

***Night Magic* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

Chapter One

From the gardenia tucked behind her left ear to the straps of her white high-heeled sandals, Dr. Daffy Brookes was the prototype of a sacrificial virgin. The chalk-white sun dress she'd dragged from the back of her closet was unrelieved by the faintest touch of color. It was only May, but in deference to a bone-dissolving heat wave, she'd refused to wear jewelry, or even makeup. Only her wild red curls—frizzing uncontrollably in the New Orleans moisture-drenched air—gave any hint that she wasn't a candidate for the stone altar.

Daffy wasn't sure why "sacrificial virgin" had come to mind when she'd glimpsed herself in the glass door of the French Quarter shop she was about to enter. She was too old and too exuberantly alive to be either a sacrifice or a virgin. But the idea had popped out of her subconscious like a piece of morning toast, and even if the description didn't quite fit, she liked it. The idea of ruthlessly squandered innocence increased the drama of what she was about to do. And Daffy loved drama.

Assessing her reflection one more time, she threw the door open, ready for anything.

The sacrificial virgin enters the abode of evil.

She had spent too many years training to be a psychologist, and then becoming one, to believe that evil existed outside the human mind. But for just a moment, she let herself wallow in fantasy.

The room was dark and smelled of incense. The drone of muffled drumbeats filled the air, and cobweb-embossed herbs hanging from the ceiling waved back and forth in the forced breeze of an air conditioner.

Standing on the threshold of Doctor Fantôme's Sanctuary of Voodoo, surrounded by sights, smells and sounds that were guaranteed to plummet visitors back to the days of Marie Laveau, New Orleans's most famous voodoo queen, Daffy decided that the atmosphere inside the shop was like the stuffed snake hanging from a moss-draped branch behind plexiglass in the far corner. The ambience could twine around you, squeezing and constricting breath until nothing was left, except feeling and instinct, and the very beginnings of terror.

Her own response fascinated her. This was just a shop, a commercial venture playing on New Orleans' history and mystique. Doctor Fantôme probably made a fortune trading on fear and passion. But how much more frightening would the shop seem if she weren't an emotionally secure adult with a firm grip on reality? How much more frightening, if she were only sixteen and emotionally fragile to begin with?

Daffy was well-rounded and rational. Yet her skin felt clammy, and her heart was beating faster and harder. Neither was due to the long walk down Rue Saint. . . Saint Something-or-Other. Sadly, she could see how an impressionable teenager like Jewel Martinez might be taken in by the Sanctuary's carefully manipulated sensual assault. The whole package was just clever enough to affect any susceptible, suffering soul.

Now she had to figure out how much it was affecting Jewel.

"May I help you?"

The voice startled her, although it made sense someone would be in the shop to wait on customers. She closed the door behind her and turned to examine the man sitting on a stool just three feet away. She nodded to acknowledge him. "I don't think so."

Talk about drama. The man—somewhere in his early thirties—was absolutely perfect for his role as merchant of voodoo secrets. She wondered how many unsuspecting female tourists had found themselves coming back to the Sanctuary of Voodoo again and again, just to enjoy his exotic allure.

This was no boy-next-door. Looking at him, it was clear that she wasn't in a shop selling Mardi Gras T-shirts or any of the Quarter's standard souvenirs. His thick black hair was neither long nor short, waving back from a broad forehead and accenting eyes as dark as midnight. His olive skin accented white teeth. And his mouth? His mouth was best of all. She had no trouble imagining his beautifully sensual lips forming any number of incantations.

She realized she was staring, so she turned a little to give the shop the same detailed examination. As she did, something nagged at her, something about the man, other than his suitability for his chosen occupation, strummed the strings of her subconscious. But when no tune emerged she forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand.

He spoke from behind her. "This place probably has everything you need."

His voice was deep and musical, and she thought the words were tinged with humor. Humor was probably a good sign. Maybe he didn't take himself or his voodoo mission too seriously.

She turned back to smile a little. "I'll bet you do. It seems very. . . complete."

He was smiling, too, a perfectly normal smile. It was a smile you might see anywhere—if it was your lucky day. The man himself might look as if he'd feel right at home chanting and writhing, stripped down to nothing except a boa constrictor necklace, but the smile told a different story. Daffy was intrigued.

She decided to keep the conversation flowing. "I don't know anything about voodoo. I just came in to soak up the air-conditioning, and maybe the atmosphere."

"There's plenty of that."

And he was the best part. His jeans were black and just tight enough. His T-shirt was black, too, stretched across a chest that was broad, muscular and almost surely tattooed. And his hands? His hands were long-fingered and beautifully shaped, but they were also smudged and stained, calling forth visions of voodoo potions and moonlight rituals.

Strangely enough, his hands, too, seemed familiar.

Tearing her gaze away, Daffy examined the room with the same attention to detail, beginning in the farthest corner.

"Don't you think the snake is a nice touch?" he asked. "That's *Li Grande Zombi*, said to be the holder of intuitive knowledge. She's used in rituals."

His voice came from right behind her. As a psychologist she could give lectures on the principles of personal space and the ramifications of invading it, but she felt only pleasure. And although she didn't believe in repressing emotion, this was one feeling she would have to file away and investigate another time.

She stepped forward a little. "Was the snake your idea?"

"I'm pretty sure Fantôme came up with the decor."

"Oh, you're not him. Fantôme, I mean." She was relieved.

"Nope."

"But you're right. The snake does add a certain panache." She moved closer for a better look. "It looks real."

As she said the words, a narrow tongue darted out of the snake's mouth, and its head began to wave from side to side.

She jumped back and put her hand over her chest. "Holy Mother! And now I see why."
"The air conditioner probably makes her sleepy. I bet that's the first time she's moved all day."

"Turn it up."

He laughed. "She's Fantôme's darling."

"Is she used for something other than putting the fear of God into tourists?"

"Catching mice at night. When he closes he puts a sign on the front door that says. . ." He made his voice low and ominous. "'Beware the Slithering Reptile.'"

"That sure beats Beware of the Dog."

"She's all the security Fantôme needs. And besides, what burglar wants to risk a voodoo curse?"

"I'd really love to know if you're kidding." Daffy wasn't sure whether the perfumed air or the persistent recorded thrumming was affecting her, but she was beginning to sway from side to side, along with the snake. Shaking her head to clear it, she wandered over to a set of shelves covered with apothecary jars and squinted into the gloom. The Sanctuary of Voodoo probably saved a fortune on electricity and window cleaning products. Still, the candles burning in glass jars were a nice touch. With their help she could almost see.

"So what do you think?"

"I don't know." She strained to read the labels. "John the Conqueror Root, Dragon's Blood, Love Powder, Boss-Fix Powder, Controlling Oil, Devil's Shoe Strings." She tried to think of a casual way to word a question. "I know some people actually believe in voodoo, but there can't be many, can there?"

"Judging by the people who flock through this door and leave with little brown packages, I'd say a good number."

Daffy dismissed his words. "Tourists. Tourists buying souvenirs to take home to friends." She waited just a fraction of a second before she added, "and people susceptible to this kind of thing. Like teenagers."

"You're not from New Orleans, are you?" He qualified his question. "Not originally, I mean. You live here now, have, in fact for. . ." He paused, his gaze drifting away from hers as if he was envisioning her past. "I'd say three years or so."

She faced him. Up close his eyes weren't black, but the darkest velvet brown, and now that they were focused back on her, shining with good humor. "You tell fortunes, too?"

His lips curved into his trademark stunning smile. "You'd be surprised what I could tell you."

"How did you figure that out?"

"Any New Orleanian has seen voodoo and hoodoo at work, whether he recognizes it or not. Most do recognize it, though, even if they don't believe it."

"Hoodoo?"

"A little different, but in Louisiana voodoo and hoodoo are entwined, and it's hard to tell one from the other. Gris-gris and little cloth dolls? Mostly hoodoo. But let's go back to you."

"You're serious, aren't you?" Daffy moved a little closer. He was probably just average in height and slender, too, which still made him inches taller than she was. But the height and weight were deceptive. Something about the way he stood made it clear that taking care of himself on the New Orleans streets was never a problem.

"You come from. . ." he hesitated. "You come from all over. You've lived in twenty, no twenty-one different states, and you've called every one of them home."

She tried not to show how impressed she was. She tried not to *be* impressed. "Twenty-two. You forgot Montana, but that's all right. We didn't live there long, and I was only five."

"I usually forget Montana. I don't know why."

She was hooked. "Tell me, if voodoo is so common here, why haven't I heard of it before this?"

"Before what?"

She turned away. "Before coming here."

"Ah, but you didn't just happen to come here. You're here to find out everything you can about voodoo because. . ." He stopped, then shrugged. "I don't know why."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"It must have something to do with one of your patients."

Daffy spun around, and as she did, one of the clumps of dried herbs hanging from the ceiling fell at her feet, stirring a cloud of dust. She sneezed three times before she could speak. "How do you know I have patients?"

His eyes sparkled. "My uncanny insight. My voodoo powers. Also the identification badge on your handbag."

"Duh." She looked down at her own laminated photo labeled with her name and City Hospital identification number. "Some detective I'd be."

"Was I right?"

"You got it."

"And not a medical doctor." He lifted a finger in the air. "A psychologist."

She knew when to change the subject. Jewel Martinez's story wasn't something she could discuss. And at this point she wasn't sure the Sanctuary of Voodoo was innocent in whatever was troubling the girl.

She swept her hand, encompassing the entire shop. "Tell me what all these things are used for."

"It depends." He hooked his thumbs in his pockets and let his gaze roam over her face. "The Sanctuary of Voodoo has something for everyone."

She didn't miss his appraisal or its effect. Under different circumstances she would have been captivated by her own response. Now, she was only annoyed. "Well, give me an example. What do people use these little dolls for? I'm guessing they're made in Hong Kong."

He followed her to the display of cloth dolls carefully segmented by lines, each section numbered. Included inside the plastic packaging were multi-colored pins and instructions on how to use them. Exactly where to stick the pins for a desired result seemed key.

"This is the kind of thing tourists buy," he said, opening one so she could read the directions.

Daffy scanned it before handing the paper back to him. "Doesn't this worry you?"

"Should it?"

"You can't really believe that sticking pins in a miniature Raggedy Ann doll can give anybody power. Power comes from within."

"Haven't you ever had a new dress that made you feel like a queen?"

She knew exactly where he was leading. "That's not the same thing."

"Maybe not exactly, but when you wore that dress, you probably felt powerful, and that made you act powerfully."

"Power and aggression are different. Completely different. People stick pins in these things hoping to harm others."

"No, that's the voodoo of popular culture, and, of course, Fantôme would never recommend anything like that."

"Of course." She dragged out the last word.

He grinned. "The other side of voodoo is friendlier. Take this for instance." He touched Daffy's arm and guided her across the room. "Here's something every woman might need to know one day."

She read the hand-lettered sign out loud. "Bind-A-Man: Essences of vanilla, verbena, vetiver. . . What's vetiver?"

He uncorked a vial below the sign and held it under her nose.

She almost choked. "Is that a lure or an anesthetic?" She waved the scent away and continued reading. "Wintergreen, lovage and follow-me-boy water. I can see how this place makes its money."

"You're not in the spirit."

She continued reading. "Anoint a white candle with each individual oil, then with follow-me-boy water. When properly anointed, burn candle in a bed of white sand until it's extinguished. Remove wick and crumble remaining wax into the sand in fine particles until no longer visible. In the bedroom, scrubbed clean of dirt and hair, sprinkle the sand in concentric circles on each side of the bed." She looked up. "After all that scrubbing, too."

"They say love's worth working for."

"What red-blooded man would follow any woman into a stinking room covered with sand?"

"Depends on the woman."

"Or the man." She paused. "And how desperate he is."

He grinned. "I know for a fact you don't need anything like this yourself. I see a man in your life." He closed his eyes momentarily.

"Daffy couldn't help but smile, too. "This ought to be good."

"A tall man with brown hair and a gentle smile. He works with you."

The man was obviously Jeremy Miller. "What else do you see?"

"I see you earlier in the spring, sitting side by side in St. Louis Cathedral, holding hands like teenage lovers. I see. . ."

The truth was as spontaneous as the ray of sunshine that finally defeated the filthy Sanctuary windows. Both had taken their time breaking through.

"You were in Sam and Antoinette's wedding! You know, if I weren't so jaded, I might actually have wondered if you could read my mind."

He opened his eyes, then he winked. "Admit it. You thought you'd discovered a psychological phenomenon. Something you couldn't explain."

"Listen, I can explain very little. I couldn't begin to explain the existence of this place, for instance." Daffy was delighted she'd been so thoroughly fooled. "Now I remember you. You're Sam's friend. Um. . . Scooter."

"Skeeter."

"Skeeter. You know, my instincts are usually more productive. I knew there was something about you that was bothering me. But you looked so different at the wedding." She tilted her head. "What's your real name?"

"With a name like Daffy, you can ask?"

She was surprised he'd remembered. Her nickname wasn't on her badge. She closed her eyes, the way he had. "I see a man with hair to his shoulders, and. . . a moustache? Dressed in a

dark suit and a white shirt standing at the front in St. Louis Cathedral. The suit's been worn before, but the shirt's obviously new, so new in fact that the man keeps fiddling with the collar. In fact, I predict that the shirt is now in the very back of his closet."

"So it is."

"The man stands at the back of the church afterwards, and I'm about to be introduced to him. I think, how interesting. I wonder what his name is, and then, I find out."

"And?"

She opened her eyes. "And then I wonder how such an interesting guy could have been named after the world's most annoying insect."

"Second only to a giant flying roach, another Louisiana staple."

"Your nickname says nothing about you. Everybody who knows me says mine fits perfectly."

"So I was told."

She wondered why he'd been told anything. Even more intriguing? Why had he remembered? "What else were you told?"

"That you were dating the man with the sweet smile, along with several others."

She thought she might be catching on. That he'd found her attractive on that day six weeks before was encouraging. "Sam told you that?"

"Sam and I have been friends since we were kids."

"Well, did he also tell you I wasn't serious about any of the men I was dating, and that the one with the sweet smile is a colleague and friend only?"

Interest sparked in his eyes. "Sam was a bundle of nerves. He couldn't concentrate long enough to elaborate."

"Really? Evidently he told you my life history, leaving out Montana."

"No, only that you're not from here and that you've lived all over. The number of places was a lucky guess."

The shop door creaked. Daffy glimpsed a dark-skinned man in his fifties carrying a white paper sack. Skeeter, who was between them, raised his hand in greeting. "Fantôme."

Fantôme strolled toward them. "I would have starved if you hadn't volunteered to let me slip out for a sandwich." At the sound of Fantôme's voice, the snake began to slither to the top of its branch.

Skeeter nodded in Daffy's direction. "Doctor Fantôme, meet Daffy Brookes. We're old friends." He stepped aside, giving Daffy a clear view of the other man, who was a definite disappointment in the drama department. Dressed in conservative slacks and an ivory dress shirt, he looked like any middle-aged businessman. There was no mystery in the balding head or the bulge of his belly.

Fantôme nodded. "Welcome to my Sanctuary."

"Right. Thanks." Daffy caught Skeeter's eye. "You don't work here?"

"Disappointed?"

Fantôme had already gone to check on his snake, and Daffy leaned closer to Skeeter. "Relieved," she said softly enough that only he could hear. "What *do* you do?"

He held up his hands. "Can't you tell?"

The smudges were suddenly as ordinary as paint. She smiled at her own imagination. "You're an artist. Now I remember. When we were introduced Sam mentioned that, and I noticed what beautiful hands you have. You're a police artist."

He laughed. "No chance of that. I do portraits at Jackson Square."

"Not true. I remember what Sam said. You've helped more than once on his cases. That makes you a police artist, even if you won't claim it."

"I only do that as a favor to Sam. Believe me, the force would *never* be with me."

She groaned. Fantôme saved her from commenting. "Skeeter, you're sure I can't pay you for your time?"

Skeeter waved aside the offer. "But I do have to set up over at the Square." He nodded to Daffy. "Are you going to stay and soak up more atmosphere?"

"No, I've seen enough." She waited until he and Fantôme had said their goodbyes before she stepped out to the sidewalk. The glare of sunshine and impact of heat and humidity made her wince. "I think I almost prefer that crazy place."

"That's saying a lot."

"You don't work there at all? No connection? You just happened to walk by, and he pulled you in to make you mind the store while he went for lunch?"

"Evidently you need to be absolutely sure I have nothing to do with the Sanctuary of Voodoo."

Daffy moved farther from the door. "Frankly, that place gives me the creeps."

"You know it's supposed to, right?"

"Fantôme has succeeded beyond all expectations."

He touched her arm. Casually, briefly, and she still felt the impact. "Which way are you walking?"

"Down to Canal to catch the streetcar back to work."

He started in that direction, too. They walked along the flagstone sidewalks under iron lace balconies that were the hallmark of the French Quarter.

Skeeter stayed close to her side. "Fantôme commissioned a portrait of Marie Laveau to hang in the shop. I delivered it this morning, so I volunteered to stay while he picked up his lunch. His assistant is out sick."

"Well, you missed your calling. You were great."

"Think so?"

"Much better than Fantôme himself. He looks like an insurance salesman."

"Insurance wouldn't be nearly as lucrative. When I told him what I was going to charge for the painting, he didn't flinch. Of course, I may find one of those little dolls in my bed. With a pin straight through its heart."

Daffy realized just how much she was enjoying their conversation. "Skeeter what?"

They crossed a narrow street, stepped past a crowd of giggling teenagers, and then another group of young men who had clearly spent some time in the Bourbon Street bars.

"Harwood," Skeeter said, once the sidewalk was clear again. She felt a return of physical awareness. Only now that she wasn't dealing with a voodoo priest or entrepreneur, the awareness had quadrupled.

"I know more about you than I said." Skeeter pulled her to one side to let a trio of tourists stomping out of a shop pass by before he continued. "I know you work with Antoinette at Psychologist Associates. You're a Gestalt psychologist."

"I use anything that works."

"An eclectic psychologist."

"That about covers it."

"What I don't know is what you were doing in the Sanctuary of Voodoo. Some people get a charge out of dabbling in the occult, but I'm guessing you're not one of them."

She debated how much she should say. She was surprised she wanted to share her reasons with Skeeter. Two of the people whose judgment she trusted knew him well, even if she didn't, and they had invited him to their very private wedding.

"I have this client," she began. "A sixteen-year-old girl who's suffering from depression. I can't get through to her."

"I'm guessing eclectic or not, you weren't planning to use voodoo as a last resort."

"Wouldn't it be terrific if we could just go down to the corner store and buy remedies for our personal problems? It's no wonder voodoo is as popular as you say."

"We could get rid of anybody we didn't like, seduce anybody we wanted to, and live in health and happiness until we died of old age."

She pushed the part about seduction out of her mind, where it had immediately started to root. "Those kinds of easy solutions have tremendous appeal, especially to people who feel they lack personal power."

Skeeter's answer sounded as if it came from personal experience. "And teenagers always feel that way."

She nodded, even though he wasn't looking at her. "Just about. They're caught between childhood, when their parents made all the decisions, and adulthood, where they will have control over their lives."

"Sometimes adults have control," he said. "But plenty of adults have given it up. Isn't that why we have prisons and psychiatric institutions?"

"Partly maybe. Anyway, my client doesn't want to be in therapy, but her parents have insisted. We've made so little progress, but yesterday she did a strange thing. And that's what led me to the Sanctuary today."

"What was that?" He sounded genuinely interested.

"She came into her session with a small paper bag, like she'd been out shopping. When she left, she picked up her purse, but she didn't pick up the bag. She left it there. I didn't notice until she was gone."

"Doesn't that happen pretty often?"

"Maybe. But as a therapist, I have to assume that nothing that happens in a session is accidental. On some level, I think she wanted me to see what was inside that bag."

"Which was?"

"Another bag, only this one was cloth tied with string. Inside was a mixture of herbs of some kind, a rock, what looked like hair clippings. The only other thing in the paper bag was a receipt." She paused for effect. "From Doctor Fantôme's Sanctuary of Voodoo."