

Eternally Yours 03

Dead Easy

by

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When a tourist drops dead at her table moments after she predicts that he'll live a long and happy life, psychic Celeste Deveaux begins to doubt her magical heritage. That is, until she hears the dead man speaking to her...

[Chapter One](#)

Celeste Deveaux squinted at the wavering sunlight in her crystal ball. "I sense a long and happy life for you, Mr. Goebler. Love, fortune, good health..."

She stopped as her client made a gasping sound. Then he crumpled onto the cobbled surface of Jackson Square, clutching his chest.

Celeste barely hesitated before dropping to her knees beside the

German tourist, loosening his tie, checking his airway. Her dark, competent hands glittered with multiple rings and bracelets — silver, brass, wood, shell — which she didn't wear just to tell fortunes. She poured drinking water onto the hem of her mudcloth skirt to use to pat Mr. Goebler's face and slipped a pinch of salt from the bowl on her portable altar onto his lolling tongue. This would not be the first time a visitor to the Big Easy had passed out from heat stroke.

But she quickly realized this wasn't heat stroke. She looked up at the gathering crowd of tourists, street performers, venders and fellow psychics. "Someone call an ambulance!"

"I did," said another psychic, Madame Cassandra. Celeste called her MC because of the girl's youth. MC, though something of a loner, was so good that she'd probably called for help even while Celeste had been promising Mr. Goebler the world. "They'll be here any minute. But it won't help."

Celeste's client had gone quite still. Deadly still. His eyes stared up at a Louisiana sky he could no longer see.

"Like hell it won't." And Celeste began CPR. But she couldn't ignore her gut, clenching with guilt and horror.

She couldn't ignore the awful thought, her second in recent weeks, that she might be a fake.

* * *

Ambulance duty wasn't all excitement — a majority of the calls ended up providing taxi service for senior citizens, back and forth from retirement homes to the hospital. Too many of the remaining calls were the kind of tragedy no man enjoyed facing.

Like this morning.

When this call came in from Jackson Square about a heart attack, male, mid-50s, Ben Steadman felt glad for the distraction. He hoped it would be a taxi-service call. He hoped he would see Celeste Deveaux.

He would rather not have found her forcing textbook CPR onto a dead man, her beautiful mocha face and warm, brown eyes stricken. It took all Ben's self-control to focus on the victim, so clearly beyond help.

"Stand back, everyone," he commanded, carrying the trauma kit to where Celeste knelt over the victim. His partner, TiJohn Craddock, repeated the warning as he wheeled in the stretcher. "Give us some air. *Chère*, you're done. It's time for us to take over."

Maybe it wasn't the most professional way he could've addressed a witness. Certainly not a regal woman in her 30s like Celeste. They'd only dated for two weeks — two magical, unexpected weeks — before she'd used some psychic excuse to call it off. She'd broken...

No, not "broken his heart." Not after just two weeks. But she'd sure bruised it.

Now, as her brown eyes lifted and found his, Ben questioned how honest her own heart had been with the both of them.

Witnesses were talking over each other, describing what had happened. It sounded like a classic heart attack. Ben barely registered their words beyond that.

"Celeste," he tried again, catching her braceleted wrists. He gently pushed her back then began unbuttoning the man's shirt. "I'm going to shock his heart. You have to let go."

She searched his face, then blinked — and, thankfully, her gaze cleared. She nodded and crabbed along the cobblestones to give him

and TiJohn the room they needed.

"Charging," said TiJohn.

It wouldn't do any good — this guy's tour of New Orleans was permanently over. But policy was policy. Visitors to the city would rest safer, knowing the EMTs gave their all.

Ben took the paddles. "Clear!"

* * *

Celeste wished someone other than Ben had responded. Watching him work, competent and kind and as handsome as she'd remembered, hurt too badly. She felt too vulnerable, wishing for the familiar harbor of his strong, solid arms.

But it would be a lie. Ben didn't believe in her — not all of her, not the way a Deveaux woman needed. The fact that she'd begun to question herself recently only made his earthly skepticism more dangerous. To her. To her family legacy.

Of all her cousins — four of them, as had been prophesied — Celeste had been the only one to embraced their destiny. She'd grown up in the manor home that had once belonged to Jonathon and Solange Deveaux. She had visited their graves, and she'd memorized their story, and she knew only magic could vanquish the evil that had threatened them. So she *had* to believe in her abilities.

Doubts against magic were like Kryptonite against Superman.

Ben was her Kryptonite. Tall, dark, earthy Kryptonite.

"Clear!"

She could not bear to watch them shock poor Mr. Goebler again, so she buried her face in her hands. A long and happy life? What had gone wrong? Nothing about this prediction had felt different from a lifetime of others. But nothing had seemed unusual several days ago, either, until she learned that her favorite uncle had been murdered — and she'd sensed nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

What if she'd always sensed nothing? What if she'd been making it up all along, and her entire adult life had been a fraud? What if Ben was right about magic and she'd lost him from pure, blind foolishness? What if —

"I think I have something for you," said Mr. Goebler in his distinctive German accent.

With a gasp of relief, Celeste looked up. Ben had done it! She *wasn't* a fraud! Mr. Goebler would live a long and happy life after all!

So why were they lifting the tourist into a body bag?

* * *

"Wait!"

Ben felt a jolt unrelated to the defibrillator he'd used on the dead tourist. It was Celeste's hand, catching his forearm. "Didn't you hear him? He's alive!"

Damn. He hated anyone thinking there was something he could have done...or not done. He covered her hand with his. It wasn't like Goebler needed more of his attentions. "No, *chère*. He's not."

She snatched her hand free and squared her shoulders. Now *that* was his Celeste. "Oh yes he is. I heard him clear as day."

Ben noticed TiJohn, clearing the paper and plastic remains of their lifesaving efforts, looking skeptical. Ben shook his head at his partner in silent warning.

Celeste frowned. "You really didn't hear him?"

Rather than argue across the corpse, Ben leaned back from the unzipped body bag to reveal Goebler's lifeless face. "He's not saying much."

Celeste stared. Surely she could see the truth of it as easily as Ben did, even without emergency medical training. She withdrew her hand from his arm and said, "Oh."

"There's nothing you could have done," said Ben.

Celeste said, "Nothing except see it coming."

"You're not a doctor."

"No." She lifted her chin. "I'm a psychic."

Ben knew better than to touch that argument. The last time he'd suggested there might be more pragmatic explanations for what she thought to be magic, she'd dumped him.

That's why it surprised him so much when she whispered, "At least, I thought I was."

Chapter Two

Of course her dead client hadn't spoken.

Celeste had to get out of there. Away from the pitying looks of the other French Quarter psychics. *Definitely* away from Ben the sexy EMT. A few months ago, she'd thought he might be the love of her life. Ben was handsome, competent, tender, upbeat...a man who could root her in reality while allowing her to spread her mystical branches to the sky.

Then she'd learned he didn't believe in mystical branches.

Only her lifelong belief in the Deveaux legacy had allowed her to leave him, all the same. Bad enough for him to question her back when she'd felt sure of herself. But if he expressed skepticism now, while she was suffering her first real doubt...

She wasn't sure she could bear it. Not after Mr. Goebler had died as she was predicting a happy future for him. And not after her uncle Harold...

No. She couldn't think about that yet.

Celeste quickly packed her portable altar, refusing to look back at Ben, the ambulance or the body-bagged corpse that had been Mr. Goebler. There were plenty of other practicing psychics in Jackson Square...probably better psychics than she was.

Stop it, she told herself.

Still, she would not be hurting anybody by leaving early.

When she hefted her pack and finally glanced toward the ambulance, it was quietly pulling away. Ben was driving, not looking at her. Good. She wasn't sure her heart could take more of his temptingly pragmatic presence. Not this week. Maybe not in this lifetime.

Not that her heart was completely happy with Ben's absence, either.

She sighed and headed home.

Celeste was house-sitting the Garden District manor home where she'd grown up. Usually she loved the French colonial house, with its balcony-wrapped courtyard and sprawling oak trees. Climbing its worn stone steps felt like going back in time.

Today, she hardly noticed.

The first floor, where she shrugged off her backpack and kicked off her sandals, was more modern than the rest of the mansion. Traditionally, first floors had been kept plain because of regular flooding. Other than a quick glance at the answering machine, Celeste barely paused before climbing a spiral staircase to the second floor.

There, in the ornate parlor that had changed little in the past hundred years, she found what she needed — the wall of family portraits. Wedding portraits of her parents, her aunts and uncles, her grandfather Robert and his beloved wife. One happy group portrait of her three female cousins and herself twenty years ago, then ranging in age from four to fifteen. And, most important, the full-length portrait of the quietly beautiful Solange Deveaux.

Their great-grandmother.

As a child, Celeste had been drawn to Solange because of the lady's caramel-colored skin, a hint that she, like Celeste, might have a mixed racial background. Celeste was proud of both her Caucasian father's

heritage and her Black mother's, but from an early age she'd been frustrated by portrayals of one group as the power holders of history, the other group as the victims. That was a truth that must be honored, of course; one that must never be forgotten. But she'd sensed even then that it wasn't the *only* truth.

Solange's bravery proved that. And the fact that wealthy white businessman Jonathon had not only married a woman of suspect background, but proudly displayed her portrait without trying to disguise her dusky complexion, made Celeste proud to be a Deveaux.

After her uncle Harold began to tell her just what being a Deveaux entailed — especially the importance of being one of four female descendents — Celeste began to visit Solange's portrait for a whole new reason. Solange had descended from a long line of powerful magic users, Uncle Harold had told Celeste even before he gave her a copy of the original journals. Because Solange rejected her magic for love, an ancient talisman in her protection was stolen by an evil wizard bent on destruction. Only Solange's heroic death had prevented disaster beyond imagination. But since the Stone of Power had been broken into four pieces, scattered across the world, the Deveaux legacy would not be finished until four female descendants lived at the same time, embraced their magic and found the fragments of the stone.

Celeste had loved hearing Uncle Harold tell those stories. But now Uncle Harold was dead.

"Why didn't I know he was in danger?" she asked the portrait now. "He was your *grandson*. If I'm so magic, why wasn't I able to warn him?"

Solange's image gazed sympathetically at Celeste and said nothing. After all, she'd been dead for almost a century.

Uncle Harold, though, had died much more recently. Celeste should have sensed that something was wrong, hopefully in time to warn him,

certainly when he died.

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Instead, her first indication of trouble had been a telephone call from her cousin Rory. Uncle Harold's lawyer had contacted her because "Aurora" came first alphabetically. So it was Rory who had to call the others with news that not only was Uncle Harold dead but that he'd not allowed them to be informed of it until after his funeral. Since only one of them needed to collect their uncle's effects, and Rory lived the nearest to his North Carolina home, it made sense she do it. Right?

Celeste's attention drifted from Solange to the picture of the four young cousins. Ironically, redheaded Rory — the closest in age to Celeste — was the one cousin in complete denial of her Deveaux powers. Skye, the youngest, had grudgingly accepted her ability to read people's thoughts. Even Eve made a conscious effort to hide that she could move objects with her mind, which, to Celeste's way of thinking, was a backward admission. But *Rory*...?

Shadow crept across the room. With a shiver, Celeste looked up. Through the doors and casement windows that opened to a wraparound gallery overlooking their private courtyard, she saw that the Louisiana sunshine had been usurped by a threat of rain.

Worse, she thought she heard something.

A whisper. A voice.

A *man's* voice.

The unexpected death of Mr. Goebler this afternoon, and the recent murder of her favorite uncle, seemed to echo through the lonely house. Nobody was completely safe, were they? Celeste always thought her sixth sense would warn her to danger, but what if Rory, and Ben

Steadman, had been right?

Celeste pivoted to eye the open windows and doors. Seeing nobody, she backed toward the stairway. Just in case.

Then she heard it again — somehow warped, like a voice through water, but definitely male. Definitely impassioned.

Celeste's gaze lifted to that of her painted ancestress. Trying to call on the power of the Deveaux women, she raised her shaking voice. "Who are you? What do you want?"

For a moment, all she heard was the wind in the oak trees, rushing through the Spanish moss, and the sudden patter of rain. Then —

"Hurry," a man said, from the shadowed courtyard. "I have something for you."

Celeste recognized his voice, his German accent. She ran. She ran down the stairs, out the front door, into the rain and down the street until she reached a café. Then, breathlessly asking permission to use the telephone, she dialed a number she should have forgotten months ago.

If anybody would know whether Hans Goebler had been revived on the way to the morgue — and was now capable of stalking her — it would be Ben Steadman.

Chapter Three

Ben deliberately relaxed his hold on his cell phone for fear of crushing it. "No, Celeste. Mr. Goebler's still dead."

"Oh," she said softly.

More than her story that she was being stalked — by a man he knew was dead — the weakness in her voice worried him. He said, "I'm coming over. Stay out of the apartment."

"I'm not at my apartment. I'm staying at my parents' house."

"Give me the address."

To his relief, after a pause, she did. She trusted him *that* much anyway.

Celeste agreed to stay at the café where she'd taken shelter from rain and stalker both. Ben supposed she should have called the police, instead of just waiting for him. But he knew Celeste Deveaux. When she refused something, it was an absolute refusal.

Which made his continued interest in her pretty sad. Hell, he should have been surprised that she would leave the café and slide into his passenger seat when he pulled over to the worn curb.

"Where's the house from here?" he asked, trying to ignore how good she smelled, how great she looked. Bad days like today needed women like Celeste.

Priorities, Steadman. Intruders first.

"Just a couple of blocks."

Following her directions, Ben realized how well-off Celeste's family was. The Garden District was the old family, blue-blooded stretch of New Orleans. Was that the real reason she'd stopped seeing him? *Money?*

Something in his gut, which he would call instinct and she'd probably call a psychic hunch, made him refuse to believe that of her. "Tell me again what this person said?"

Celeste nervously rolled bracelets around her dusky wrist. "He said he had something for me. That's the same thing he said back in Jackson Square."

"Before the heart attack?"

She fixed him with brown-eyed skepticism. "After the body bag."

That again. "The man didn't say anything after I got there with the ambulance, Celeste. He was DOA."

She stared at him for a long moment, then turned away. "Here."

He parked under a feathery mimosa tree. "Stay here while I check it out."

Celeste let herself out. "No."

Damn. The way Celeste Deveaux threw herself headlong at life, courageous and wild and wonderful, had been one of the first things to attract Ben to her. He tried to remember that as he followed her up the worn stone steps to the first floor gallery. "At least let me go first."

She glanced regally over her shoulder, rain or no rain. "You know your way around my house?"

Ben sighed defeat. At least he was here. With her.

Hopefully with no psychotic crazies pretending to be dead men lurking nearby.

* * *

Celeste knew they wouldn't find anyone. Ben's honesty was one of the first things to attract her to him. If Ben said he'd left an irrevocably dead Mr. Goebler at the morgue, it was true.

So why was he still here?

Maybe it was because the only other explanation was more than even Celeste wanted to face alone.

"Just because someone had a German accent," said Ben, his looming presence warm and strong right behind her, "doesn't mean he was Goebler."

"It was Goebler," she said.

"I made some calls on my way over. Goebler's emergency contact was his brother." He let her lead him through the first floor, sometimes stopping so he could open a closet door or check behind a curtain.

Celeste liked watching him confront each threat, fearless. "So?"

"So maybe it was his brother you heard." He leaned into the downstairs pantry, then levered himself out, shaking his head. "Maybe *he's* the one stalking you."

That was a more practical explanation than hers. But... "I don't think so."

"It would explain his voice sounding like Goebler's."

"Why would he come after me?" Other than that I promised his brother a long life, right before the man dropped dead. But even if this brother

knew that — and how could he? — why would he target *her*? "I didn't cause the heart attack. I even did CPR."

Ben shrugged. "Let's check upstairs."

Celeste even let him lead the way, *up* being an easy enough direction. "Where is this brother anyway?"

"Well, uh..." Ben's step slowed as he topped the stairs. "I think the authorities reached him in Germany."

"*Today*? So he couldn't be here yet. Your it's-his-brother theory doesn't make sense."

"As opposed to the maybe-he-isn't-dead theory?" Ben blew out an exasperated breath. "Or are you going to try to tell me —"

He stopped, eyes widening as he figured it out. "You think a *dead guy's* talking to you?"

"Well, I heard Mr. Goebler." She planted her hands on her hips. "Twice. And you say he's been dead both times. So, Mr. Logic..."

Ben touched her shoulder and guided her to a high-backed Victorian sofa. He even crouched beside her. "It's been a bad day, *chère*. Let me take you out to eat, and it will all make better sense."

"It already makes sense. At least, it does if you're a Deveaux." A simple glance past his broad shoulder, to the portrait of Solange, confirmed that. A woman needed her magic, love or no love. "Thanks for coming, for checking things out, but it doesn't look like we'll ever see eye to eye on this."

In fact, they *were* eye to eye. That's how she saw a glint of frustration in his gaze. Or was it anger? "I'm not done yet. Someone could still be

hiding in one of the bedrooms or the courtyard."

Or in the realm of the dead? Celeste felt suddenly weary. "Knock yourself out."

With a sharp exhale, Ben straightened and began looking around. Celeste stayed seated, increasingly sure he would find nothing more than a beautifully kept manor home. She had to accept the truth.

The dead man's ghost was talking to her. But why?

Eyes closed, she listened to Ben's footsteps along the gallery, past the open plantation shutters. He was so solid, so...ordinary. From the moment she'd seen him, clean-cut and broad-shouldered and clear-eyed, she'd wanted him. It didn't make sense. Why would she of all people want ordinary?

Then again, Solange had wanted ordinary. And look what had happened.

Celeste opened her eyes and saw that the rain was stopping, just in time for sunset. She stood and went to the doorway overlooking the tropical courtyard. The kindest thing she could do for both of them was to send Ben away, and yet —

As if a slant of orange light carried special energy, Celeste caught her breath. She felt an unexpected rush of despair, loneliness, longing. Ben. *She had to find Ben!* She couldn't lose him, had to reach for him, touch him, one more time....

Celeste bit back an instinctive cry and stumbled backward, into the parlor. The most intense rays of sunset faded behind the roof and, somehow, her despair eased.

She sagged against the ornately papered wall, confused by the flow and ebb of such rich emotion. "What am I going to do?" she whispered,

opening her eyes to the portraits lining the parlor walls.

For a moment, sound seemed to stretch, to stutter, to buckle. Then, as evening's shadows fell in a final curtain across the courtyard, she heard it.

"Listen to the dead, chérie."

It was a woman's voice, not a man's. And it wasn't German.

Of course! Celeste had never had such a strong psychic hunch, so powerful it felt like hearing someone, but she wouldn't question it. She hurried to the verandah rail.

"Ben? I'm going out. Lock up when you're done, okay?"

She felt surprised to see him directly across the courtyard, outside her bedroom. Just to make sure nobody's there, she sternly told herself, angry at her disappointment.

He called, "You're what?"

But there was no time to explain — the dead man's voice had said to hurry.

"I'm going to the cemetery!"

Chapter Four

Once they reached the St. Louis cemetery, Celeste was glad Ben had argued himself along. And not just because the NOPD officer watching for vandals and Voudoun wannabes gladly looked the other way for an EMT.

The place was spooky at night!

Row after row of above-ground crypts varied from white to water-stained gray. Intricate black-iron fences surrounded some. Amidst the tombs and funerary lurked moldy stone figures — angels, infants, saints — to guard the dead.

Or to guard *something*.

Celeste had walked the age-worn path to the Deveaux tomb, under an arching palm tree, more often than she could remember. Usually she found the cemetery comforting, even companionable. Tourists came and went to see the grave of "voodoo queen" Marie Laveau. Mourners sometimes danced past after funerals in Big Easy style, celebrating the passing of their loved ones to a better life.

Now, with the cemetery closed to all but a few "ghost tours" for the night, their only company in this city of the dead was the singing of crickets and toads and the peripheral noise of urban sprawl. Occasionally, a ship's horn wailed, mournful, off the Mississippi.

Deveaux or not — if it weren't for Ben, beside her, Celeste would fear this place.

Especially one statue in particular.

She'd never known what the life-size figure in eroded marble was meant to represent. He wore ceremonial robes of some sort, but did

not look like a priest or saint. He sure wasn't an angel — not with the grimace on that worn stone face. His hands extended toward the sky, as if they'd once held something.... Flowers? A crucifix? She couldn't tell. Nor could she decide which of the nearby crypts belonged with him. As they passed the shadowy stone figure, she shivered.

Ben put a hand on her back, strong and comforting. But he said, "I don't like this."

She tried not to arch into his touch. "I didn't invite you."

He took his hand back. She missed it. But if she let him go on touching her, heaven knew what mistakes she would make. Luckily, they reached the looming crypt of Solange and Jonathon Deveaux, a solid reminder of why she had to go on missing Ben. If Celeste gave up her magic for love, as Solange had, she might suffer similar consequences. The quest demanded more of her. Her *blood* demanded more.

She reached out, spread her hands against the mottled stone. If she was supposed to listen to the dead, she couldn't think of a better dead person to access than her great-grandmother. She took deep breaths. She closed her eyes, arched her head back and focused. And focused harder.

And she heard crickets. Toads. A tugboat.

A big, fat pile of nothing.

Normally she would open her mouth and just say whatever came into her head, assuming it must be a psychic message. Recent events, like the unexpected deaths of the German tourist and her uncle Harold, tightened her throat with uncertainty.

She opened her eyes and saw that Ben was taking a closer look at the empty-handed statue.

"Don't touch that!" Now *that* felt like a psychic impulse.

"Why not?" asked Ben, glancing back over one broad shoulder. He was bigger than the statue. And it was inanimate, right? He could take it.

"I don't know." But she felt relief — again — when he shrugged and left the statue to go look at a sculpted lamb.

Celeste laid her hands on the crypt, closed her eyes, arched her head back, took a deep breath and waited. Waited. Waited for...

A siren wailed by, somewhere toward the west, and car horns honked.

She opened her eyes. "Crap."

"No voices from beyond, huh?" Ben's smile looked smug — and Celeste lost it.

"This is why I didn't want you to come here tonight," she said, despite how comforting his presence had been. "This is why I stopped dating you. Your disbelief in what I can do puts out an energy that keeps me from being able to do it."

Ben took a step back. "All I said was —"

"You didn't have to argue it. You think it, and that's enough! You may be perfect in every other way, Ben Steadman, but you're still a skeptic."

"I'm perfect in every other way?" Damned if he wasn't smiling again. Worse, it was a truly sexy smile. That's all she needed. More distraction.

"You don't understand how *precarious* all this is! It takes the right atmosphere to try to get a clear psychic reading. You and your doubts

cloud everything."

He'd stopped smiling, which felt like a mixed blessing. "You really think the reason you aren't chatting with dead tourists is because I don't actively believe you can chat with dead tourists?"

"That's exactly what I think! I've been trying. Hard. And nothing's happening! It's not like I can just say, 'Dead people, talk to me!'"

Which was when her head exploded.

At least, it felt like her head exploded. It was voices. From the cemetery, and the city beyond. From the present, and the past. Louder than a rock concert. More disorienting than a roller coaster. All clamoring for her attention.

"...get to tell my daughter I love her..."

"...it was George who did it...he lied...."

"...stop that shouting and let a fellow sleep...."

Celeste dug her hands into her hair, clutching her skull — or she thought she did. She couldn't be sure. This felt like being pushed in a hundred different directions, a thousand, by unseen hands. No, by the rush of unseen voices. This felt like drowning.

"...wasn't supposed to get the Mercedes..."

"...how dare they? How DARE they..."

"...shut up, you mulatto bitch...."

Someone was shaking her, shouting her name, but Celeste had no attention left to give that. The voices had swelled into a roar, like in a

football stadium, one great voice, until she could no longer make out words — only noise and desperation. She was drowning, suffocating, unable to tell which way she had to swim for the surface of her consciousness. Then, as shadows roiled in on every side, one voice cut through with familiarity.

"...you invited them, my darling. Silence them!"

Somehow, Celeste knew it was Solange. She clung to her great-grandmother's voice as she might to a single hand in a current, and she tried. She made her mouth move, though unable to hear herself over the tumult.

"Only... those..."

An edge of the din faded. She could hear Ben asking, "Celeste, what's happening?"

It was just enough of a lull for her to catch a breath and try again, with more conviction. "Only those with messages for *me*," she murmured. "For Celeste Deveaux. I allow only you."

And the voices stopped. Most of them.

Into the dizzying peace, the voice she thought was Solange's said, *"That's my girl."*

Then the German-accented voice of Mr. Goebler said, *"You must hurry. He is coming."*

And one more voice, as unexpected as the realization of Ben's arms around her, whispered with childlike sincerity. *"Please tell Mr. Steadman it's okay,"* it said.

"I know he didn't want to kill me."

Chapter Five

And to think, he wasn't real comfortable with Celeste's delusions of magic. How small-minded of him.

Right.

Ben was halfway to the parking lot, carrying an unconscious Celeste — and not in a fireman's hold — when she opened her eyes. "No."

She'd been babbling other things, so he ignored her. Despite her strong pulse and respiration, whatever she'd tried hadn't gone well.

Then her eyes fluttered open, and she nudged his shoulder with the palm of one hand. "*No*," she repeated, stronger. "Ben...stop."

He'd never been so happy to hear a woman tell him to stop. He'd never been so tempted to ignore one, either. "Let's get you to the emergency room first."

"No! What just happened — I have to think. Solange...." And she began to fight his grip on her.

Well, *that* wasn't safe. He lowered her feet to the grass, but he didn't want to let her go. When she sagged in his grasp, though, he wished that weakness weren't his only reason to go on holding her. "*Chère*, you've had some kind of episode —"

"I've had some kind of *epiphany*," she corrected him, still leaning into his chest, using his strength to stand. "It was... Oh, Ben, my word..."

She smiled up at him, shadowy and beautiful. And he thought, just like the first time he'd seen her, I could love this woman.

Fat lot of good it did him.

"Whatever that was, it wasn't healthy. One minute we're talking; the next you fall like a cut tree. Even if whatever dropped you wasn't dangerous — and I don't know how it wouldn't be — you could have hurt yourself in the fall. Cracked your skull on a tomb, or landed on one of those iron spikes." Or worse. God knew he'd seen it all.

"But I didn't."

"Would you please face reality this once? For me?"

Well, that finished off her smile. "*Reality?*"

Here it came again. "I don't care what you believe, *chère*. I really don't. But when you start endangering your safety —"

"Oh? You never go into a dangerous situation after someone who was hurt?"

Of course he did, whether his captain liked it or not. He'd gone into burning buildings. He'd crawled under unstable wreckage. Once he'd dived into the Mississippi — a river notorious for not giving up those she took — after a drowning woman. But it was his job. "That's different."

"Bullshit." She pushed herself away from him — and swayed.

He caught her and lifted her back into his arms. Whatever she'd done

had taken all her strength. "I'm giving you two choices. Either I take you to the emergency room, or I take you home and spend the night."

Tired or not, she arched her eyebrows at that. They'd never gotten to the spending-the-night stage of their courtship earlier that year. Only as far as incredible kissing on sofas. He'd thought they had all the time in the world....

He reached the parking lot. "You know what I mean."

To his relief, Celeste closed her eyes in defeat. "Fine. Take me home. I don't... I don't think I need to be here for it to work anyway."

Ben wanted to say, For what to work? He didn't.

He suspected he wouldn't like the answer, and Celeste didn't look up to another fight.

* * *

I hear dead people.

Exhausted, Celeste didn't protest while Ben strapped her into the passenger seat or drove her toward the Garden District. Too much had happened.

She couldn't quite face the ringing memory of their voices just yet; her head hurt too badly. But something even worse lurked just under her thoughts, waiting to be faced. What she'd just experienced, in the cemetery, had been overwhelming. Unique. Powerful.

Like nothing she'd ever felt before. *Ever.*

Which said what about her lifelong insistence that she could tell futures?

How often had she argued with Rory about getting a dose of their great-grandmother's magic? She'd felt so righteous, so in touch with her Deveaux heritage. But what if Rory had been right, and she'd been wrong?

Okay, not wrong about having special powers. But wrong that she'd been using them all her life. Wrong about what they'd been.

Until now, she'd dismissed incidents when her predictions didn't come true as anomalies. She'd rationalized her ignorance of major events as the discretion of the universe. She'd never actually charted her success rate; that seemed too skeptical. Like she'd told Ben, even a hint of disbelief might affect the *precariousness* of what she did.

Now she had to wonder what the success rate was of someone *without* the power to tell the future...and how she would have measured up.

It was embarrassing, is what it was. Not only had she acted magicker-than-thou to her cousins, but she'd dumped Ben because of his own doubts. And now...

She slid a glance toward Ben, where he was steering his truck with the ease of someone used to handling emergency vehicles — fearless, competent and yet cautioned by what he'd witnessed of other people's recklessness. Through her exhaustion, two thoughts reigned supreme. One was the continued refrain of "I'm a medium."

The other was, "Damn, that boy's hands are sexy."

She didn't need magic to predict danger here. Solange and Jonathon's example still warned her from this kind of romance. And then there was that little girl's voice, talking about Ben killing her....

Now there, *Celeste* was skeptical. But if someone came back from the

dead to tell her, then it had to be important, right?

So why did she hold her tongue while Ben stopped the truck and came around to lift her out, back into his arms? Was it because, for the first time in her life, she didn't want to rock the boat? Or was it because she was too happy reaching out, draping her arms over his strong shoulders, giving herself over to his earthy strength?

Oh, heavens, but she wished things could have been different between them.

Ben let them both inside with her keys, then even carried her up the stairs, impressing her even further.

"Where to?" he asked as he carried her onto the gallery, and she realized that he hadn't known which bedroom was hers.

"That way." She pointed her toe in the right direction. "Across and one over."

He carried her to her room, settled her onto the bed, then kneeled beside her to take her hand. For a moment, that felt touchingly romantic. Then he touched her wrist and glanced at his watch. He was just taking her pulse again.

Even she could tell her pulse was strong. Maybe it was a reaction to her proximity to all that death, back in the cemetery. Maybe it was just Ben. But Celeste felt increasingly powerful with every breath. Alive, and anxious to stay that way.

Whatever Ben saw in her gaze, when he glanced up at her, seemed to make him uncomfortable. He looked quickly away and released her wrist. "I wish you'd go to the hospital."

Celeste caught his hand to keep him from standing, from leaving her. Otherwise, he would probably go lie down on the sofa or something

similarly heroic.

His gaze shot back to hers as she said, "I wish I knew how to convince you to believe in magic."

Ben took a deep, shaking breath. "Like this, maybe?"

And he kissed her.

Chapter Six

Ben knew this wasn't the kind of magic Celeste had meant. But he couldn't imagine how any human could long for more.

He tightened his hold on her, wanted never to let go. From the way she furrowed her fingers into his hair, using her grip on his neck to lever herself up against him, she didn't mind. At least not for the moment.

"Perfect," she murmured, in a gasping moment before their lips reunited.

God, he'd missed kissing her. He'd missed her spicy scent, the strength of her arms around his neck, the taste of her lips, her mouth. Celeste really was magic, supernatural or not. Her optimism was magic, and so was her courage against convention and graveyards and everything else. She brought an exotic wonder to everything she did. Too often in his busy life, he forgot to look up, look at the stars. Celeste got him to do that. Hell, she was a universe all on her own.

She curled downward into the cushion of her bed, pulling invitingly on

his shirt, hooking a leg around his. Ben slid over her, onto her, testing the curve of her hips, her waist, her heavenly, womanly bosom. He loved the confidence with which she opened her mouth to his, opened her body to his, opened her heart....

But she *hadn't* opened her heart. They'd skipped some serious steps here. Despite how fervently she was returning his kisses, nothing had changed since their breakup. Celeste was just disoriented from her episode in the cemetery. Loss of consciousness did that to a person. And he was taking advantage.

Only that realization gave him the strength to draw back, to lever himself off of her, to stop kissing her. "No...."

"Yes." Celeste curved her fingers around his ear to draw him back down.

It wasn't his ear that ached to obey, but fair was fair. "*Chère*, this isn't right. You're exhausted."

She slid her fingertips from his ear across his jaw, her lower lip protruding in a way that would have looked pouty on a lesser woman. On Celeste, it looked blissfully dangerous. "Ben," she whispered, "I am so *not* exhausted."

His only choice was to roll off of her and the bed entirely, onto his knees on the rug. He did so before either of them could change his mind. "You lost consciousness. That's the only reason I'm here."

Did something flicker in her gaze? "Is it?"

He would have to know the answer to that himself before he tried giving it to her. "If there's something real between us, it will be real tomorrow, too. Tonight, you rest. Period."

He hoped she didn't call his bluff. If she really wasn't exhausted, and came after him, he doubted his willpower could withstand much more of this. Not after months of remembering her, dreaming about her, wishing things could be different....

Could they be different?

He didn't dare hope.

To his mixed relief, Celeste sighed deeply...and in that sigh, much of the strength seemed to drain from her body. She rolled onto her side to watch him, and the way she tucked her hands under her head, the way her eyelashes dipped, told him he'd made the right decision. She *was* tired. She'd just been willing to ignore it.

"Have you *never* done the wrong thing?" she teased — and he thought about that morning, the start of his bad day, and quickly stood.

"I'll go find a sofa."

"Please don't."

He hesitated.

"You're here to watch over me, right? How can you do that from a different room?" Celeste extended a hand. "Please, Ben. You're right. I need to rest, to think, to...to *ground*. But it would really help if you stayed, just for now. More than you can know."

He reached for her, took her hand — and was lost. Maybe he could keep from kissing her again, keep from climbing back into her bed. But as he adjusted himself on the floor beside her, watching Celeste close her eyes like a child pretending to nap, Ben knew he was lost all the same.

Maybe she *had* just bruised his heart last time.

If she left him again, it would definitely be broken.

* * *

"No!"

Celeste sat up in bed, certain that she was about to lose something. Something precious beyond money or words or even life. She'd almost been able to reach it, to brush her fingertips to it — *no, to him* — when a flash of light stole it away.

Panting, she reoriented herself and saw that Ben was gone. Damn. She'd slept better than she could remember and not, she thought, because of how much her brush with death had drained her. It had been Ben's hand curled around hers, anchoring her. It had been his protection, his concern.

She shook off the worst of her nightmare, and heard a crackle. A piece of paper lay on the coverlet beside her. In the pale dawn light, she read it. *Had something to do before work. You're beautiful when you sleep. Call me.*

She smiled. Then she realized the full implication of the dawn. No! "Solange?" she called.

Her voice echoed back at her from the empty house.

Maybe she'd been wrong last night, and she really did need to be in the cemetery for this to work. She didn't think so. Celeste got out of bed and circled the verandah to the parlor entrance, then looked at her great-grandmother's portrait. "Solange? I have so many questions for

you about what's happening to me...."

But she got no response. Solange's ghost only wandered by night; that was part of the curse. Her true love, Jonathon, wandered by day — but he was no magic user. Celeste fought back the temptation to call on him just to see if it worked; if last night was any indication, this new skill of hers took energy.

Instead, she tried a safer route. "Does anyone here have a message for me?"

"Hurry."

It happened that quickly. She started to turn in the direction from which she thought she'd heard the voice. Then she remembered it wasn't coming from a standard direction. "Mr. Goebler — I'm so sorry I gave you a bad reading. I don't think I understood my true powers until —"

"Hurry!" repeated the German voice, faint and broken but recognizable.

Which, of course, had been what he was saying all the time. "Of course I'll hurry," said Celeste. "But what is it you want me to do? You say you have something for me, but how could you? We only just met."

"I think I chose you for a reason beyond knowing." Goebler's voice seemed to fade in and out, like losing a radio station. *"I think I have something for you. But..."*

His voice, his signal, wavered.

"But what?" demanded Celeste, raising her own voice as if that would help. "Why do I have to hurry?"

She thought she'd get no response. Then, thinner than a whisper of wind on a July day, she heard a breath of "... He's coming...."

"Who? Who is coming?"

Receiving no response, Celeste hurried back for her bedroom to shower and change into clean clothes. She had no idea what was happening, but she'd been around psychics long enough to know that a woman was a fool to ignore a summons like she'd gotten.

Besides, whoever was coming, it didn't sound good!

When Celeste arrived at the city morgue, the only place she could imagine finding Mr. Goebler, she encountered two surprises.

One was a German man who looked just like her late client, signing paperwork.

The other was Ben Steadman, slumped miserably against a hallway wall, his forehead braced against his clenched fist.

Chapter Seven

Celeste's steps slowed, there in the morgue corridor. She looked toward Mr. Goebler — no, his brother...who would probably also be named Mr. Goebler, wouldn't he?

Then she looked toward the man she might just love.

She'd never seen Ben look so upset, not about anything. It unnerved her. She'd come to think of him as solid, eternal, unbreakable.

Then she felt ashamed of herself. He'd spent most of yesterday taking care of her problems, and she'd never once asked if he was facing any of his own. Not even after that little girl's voice had told her . . .

Oh, heavens.

She glanced toward the German man — then hurried to Ben's side. "Ben!"

He looked up, surprised. For a moment before he reset his expression, she thought she saw pain in his eyes. "Celeste, what are — How'd you find me?"

"I think . . ." The words came more easily than any psychic reading. "I think I came here for a reason beyond knowing. What's wrong?"

He drew fingers across her cheek, as if taking some kind of comfort from her presence. "You don't want to hear it."

"Yes." She caught his hand in her own, but only to comfort him. She was no longer confident in her ability to get psychic impressions. Not unless someone dead was giving her inside information. "If it's important to you, of course I want to hear it."

But even after hearing that voice in the cemetery the day before, she wasn't ready for his full admission. "I think I killed a child yesterday morning."

* * *

To Ben's relief, Celeste took his announcement with surprising calm. "How could you possibly think that?"

For the first time, he was glad she could believe in something with little or no proof. He was glad she believed in *him*. But was she right to?

"It was our first call — a five-year-old in long-term hospice, with a high fever. It turned out to be septic shock. She'd been chronically ill for a while. By the time we got there, she was going into multisystem failure...."

From the way she searched his eyes, sympathetic but momentarily blank, he realized he was using shop talk. "Her kidneys, liver, lungs, heart...everything was shutting down. She didn't respond to IV fluids or oxygen, so our only hope was getting her to ICU as fast as possible. TiJohn was driving, and I had to make a call of how much more antibiotics — and what kind — her system could take. And I held back."

She'd been so very little, even for her age, wasted to frailty. And he'd already given her antibiotics, as well as vasopressors to raise her blood pressure. The hospital had been two more minutes away....

"I was afraid more medicine would kill her. Instead..." His throat tightening, he just shrugged.

"It's okay." Celeste's words held a confidence that he didn't understand, one that soothed him even more than the coroner's initial report that they'd found no evidence of liability. He hadn't been worried about being sued. He'd been worried about being incompetent.

To his surprise, she took his jaw in her hands and turned his head toward her. "Look at me, Ben. *It's okay*. You didn't kill her."

Somehow, he did feel better, despite Celeste lacking any training in emergency medicine.

Then she had to go and say, "She told me so."

* * *

"Do you never let it rest?" demanded Ben.

Celeste blinked up at him, startled by the force of his anger. "Let what rest?"

"This game you have, where you talk —" He lowered his voice, either from embarrassment or respect for the people in the corridors around them. "Where you talk to the dead."

"It's not a game."

"No," he said. "No, it's not. Games are fun. This is sick."

"Sick? Do you realize the *gift* this is? Even if you realize, in your soul, that our loved ones are still part of our lives, that's not the same as getting proof. And now I've got better proof than I could have ever imagined —"

"Fine," challenged Ben, folding his arms. "If you can really do this, tell me what else the girl said. Tell me what color hair she had."

"Right here in the morgue?"

He raised his eyebrows, stubborn. Celeste had gotten challenges like this before; what psychic hadn't? They usually annoyed her. Then again, maybe on some level she'd feared her own abilities...or lack of them.

Now she sat on one of the hard plastic chairs, rested her hands on her knees, palms upward, and whispered, "Will you talk to Mr. Steadman again, honey?"

There was no moment of suspense. Immediately the voice said, *"I've got black hair. Like yours. And lots of braids, with dragonflies on them. The nurses gave them to me."*

"Braids," repeated Celeste, though it felt more like translating, with many strobing images overlaying the otherworldly sound. "Dragonfly barrettes. She spent a lot of time in hospitals, and the nurses gave her pretty things. She was tired of being sick. She wanted to go on."

Ben sat down, two chairs away from her. Hard.

"My mommy was sick and went away, but she was waiting for me. Now I don't hurt no more. I didn't mean to make anyone sad, though. Tell Mr. Steadman I'm sorry for making him sad. He was real nice to me."

"You called her *princess*," continued Celeste as she heard more, smiling slightly at the pleasure the child clearly took from the endearment. "You told her you'd make her all better. And she says you did."

"She died."

More than anything, the fact that Ben was responding to her — to what she was receiving — encouraged Celeste. Maybe he could believe in her after all. Maybe.

"The girl is with her mother," she insisted now. "She's not sick anymore. Death isn't an ending, just... a passing."

"My brother," said a familiar, accented voice, "would have enjoyed this."

The little girl's voice and thoughts faded from Celeste's focus — it had been time for her to go play with her mommy anyway. But Celeste felt

startled all the same.

From the way Ben's eyes widened, he, too, saw the similarity between yesterday's DOA and today's bereaved brother, who had come closer during her reading.

"Forgive my interruption," the blond man said. He stood with the tight expression and posture of someone still in the early stages of grief, doing his best to function past it. "It's just that Hans enjoyed the mystical arts. He wanted to go on ghost tours while he was here, and visit voodoo shops, and see psychics. But, you see, he died yesterday... I can only hope he got to do some of that first."

"He did." With one last glance toward Ben, Celeste stood and offered her hand. "I was with your brother when he died, Mr. Goebler. I — I'm afraid I turned out to be a terrible psychic. I told him he would have a long life, and now..."

To her surprise, the German smiled. "Perhaps that was for the best. What finer last words to hear, eh?"

Celeste tried to smile back, but it felt somehow blasphemous. Just because she'd learned to speak to the dead hardly robbed death of its sting. Loss was loss, especially when fresh.

"I am sorry to seem — how do you say? — morbid," continued her client's brother. "But did Hans go quickly? Was there any pain?"

It was Ben who offered "No." To Celeste's relief, he stood behind her and offered his hand. "Ben Steadman. I was with the ambulance that responded to your brother's heart attack. Miss Deveaux here had started CPR almost immediately, and even that wasn't enough. We can all hope to pass that quickly."

Goebler nodded, clearly grateful. "Thank you. Thank you very much for this kindness, to myself and to Hans. I... It is perhaps silly, but I

would like to give you a gift."

Her? As he reached into a plastic bag, the kind that held personal effects, Celeste started to say, "I couldn't."

Then Goebler extended to her a piece of smoke-colored stone with at least one smooth edge, at least one jagged. Instinctively, Celeste opened her hand and took it when offered.

The rock felt warm in her hand. That, even more than the mystical symbols engraved on the smooth side, convinced her of just how fortunate her meeting with yesterday's client had been.

"He called it his lucky rock," dismissed Goebler. "It is just something he found in the Alps. I know he would like someone who appreciates such trinkets to have it."

Trinkets? Celeste knew better.

It was a fragment of the Stone of Power.

Chapter Eight

"I have to ask you something," said Celeste, once Mr. Goebler had left them. She hadn't yet put down the "lucky rock" he'd given her. "And it might be the most important thing I've ever asked you, for more reasons than you may understand."

Well, that put the pressure on. "Try me," said Ben.

"I need to know if you believe in magic." Celeste's gaze lowered to the stone in her hand. "Because I have to get this fragment someplace safe, and I need help doing it. And because..."

The longing in her regal face was palpable, and Ben wished he could say he'd been wholly convinced. He'd come close; since her revelations about yesterday's sepsis victim, he could see benefits to believing the way she did. But people didn't shift their grasp of reality in one morning, did they? And if her question was that important — as important as she was — he had to answer it honorably.

"I believe you believe."

Celeste couldn't mask her dismayed expression.

"And that you were doing *something*," he added quickly. "I'm still not sure what it was, but I'll help you anyway. Isn't that enough?"

Celeste's grip tightened around that rock shard. "Enough for one reason."

But she looked heartbroken all the same.

* * *

Ben was being great. When she asked him to find someone to cover his shift at work, he did, no questions asked. Her need was apparently good enough for him.

At least she had an escort, strong and competent, to drive her and her piece of the Stone of Power home. Celeste wasn't sure what might happen en route. But *something* out there wouldn't want the Stone's fragments brought together. Better to be safe than sorry.

So she had an escort. But she didn't have her lover.

Despite a reading that should have convinced anybody, he still didn't believe in magic.

On the drive home, she told him the story of the Stone of Power — of Solange Deveaux giving up her magical responsibilities to marry. Of the tragedy that befell the world because of it. Of Solange's sacrifice to hide the powerful artifact in pieces until not one, two or even three Deveaux women could protect it, but a necessary four. Of the prophecy.

When she finished, Ben said, "No wonder you believe this stuff."

But he still didn't say *he* believed it. That was enough for him to help her bury her treasure in the safest place she could think of — Solange Deveaux's rose garden.

But it wasn't enough to risk the Stone's future.

"That should keep it safe," said Ben, shoveling the last of the dirt onto the now-buried fragment. He'd taken off his shirt to dig. His chest gleamed with sweat, and the muscles in his arms stood out from the effort. Dark hair hung damp into his face. He'd never looked so gorgeous — or so unattainable. "Against dark wizards *or* mice."

Celeste couldn't smile at his joke. Not when that need of his, to offer rational explanations, was costing them so much.

"So," asked Ben. "What do we do now?"

Celeste stepped forward, framed his damp face with her hands — and kissed him. Deep, long, needy. She might have to lose him, but not without a taste. Not without knowing what she'd sacrificed.

When Ben's arms closed, hard, around her, she tasted more fire than ever in his returned kiss. His body was strong and hard against hers. His need for comfort, for solace, for her was as real as hers for him. She wouldn't deny them this, anyway. Not today.

Ben drew back from her, just far enough to meet her gaze with silent, blue-eyed questions. Celeste nodded, and they went inside — and they made love.

It was more powerful than anything she'd ever known...even the Stone of Power. Maybe because she knew it was the only time. For the sake of her heart, of the Deveaux legacy, even of the world, she could not forsake her duty as Solange once had.

But for the first time in her life, falling asleep in Ben's arms, Celeste wished she were ordinary.

* * *

"You are a fool."

Celeste's eyes opened, startled out of sleep. Late afternoon sunlight slanted through the plantation shutters of her bedroom. This time Ben was there, his arms wrapped around her like a child with a beloved teddy bear. Now she *knew* he held her heart, because she could feel it breaking.

Had someone said something?

"I cannot believe my grandson could sire such a fool."

It was not Solange's voice — not during the day. It seemed to waver from distance and effort. But her very cells recognized it. "Jonathon?" she whispered to her great-grandfather. "Is that you?"

When he replied, his voice — or thoughts — seemed stronger. Celeste was beginning to realize that the main trigger to this ability of hers was simply to ask.

"You don't understand anything," he said.

That didn't sound good. But with reluctance, she slid carefully from the weight of Ben's arms. How little rest had he gotten, taking care of her yesterday and last night, that he still slept so soundly? He looked solid, dependable and more. He looked vulnerable.

She thought of their lovemaking. How could she leave him again?

She remembered the Deveaux legacy. How could she not?

Hurrying now, because she couldn't bear to leave him otherwise, Celeste wrapped herself in an embroidered, Persian robe and padded around the gallery to the open parlor doors. Somehow she knew that was where she would best connect with Jonathon.

Surrounded by the images of people they both loved.

"What don't I understand?" she asked, now that she was sure she wouldn't wake Ben. "What have I done wrong? Is the rose garden not a safe place for the fragment? I know I have to unite it with the other pieces, but until we find the rest —" *if* they found them "— it should be someplace safe, shouldn't it?"

Instead of instructions about the Stone of Power, though, Jonathon Deveaux said, *"I loved Solange from the moment I saw her, and I have loved her ever since."*

Confused, Celeste turned to look at her great-grandmother's portrait — and at the smaller photograph of the tall, handsome man and his son, taken some years after her death. "How could you not?"

"More surprising, she loved me. She loved me enough to forsake her powers and her ancestral responsibilities for me."

Which was what had started it all. "I know. But she was wrong."

"Yes," agreed the polished Southern drawl. *"She was. But her mistake was not her love, but her fear."*

What? Celeste shook her head, confused.

"Did she think me deaf and blind? I knew the rumors before marrying her. Though I did not understand it all, how could I not love anything that was part of Solange's life? No, she did not forsake her powers for me, but out of fear. And now you threaten to do the same."

"But I'm not afraid!"

"You are afraid that by loving this mundane healer of yours, you will risk the family legacy. Don't you understand, Celeste? Look at the faces on this wall. How can you not see?"

Celeste did as told, looking from one Deveaux face to another. Couples. Families. Babies. Friends. Cousins. All of them happy, powerful. All of them...

"Loved," she whispered. And even without hearing a reply, she sensed an easing of the tension that had vibrated around her as she spoke to Jonathon. Or maybe it was the easing of a tension that she'd held inside for far too long. "Love is the power. It's the ultimate good. Whether or not Ben believes —"

"Believes what?" Ben stood in the doorway, tousled and confused and shirtless and gorgeous. Realizing that perhaps she didn't have to leave him made him all the more wonderful. "Are you talking to dead people

again?"

"I thought you don't believe I talk to dead people," she challenged — but with a laugh.

Ben rubbed a hand across his face, clearly still waking up. "I never once said that," he reminded her. "I just question whether they talk back."

But it didn't matter. Celeste ran to him, wrapped her arms around his waist, lifted her mouth for a kiss that he gladly gave — and it was okay.

Better than okay. Perfect.

"Ben," she whispered, curling into him as if born to be held this way. "Do you believe —"

He groaned.

She nudged him with her naked knee. "Listen. Do you believe in eternal love?"

Then she leaned back from him, to better watch his face.

Ben cocked his head at her. Then he said, "Yes. Yes, I do."

"I'm thinking you need to prove it to me," she said.

He grinned. "Gladly, Celeste Deveaux." And he kissed her while the sun set, and she felt no desperation at all. In fact...

"Jonathon..." breathed a familiar woman's voice in Celeste's head.

"Solange! I love you."

"Always... Soon..."

Perhaps this was a longer moment of transition than the cursed couple usually got. Had Celeste and Ben's love won them that? Perhaps, once she called Rory and Skye and Eve, love could even win Solange and Jonathon their freedom.

Celeste leaned her head on the strength of Ben's shoulder, content. The sun would rise again.

It always did.

The End



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