

# **THE SWAMP IS FULL OF MYSTERY**

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[Acknowledgements](#)

[Chapter One: A Day in the Life](#)

[Chapter Two: Erase and Rewind](#)

[Chapter Three: The Usual Suspects](#)

[Chapter Four: Cry Me A River](#)

[Chapter Five: Blurred Lines](#)

[Chapter Six: Rolling in the Deep](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Connect with the Author](#)

[Other Releases by this Author](#)

[Check out Alex Apostol](#)

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y'all.

## **Chapter One: A Day In The Life**

“I can’t believe you brought me here to be healed by some wild-haired crazy old lady!” Roy Lestrangle complained to his mother as she pulled him impatiently along.

“I told you, she’s not just some old lady; she’s a witch and she can make you better.”

“The fact that you believe in witchcraft Ma... I mean this is 1989”, Roy complained even as he followed her through the trees to the ramshackle house he could see. It looked like it was standing strictly by the grace of God or maybe some magic the witch was using to hold up her residence. Roy didn’t get it; if she had access to all this magic and shit why didn’t she imagine herself a mansion and a fortune? Why live like an animal in the middle of the bayou with her equally crazy granddaughter?

His mother reached the door, she hesitated, shooting him a glance tinged with apprehension before extending a hand slowly to knock softly on it. They shifted from foot to foot, waiting for someone to come to the door. It was opened by a wizened old woman with a halo of grey hair; she smiled at them in welcome as if she'd been expecting them...

“Come in”, she said and led the way into her house. Roy was expecting to see the skulls of babies decorating the mantelpiece, maybe with snakeskin covering the walls. But no, the furniture was threadbare yet neat. An aubusson rug, old but well kept lay on the living room floor. The couch was covered with throw pillows and a crocheted cover. There were outdated pictures on the wall of men and women dressed in old fashioned clothing. A tantalizing smell of freshly baked something emanated from behind the wooden kitchen counter. Roy's mouth watered, and he

wondered if the witch would offer them something to eat before the day's business began.

She led them past the living room however, toward some narrow stairs. They led up to an attic where all the *good stuff* was. Animal skulls, and chicken feathers, an altar with the requisite freaky statue on it. The statue was surrounded by offerings of rice and tobacco, black coffee and yams, a straw hat and a cane, pennies, palm oil and roses. *This* was more like Roy was expecting.

“What can I do for you?” The witch asked startling Roy with the soft, compassionate nature of her tone.

“My Roy is sick Nannane. Could you heal him?” His mother asked hands clasped and stretched forward in a pleading way.

The witch held out her hand to Roy, and he understood that she wanted him to put his hand in hers. He was scared

though; he didn't want to do it. With his mother's narrowed eyes on him though, he felt he had no choice but to clasp her hands with his own. She closed her eyes, humming softly under her breath. A warmth suffused the area where her hands touched his and it slowly began to permeate the rest of him. He felt his body relax into languid peace while his eyes closed of their own volition. It was like receiving the gentlest massage in human history.

“You have the wasting disease”, the witch intoned, “What are they calling it these days... AIDS?”

Roy jumped in shock. *Nobody knew that; nobody said that...not out loud.* His mama didn't know, she couldn't have told. How had this witch guessed? He opened his eyes and snatched his hand out of hers, standing quickly to leave. His mother was watching him; a sad look in her eyes. The witch's eyes were serene. She sat watching him, waiting for him to do what he would.

“How do you know that?” He whispered.

The witch just smiled slightly and held out her hands, “I don’t know if I can heal you; that is not in my hands. But I can make you feel better,” she said.

Roy just stared at her, “You can’t... tell anyone. You can’t...”, he stammered.

The witch shook her head, “My work is just as confidential as any priest... or doctor. You need not worry that anyone will know of your illness from me.”

“What can you do for me that the doctors can’t?” Roy demanded.

The witch shrugged, “The doctor gives you medicine for your body. You should continue to take those. I deal with a more holistic approach – your soul, your mind and your body – I call on the healing spirits to help you to feel better,

and give you herbs to help your body and soul open to that healing spirit.”

“I don’t believe in that mumbo jumbo,” Roy said belligerently.

“Indeed”, the witch said, seemingly unperturbed.

“Roy, will you sit and let the lady do what she can for you?” His mother’s voice was low yet stringent and strained with emotion.

Roy stared back at her with a frown but the habit of obedience was long ingrained and he sat back down, “Okay”, he said meekly.

The witch lit the candles on the altar and lifted her hands up chanting:

*“Papa Legba!*

*Papa legba open the gate for me.*

*Antibon legba please open the gate.*

*Legba open the gate for me and I will thank*

*The lwa when I return.”*

Roy waited for something to happen, maybe a bright light to appear in the statue's eyes or something. Nothing did though, but the witch seemed unperturbed. She leaned forward, lighting a fragrant leaf on the candle and waving the resultant smoke about, wafting the smoke toward him as she chanted. And then she picked up herbs from the shelves, crushing them in a mortar while she continued to chant. She put the resultant crushed herbs into a tiny cloth and twisted it into a small bag.

“Put this in your tea for three nights in a row as you go to sleep. Sip it slowly and then chant three times;

By earth and water,

Air and by fire,

May you hear this wish,

Sources of life and light

Sources of the day and of the earth,

I invoke you here,

Heal my body and mind.”

Roy nodded his head, pretty sure he'd forget those words as soon as they cleared the perimeter fence but not sufficiently invested to ask for a repeat.

“Could you repeat that so I can write it down?” His mother asked and Roy narrowed his eyes at her, wondering if she had somehow guessed what ailed him and that's why she was so insistent on this visit.

The witch obligingly repeated the incantation slowly so his mother could write it down. She handed over the herbs and just like that, the juju session was over.

“Thank you Nannane”, his mother said. The witch nodded and smiled, gesturing for them to precede her back down the stairs. His mother asked about the witch’s granddaughter and she went on about how well she was doing in school which was just freaky considering they’d just been calling out to some pagan god in her attic.

Honestly Roy was surprised the kid even bothered with school what with her future career as a witch not exactly needing a GED.

They left the witch’s place, back through the woods to where they’d left the car. The sun was setting, and they passed the figure of a black girl, walking toward the ramshackle from the direction of the town. It was a small town, so they knew at once who she was. Her tall, slim

figure and big hair marking her out as Matia's grand-daughter Mya. Her clothes seemed to be hand me-downs straight from her grandmother's wardrobe but she carried herself with dignity. She was a very youthful looking yet poised young lady and smiled slightly at them as she passed but didn't linger. It was as if she knew they didn't want to be seen. They must get a lot of visitors like them up at the Andrewes house. They must be used to people skulking away through the woods. His mother touched him gently on the arm.

"Everything will be alright Roy," she whispered.

"I know ma", he replied.

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Mya was daydreaming as she walked, a slight smile on her face. She was having a good day for once and she wanted to savour it. Her grandmother had packed cucumber

sandwiches with a piece of chocolate cake for her lunch, which was great. And then she'd gotten to eat it in peace at the back of the chemistry class. Mrs. Rogers had held her back to finish her experiment. She expected that the teacher had meant it as a punishment; but chemistry was her favourite subject and she *wanted* to finish the project. To be given the chance to do it over her lunch hour was a plus. The chemistry class was quiet; it was a distance from the dining hall and the madness disguised as the lunch time crowd in there. If she could, she'd eat lunch there every day. The sharp smells of the chemicals didn't bother her at all; not after grammy's attic...

After lunch, she'd had her phys ed. class which quite honestly, was her least favourite. She was always the last to be chosen for every team, and some of the more prejudiced kids were pretty quick to cause her hurt. She had gotten good at dodging them these days, but it still sucked. Today

had been one of those days where some idiot had stepped on her ankle and twisted it. She'd been in so much pain and dreading the walk to the nurse's office but then her classmate, Teddy 'The Bear', had picked her up and carried her to the infirmary, murmuring comforting nonsense all the while.

"You'll be just fine", he'd said as he put her gently down on the nurse's bed.

"Thanks for the ride", she'd replied with a shy smile.

"No problem. Hey I can take you home if you like."

Mya would have liked... but she had this thing about getting in strangers' cars. Even nice enough almost strangers like Teddy The Bear. Sure they were in the same class so yeah, not exactly strangers. But he was a big guy and she was a girl with no friends and none but an old grandma to defend her. So she wasn't putting herself in

compromising situations if she could possibly help it. But she enjoyed the attention that Teddy paid her, it was tender and solicitous without being patronising. She thought that given time, and effort, they could be good friends. Who knows? Maybe even more. Though she'd noticed the way he looked at Charlotte le Carre. To be honest everybody'd noticed how he looked at Charlotte. Mya shrugged internally, it wasn't like princess Charlotte looked back... she was too taken with that jock; the one all the girls fell over. What was his name again? Louis? Lester?... Leo. His name was Leo. Leo Devereaux. And he was so much larger than life that Mya just couldn't take him seriously. Maybe seeing as Teddy didn't have even the ghost of a chance with his crush, he'd look at her as a suitable substitute. I mean god knew it was way past time that somebody kissed her. And if someone was going to do it, she wanted it to be a guy that was as good and kind as Teddy. Mya scoffed at herself;

*‘Good and kind Mya? Really? Could you get any more pathetic or desperate?’*

Mya hated that voice; it was always snarky and superior and spoke to her like it knew a lot more than she did. I mean sure it was in her head, but she didn’t recognise it as anyone she’d ever heard or known. Usually the voices in her head followed a pattern; there was the comforting voice of wisdom that sounded a lot like her grandpa George, and then there was the disappointed, ‘but what are you doing Mya?’ voice that sounded the way she imagined her mother used to sound. The indulgent ‘Oh Mya, what am I to do with you?’ tone definitely belonged to Grandma Matia... and then there was this snarky bitch who Mya did not know and would have preferred if she left. Nevertheless, Snarky Bitch had a point - perhaps there *was* more to a partner than kindness and goodness... maybe she was playing it safe; but

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