

ONE

"I've come to clean up your dirt, sir."

Narando Ballinger stared incredulously at Stiffani Voydalle. "At this time of night?"

Stiffani smiled. "Yes, sir. I saw the light under your door, so I figured you hadn't gone to bed yet. May I come in?"

"There's no dirt in here. The room is spotless. And even if it weren't, this is hardly the proper time to be tidying up. Come back in the morning."

"Oh, but there is some dirt in here, sir. And I'd be neglecting my duties if I didn't tend to it right away."

"I think you've been working too hard, young lady. I suggest you get a good night's sleep. Now if you'll excuse me..."

He started to close the door.

"If you say so, Foster Lee," she said.

He froze. "What did you just call me?"

She put her fingers up to her mouth. "Oh, I am sorry, sir. Slip of the tongue. I got your name mixed up with your partner's."

His eyes narrowed. "I have no partner."

"Not any more. But you did. Before that unfortunate ... accident."

Narando studied her face. It had been pretty once—before someone cut a big scar into it, running jaggedly from her forehead clear down to her chin. But it was her eyes that captured his attention now—green eyes, feral and hungry, like those of a jungle cat stalking its prey.

He quickly swung the door open. "Get in here," he said gruffly.

He was a handsome man, with swarthy skin and brilliantined hair and a pencil mustache, and he was nattily attired in cream colored silk pajamas with gray trim, and maroon slippers. The glowstone lamp next to his roll-top desk was alight, and a workbook full of blank music sheets lay on the blotter, with a fancy gold-plated fountain pen next to it. Some musical notes had been jotted down on the first page of the book, with a few lines of lyrics scribbled below the staves, marred by lots of cross-outs. But most of the page was empty.

Stiffani strolled toward the desk, humming a tune—*Rubber Boot Blues*. It was one of Narando's compositions, perhaps his most famous.

She sat down in the dark green swivel chair and crossed her legs. Narando's eyes inspected her shapely shins, then returned to her flawed face. He licked his lips. She picked up the workbook.

"What's your latest song about?" she said.

He marched to the desk and snatched the book away from her, snapping it shut.

"Look, Miss Voydalle, I don't know what you're up to, but I wish you'd get to the point. Why did you really come up here?"

She swung around to face him, folding her hands in her lap. "To talk about Foster Lee. A remarkable lad. Earned his living scraping the barnacles off the hulls of fishing boats down in New Orleans. Used to sing little tunes he made up on the spot while he worked."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"Isn't it obvious, sir?"

"No. It's not. What makes you think there's any connection between myself and Foster Lee?"

Stiffani reached into a pocket of her white apron and took out a deck of cards.

"I understand you're good with cards," she said. "Ever played with a deck like this?"

His eyes slitted. "Your Mumler deck. So that's it."

"Correct, sir. The little scrying session I held in the parlor the other night went so well, I decided to gaze into my water bowl again and see what else I could dredge up. I've captured it on this card, and I thought you might like to watch it, just in case your memory needed a bit of a jog."

"How kind of you," he said acidly.

She riffled the cards, then fanned them out. "Pick a card, any card—as long as it's this one." She pushed up one of the cards with her thumb.

His hand trembled as he pulled the card from the deck. It had a black back embossed with a pentagram, and the front was white, the border decorated with Celtic designs in thistle-colored ink. But the picture in the middle was not a king or queen or joker, it was Narando Ballinger himself—not a drawing, but a sepia toned photograph. A very special kind of photograph.

Stiffani traced a magical glyph in the air with a forefinger and said, "Visions of water, in cardstock sealed, come alive now, the past is revealed."

The surface of the card glowed with soft light and the sepia image blossomed into color—and began to move. The focal point zoomed out, revealing more of Narando's surroundings, and

sounds began to play—the plinkety-plink of a piano, the thrum of a powerful engine, the wush-wush of a paddle wheel churning through water. Narando was sitting at a round table, playing poker with three other men, all clad in gentlemen's clothes. Two of the men were smoking cigarillos, while another had a big stogie crammed into his mouth.

Everything seemed quite amiable at first—until one of the other players suddenly grabbed Narando's left wrist, twisted it, and plucked an ace of spades from the sleeve of Narando's green suede jacket. Everyone stood up. A brief argument ensued. Narando was seized by his fellow players and forcibly escorted out the door onto the deck of the riverboat and hurled over the railing. He splashed into the moonlit waters of the Mississippi and shook his fist at the receding boat, then began swimming toward shore. But he tired long before he reached the bank, and began to cry out piteously, begging for help. A cry no one heard.

No one but an ugly lad working in a small dry dock near the river's bank. He had a hunched back and a patchy scalp and malformed hands that resembled claws, which he was using to scrape barnacles off the hull of a fishing boat. His shiny red flesh gleamed in the pool of light from his brass glowstone lamp, which cast his shadow onto the dry dock's wall, magnifying and distorting it into a monstrous shape—yet when he heard the cry from the river he behaved in a very human way. He climbed out of the dry dock and sprinted to the muddy bank and scanned the moon-dappled water, and when he spotted the flailing man he dove into the river and swam to him, grabbing the collar of his coat and tugging him to shore. Draping the man's arm around his shoulder, he helped him trudge up the muddy bank.

"Ran out of steam, eh?" the lad said.

Narando had to cough up some river water before he could answer. "Ran out of boat, too," he gasped.

The lad took Narando to his home—a tin lean-to right next to the boat yard—and set him down in a rickety chair, then fetched a moth-eaten brown-and-gray blanket off his cot and draped it over Narando's soggy frame.

"Care for some hot rum?" the lad said.

"That would be lovely," Narando said. "My name's Ballinger, by the way. Narando Ballinger. What's yours?"

"I go by Foster Lee," the lad said. He walked to his cobbled-together cupboard and took out a mug. He blew into it, then held it up.

"Ain't been used in awhile and it's got a chip in it," he said, "but it's the only spare mug I got. I'd let you use mine, only the handle broke off a long time ago and it's kinda hard to hold when it's hot—if you got normal hands like you got."

Narando smiled. "The chipped one will be fine."

Foster grabbed a bottle of rum from the cupboard and went to a small table sitting next to a potbellied stove in the center of the shack. He set down the chipped mug next to his own, then uncorked the bottle and poured some of the contents into each mug. He picked up a tea kettle from atop the stove and poured some hot water on top of the rum, then carried the mugs to Narando.

"Here you go," he said.

Narando grabbed the chipped mug and took a sip. "Ah, that hits the spot. Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Foster walked over to his cot and sat down on the edge.

"I'm much obliged to you, Mister Lee," Narando said. "I hope I'm not putting you to a lot of trouble."

Foster took a gulp of his drink, then wiped his mouth with the back of his grimy, deformed hand. "Aw, no trouble at all, Mister Ballinger. It's nice to have company for a change. And call me Foster." His eyes flitted over Narando's attire. "Those are pretty fancy duds, even if they are kind of soggy. Gambler's clothes. Is that what you are, a riverboat gambler?"

Narando nodded. "But I have a feeling it's not my forte."

"You sound British."

"Yes, on my stepfather's side. Mother was from Spain."

"So what are you doing in these parts?"

"Well, I got tired of living the life of a country squire in Yorkshire and taking handouts from dear old stepdad, so I thought I'd set out on my own and explore the land of opportunity. But I haven't found a calling that suits me. I played piano in a honky-tonk in New York for awhile and then I tried hoofing it in the Catskills with a Vaudeville troupe and then I ran a three-card Monte racket in Boston. But I'd always wanted to ride the riverboats so I came down here to the Big Easy." He smiled ruefully. "Unfortunately, I found out there's a big difference between life *on* the Mississippi and life *in* the Mississippi."

Foster chuckled. "How'd you end up in the drink?"

Narando shrugged. "Ran out of sleeves. And luck."

"Well your luck held up just long enough, I'd say. There ain't many people out and about this time of night, not on this side of the river. Only me. You're lucky I heard you over the scraping."

"Scraping?"

"Yeah. You know that dry dock we passed? I work in there, scraping barnacles off boat hulls."

"I see. Well I must say I picked an excellent spot to get pitched into the drink. It's the only smart move I've made tonight."

"Yep. A little farther downstream, or up, and I wouldn't have heard you at all."

Narando shuddered. "It was a narrow escape. One of several I've had lately." He leaned back, stretching out his long legs. "I suspect I've taken advantage of Lady Luck's generosity once too often. If I'm smart I'll head back home to England at the earliest opportunity." He took another swig of rum and shook his head. "Damned shame, though. When I left Yorkshire I vowed I wouldn't return till I'd made good. I wanted to prove something to my stepfather. Now I guess he'll have the last laugh."

"The last laugh," Foster said pensively. "You know, it's funny, but I never heard my father laugh. Not once."

Narando looked up, waiting for Foster to tell his own tale of woe. Instead, the lad abruptly stood up and headed toward the door. "Time to fetch more wood. I won't be gone long."

He left the lean-to, singing a song under his breath. Narando couldn't quite catch the words, but the tone was bluesy, the melody haunting. Soon the lobster boy returned with an armload of wood and dumped it on the floor next to the stove, then picked up a couple of pieces and tossed them into the firebox.

"That was a pretty tune you were singing," Narando said. "What's the name of it?"

Foster shrugged. "Ain't got a name. Just a little ditty I came up with on the fly. I make up songs all the time. Helps pass the time."

"You made that up yourself? I'm impressed. But I'm sure a lot of people tell you that."

"Not really. I'm by myself most of the time—an audience of one." He grinned. "But at least I never get booed."

"So you never get to share your songs with anyone else? Friends? Relatives?"

"Ain't got no kith nor kin. No friends, neither."

"Not even a lady friend?"

"Heh. You kidding? With a face like this? And these hands?"

"What about your coworkers?"

"Nobody works on the boats but me—and sometimes Mister Boelke, on the bigger jobs. He's my boss, and he don't cotton much to music. I gotta pipe down when he's around."

"I see. Well that's unfortunate. Those music hall warblers in the French Quarter have nothing on you."

Foster looked like he might be blushing—but with his lobster-red skin, it was hard to tell. "Aw, go on," he said.

"No, you go on. Sing me another one."

"I think you're tone deaf, Mister Ballinger, but here goes."

When the second song was done, Narando asked for a third.

"I'd like to oblige you, Mister Ballinger," Foster said, "but I gotta get back to work."

"At this time of night?"

"I like working at night. It's quieter." He grinned. "Most nights, that is."

Narando rose from the chair. "Mind if I go with you? You can sing some more songs for me while you work. In fact, I'll help you scrape the hulls."

"Shucks, Mister Ballinger, that ain't necessary. You've had a rough go of it. Just take it easy."

"But I'd feel better if I helped you out. The river took my money, but I've got to repay you somehow. I insist."

"Well, if it would make you feel better..."

Foster Lee led Narando back to the dry dock, a roughly constructed trench walled with logs, where a fishing boat sat atop six sawhorses. Foster nodded at a big scraping tool hanging off a peg on the side of one of the horses.

"That's what Mister Boelke uses during the day when we're working together. I use it sometimes, too, on the real thick stuff, but most of the time I just use these ugly mitts of mine."

Narando picked up the tool, eyeing the long, slightly curved blade. "Nasty looking thing," he muttered.

He went to the stern of the boat and took a few tentative swipes at the barnacles.

"You do that real good, Mister Ballinger," Foster said.

"You're too kind."

Foster went to the bow and began scraping away with his hands, singing another song as he worked. When it was finished, Narando asked for another. Five songs later, Foster had exhausted his repertoire. And Narando was just plain exhausted. But he kept going. For a few more fateful seconds.

"I must say, Foster, this is a lot harder than I ... OUCH!"

Foster looked up. "What's wrong? Cut yourself?"

"No, I skinned my knuckles. Dammit!"

Angrily, he tossed the scraper sideways, hurling it into the sand, and grabbed his bleeding fingers.

"My hand's cramping up, too. Maybe I'd better rest for awhile."

He turned toward Foster Lee. And realized the scraper had not landed in the sand after all; it had struck the lad in the back.

"Foster!"

The lobster boy was on his hands and knees, trying to reach behind him and grab the scraper's handle. The blade hadn't gone in too deep, though. Maybe there was hope. Narando dashed toward him—and stumbled, landing on top of the lad. The impact drove the scraper blade deep into Foster Lee's body, puncturing his heart. Foster let out one brief cry. Then silence.

Narando got to his feet, gaping at the blood gushing from the lad's misshapen back. He started to reach for the scraper's handle; thought better of it. He turned around and trotted to the short ladder leaning against the side of the dry dock, then climbed halfway to the top and stopped, looking left and right. The area was deserted. Nobody had witnessed the tragedy. Nobody but him. He climbed out of the dry dock and ran away as fast as he could, his feet leaving deep prints in the damp, clinging sand...

The image froze, then reverted to the original scene—Narando on the riverboat, playing poker. The color drained away—from the image, and from the flesh-and-blood face of the man looking at it.

"And so ends the short, sad life of Foster Lee," Stiffani said.

Narando snatched the card away from her.

"It was an accident," he said sullenly, crumpling the card.

"Was it? Well I guess that's not for me to judge." She began fanning herself with the remaining cards. "Isn't it sad that Foster Lee never knew what a gift he had for music? Of course he does live on in his songs. There's some comfort in that, I suppose. Yes, his songs are sung in vaudeville halls and barrooms throughout the United Kingdom, and in France and America, too. And the sheet music sells out at every shop that carries it. There's only one itsy bitsy problem. The name on the top of the sheet doesn't say Foster Lee. It says..."

"Stop it!" Narando said. "You've made your point. Now let's cut to the chase. What the hell do you want?"

"What do you think I want? Money."

He glowered at her. "So that's it! You're a blackmailer!"

"I prefer to think of myself as a keeper of secrets, sir."

He ripped the card into little pieces, then went to the wastebasket on the far side of the desk and hurled them into it.

"Now where's your proof?" he gloated.

She smiled placidly. "Oh, that's no problem at all, sir. I have a copy of that card."

"Hand it over."

"I don't think I want to do that, sir."

"You'd better, or you'll wish to God you had!"

"Uh uh."

He came toward her, arms outstretched, reaching for her throat. She lowered the fan of cards she was holding in her left hand, revealing an object clutched in her right: a four-barreled derringer.

"That's far enough, sir."

He stopped short, his eyes glued to the oddly shaped gun. "My, aren't you well prepared?" he grumbled. "You've got it all worked out, haven't you? Very clever. Maybe too clever for your own good."

"I'm always well prepared, sir. The copy of that card is tucked away nice and tidy in a safe deposit box at a local bank, and if I get knocked off, my solicitor will hand that card over to the proper people."

Narando snorted. "Who? The police? I've broken no laws. It was an accident, pure and simple. Or are you talking about the newspapers? The Times won't print some sensationalistic tripe based on Mumler mumbo-jumbo, and nobody of any importance reads the Tattler."

"I agree, sir. And it's such a bother to walk all the way to the police station or send a letter to the papers. Why should I go to all that trouble when I can just go downstairs and hand the card to your stepfather? He seemed quite pleased with my little parlor game the other night and I'm sure he'd love to see more—although this would be a far less pleasant tale than the bit of fluff I showed him before, wouldn't you agree?"

"You insolent little bitch! I'd like to..."

"Now, now. No point in calling names, sir. I'm just trying to better my lot in life, and if I have to bend the rules a bit, well ... how's that different from what you did on that riverboat, eh?"

"Don't compare yourself to me! You're nothing but a spy and a blackmailer!"

"Better than a plagiarist and murderer."

"I said it was an accident!"

"Very well, sir. And if I just happen to drop my copy of your card in your stepfather's lap tomorrow, that will be just an accident too, won't it?"

Narando struggled to master his anger, clenching and unclenching his fists as he eyed her throat. "Alright," he said in a tight voice, "you've got me over a barrel. How much do you want?"

"Ah, now we're getting down to cases." She pursed her lips and gazed toward the ceiling, doing the maths in her head. "Let me see. I'd wager Foster Lee's songs—I'm sorry, your songs—have made you a right tidy sum. I would guess ... oh ... twenty thousand pounds, give or take?"

"Twenty thousand!" He laughed bitterly. "You don't know anything about the music business, do you? I only get ten percent royalties and my agent takes a chunk of that, which leaves precious little for me. And it's nowhere near twenty thousand."

"Oh, I don't want it all sir. I'm not a greedy girl. I'll settle for much less. Say, five thousand?"

"Five ... five thousand!" Narando croaked. He staggered across the room and sank down on the end of his bed. "I can't believe this. I really can't! I thought I was through taking orders and being bossed around, and now it's happening all over again." He smiled mirthlessly. "But it isn't my stepfather this time. Oh no. It's a common servant! How could I sink so low?" He buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, I'm far from common, sir," Stiffani said. "In fact, I'm rather uncommon. Because I'm going to cut you a break, the kind you seldom get from someone in my profession."

He parted two fingers and peeked at her, with a desperate gleam of hope in his eye. "What sort of break?"

"I might reduce your fee to a thousand pounds. Maybe even lower. Would that dry your tears?"

He raised his head. "What's the catch?"

She stood up. "There's more to life than money, sir." She strolled toward the bed. "You can pay me in ... other ways."

She pocketed the derringer and began unbuttoning her blouse. Narando stared at her like she was a creature from another planet. Soon her black and white uniform lay at her feet. Her undergarments followed. She kicked them aside and lay down on the bed. Narando studied her over his shoulder, his eyes roaming over her body. It was a little thick, but still shapely, and if the lamp were turned down low, the ghastly scar on her face would be masked in shadow.

She gave him a saucy grin and spread her legs. "Care to make a deposit, sir?"

An hour later, Stiffani Voydalle returned to the servants' quarters, tiptoeing past her roommates' beds. Old Mrs. Browager was snoring up a storm and dead to the world, but Sessy Bleeft was instantly awake and sat bolt upright, her plump, babyish face full of eager curiosity. She had fallen asleep reading one of her penny dreadfuls, which lay open in her lap, and her glowstone lamp was still on, creating an island of soft light in a sea of shadows. She was only fifteen and still wore her hair in pigtails, and slept in jammies with little red dragons on them. But she was far from innocent.

"What have you been up to, Stiff?" she said in a raucous whisper.

"Nothing," Stiffani said. "Go back to sleep." She began undoing the buttons on her uniform.

Sessy set her dreadful aside, then pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. "So who were you with this time?"

"What makes you think I was with anyone?"

"Oh come on. I may not have your gift for the water bowl but I can smell a man a mile away and you've got the scent all over you."

"That strong, huh? Maybe I should take a bath now instead of in the morning."

"Never mind the bath. Tell me who you were with."

"No comment." Stiffani tossed her uniform onto a nearby chair and began wriggling out of her undergarments.

"Was it Morgan?" Sessy said.

"Are you kidding?"

"Askot, then?"

"No."

"Drake again?"

"Hell no!"

"Who, who, who?"

"Shush." Stiffani grabbed her nightgown from the foot of her bed and slipped it over her head.

"I know," Sessy said. "It was Himmel!"

"Oh heavens no!"

"Narando?"

"Shhh."

Stiffani climbed into her bed. A second later Sessy joined her, landing hard on the mattress and gripping Stiffani's arm.

"It was Narando, wasn't it? Wasn't it?"

"What makes you think so?"

"The way you said 'Shhh.' You had a certain tone in your voice."

"You're clairvoyant."

"I wish. Come on, tell me about Narando. How big is he? I bet he's really big."

Stiffani sighed. "Yes, he's big."

"As big as Drake?"

"Bigger."

"Oh God! How much bigger?"

"I didn't take a tape measure with me."

"Did he come right away?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"Oh, like he'd admit it!"

Stiffani plumped her pillow, fantasizing that she was holding it over Sessy's yammering mouth.

"So what's your secret with men?" Sessy said. "Why do they all want to bonk you?"

"It's my beauty. Men just can't resist me." She lay down and closed her eyes, hoping Sessy would take the hint. She didn't.

"It's a love charm, isn't it?" Sessy said.

"No, I sneak into their rooms in the dark and claim I'm you, and they're instantly overcome with lust."

"Oh hardy har har."

"No, really. They're always convinced I'm you because I yammer the whole time I'm with them."

"I don't yammer."

"Oh?"

"I do not yammer! ... So what's Narando like in bed?"

Stiffani shrugged. "Same as any man."

"Did he take you right away or loosen you up first?"

"Goodnight, Sessy."

"I bet he loosened you up. Did he use his fingers or his tongue? I bet he used his tongue. He's half Latin and they always use their tongues."

"Yes, he used his tongue. But he won't be using it again, because I bit it off."

"You did? Oh my God! Why? Were you in a paradox of ecstasy and couldn't control yourself?"

"The word is paroxysm, and no, that's not why." She sat up and grabbed Sessy by the shoulders. "I bit off his tongue because ... HE WOULDN'T SHUT THE HELL UP!"

Sessy pouted her lips. "There's no need to get nasty. I was just asking. Sheesh!"

She jumped to her feet, stomped back to her own bed and dove in. The lamp went out. A few minutes later Stiffani drifted off to sleep, serenaded by the sounds of Sessy playing with herself—"squish, squish, squish"—and mewling softly: "Narando ... Narando ... Oh God!"