t touch anything.”

“Yes’ ma’am.” I saluted her and she rolled her eyes.

“Smart ass.”

The door to the cabin opened and a woman stood there. Her facial structure and coloring were similar to Zelia’s, but her gray eyes were cold. She folded her arms under her chest and shifted her weight to stand with her hip out.

“Dolucila.”

“Zelia.” She nodded her head toward me. “What’s the Traditional doing here? You make another deal? Using that black stuff again? You know I only allow light magic in this space.”

“No, I’m trying to stop. I met him at my first meeting.”

“Meeting?”

“Zombie Anonymous.”

A brilliant smile broke out on Dolucila’s face.

“Oh *Cher*, I am so proud of you!” She bounded down the stairs, and took Zelia in her arms. “Any man that helps you with this is a friend of mine, undead or no.”

Her Cajun accent was thick and her tone charmed me.

“Thank you.” Zelia sounded shy, almost bashful. “It means a lot to me. I know we haven’t had the best relationship since I’ve been free, and a good portion of it’s my fault, but I’d like to start over.”

“Of course, *ma petite*. You’re my *soeur*. However, I sense there’s more to this though than reconciliation.”

“Yeah, there’s something between us neither of us can understand.” Zelia indicated the two of us with a nod of her head.

A flicker of understanding lit Dolucila’s eyes. “Come on inside and we’ll talk. I know what you speak of, seen it happen a time or

two.” She turned on her heel and walked toward the cabin, and we followed.

The inside was at odds with the outside. Shelves of jars, stones, and various other items used in practicing Hoodoo lined the interior of what appeared to be a store front. As we continued to walk, we seemed to cross an invisible border. This was clearly where she lived.

“Please sit at the table.” She gestured toward the square wooden table that sat six.

I pulled out a chair for Zelia, pushing her in when she sat before I took the seat beside her.

“Oh you got a winner, a real gentleman. You gonna introduce me to your man?”

“This is Martine. Martine, my sister, Dolucila.”

“It’s nice to meet you.”

“Good to meet you too. Now, you both got the look of the hunger about you. Can’t get enough of each other, right?”

I cleared my throat. *Would it be rude to say yes?*

“Yes,” Zelia said. *Guess not.*

“When you cross over to that in-between, not alive but not dead, it wakes up things that lie dormant in regular ole humans. What you feeling now is animal magnetism. Your body recognizes each other as being compatible.”

“What does that mean though?” Zelia asked.

“It means that you two are meant to be... like soul mates, but on a more primal level.”

“Is this something that will fade over time?” I knew that was Zelia’s main concern. She’d been hurt a lot in her life, I could tell, and the last thing she’d want to do was open herself up for more pain.

“No.” Dolucila shook her head. “Like it or not, this is forever *bebe’s*.”

“Forever?” Zelia’s voice shook.

“Yes, *soeur*. Your man is not going anywhere.”

Tears welled in Zelia’s eyes.

“Thank you, Dolucila. I know we just got here, but we have a lot to talk about, and I really need to tend to your sister right now.”

“You’re a good man, Martine. Take care of her for me.”

“I will.” I stood. “Come on, Zelia, let’s go for a walk.” She stood, and I wrapped an arm around her as Dolucila directed us outside into sunlight.

“Don’t be strangers.”

“We won’t,” I promised. She smiled and gave a nod before she disappeared back into the house.

“What’s wrong?” I whispered. “I thought this would be happy news.”

Tears trailed from Zelia’s blue eyes, down her face and onto the ground.

“You’re stuck with me. My addiction to black magic is still here and very real. Right now I itch to go and perform a spell. What kind of existence is that for you?”

“As long as I’m with you, a good one.”

“How can you say that?” She shook free. “Do you think this is a trivial issue? When I perform that kind of magic it hurts people. I know it, but I take the jobs anyway. Magic for hire is how I make my living. It’s like an alcoholic working at a bar. But it’s all I know.” She paced the swampy area like a cornered animal.

“Do all your cases deal with dark magic?”

“No.”

“So, then we’ll put out the word you don’t take those type of cases anymore.” I put up a hand when she began to argue. “Hear me out. I know it’ll be hard, but you can do this.”

“And if I slip?”

“Then we’ll deal with it. One day at a time, just like we talked about at our meeting. I know about cravings, Zelia. The universe wouldn’t pair us if we couldn’t make each other better people.” I took careful steps toward her. “I’m asking you to try for me. I know we can be great together. But it’ll take the two of us committed to riding this thing out to make it. Can you do that?”

“I want to, but I’m so scared. I don’t want to let you down, Martine.” Her voice shook.

“Don’t worry about that. Lord knows I’m not perfect.” I took her hands in mind. “As your sponsor, I must recommend you keep me on for support, and counseling.”

She laughed and the heaviness in the air lifted.

“I think you forfeited that title when we became involved.”

“So you admit it.”

“Admit what?” Her brow furrowed.

“That we’re involved.”

Her jaw opened and closed. “Well shit.” A heartbeat passed before she continued. “I want this with you Martine. I could love you.”

“I’m already half in love with you, Zelia.”

Her eyes widened.

“For the first time since I returned to the land of the living, I feel alive.”

“That’s no small feat, considering.”

“No *Cher*, it isn’t.”

The tension sloughed off and she gave me a genuine smile.

“Okay, let’s do this.”

“We gonna be proper like, let me court you?”

“I think we skipped ahead a few steps from that.”

“Awwh girl, it don madda.” I thickened my accent, and she laughed, which was exactly what I wanted. We linked hands and turned to walk toward the car. As the sun shone down, warming my skin, I finally knew why I’d endured all those years. I was waiting for Zelia.

The End

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