

## Crown Royal

Spanish moss in the trees beckons like the bony fingers of a withered corpse and the omnipresent aboveground crypts conjure images of decomposing residents emerging stealthily, freed by hinges rusted from decades of rain and mist to roam once more. The acrid whisper of voodoo and obeah is stronger than the aroma of Café du Monde and beignets wafting through the French Quarter. Residents well acquainted with charms for good luck or amulets to ward off evil straddle a precarious liminal threshold separating the living and the dead.

Serafina Boudreaux has also teetered precariously above that narrow chasm separating life and death. She entered the world prematurely, a pitiable, shriveled, mewling, and red-faced gremlin. Her very doubtful survival was ensured only after spending three months in the pediatric intensive care unit at Tulane's Children's Hospital. By the age of eight months, she had turned into the most adorable infant the residents of Metairie's Jefferson Parish had ever seen; laughter and delight bubbled from her as effusively as a jazz riff from Preservation Hall. At 25, her radiance outshone that of Botticelli's Venus, and left almost every man she encountered stunned, speechless, and certain he could neither muster the courage to speak to her nor dare imagine himself worthy of winning her affection.

John Pardoner was one of the very few men undaunted by Serafina's extraordinary beauty. When they met there was an instant attraction, and a nearly palpable electricity arced between them, simultaneously dizzying and exhilarating, yet a bit frightening in its intensity. Serafina was visiting her beloved grand-mère Antoinette, a tiny Cajun woman with a vigorous personality and a slightly risqué vocabulary sprinkled generously with a

delightful smattering of Cajun French. Both characteristics belied the physical fragility that had led her to an angioplasty in the teaching hospital connected with Tulane University's medical school. John Pardoner, a young intern undecided about his area of specialization, was just beginning a cardiac rotation and, with the other cardiac interns, walked innocently into Antoinette's room, completely unaware that the wheels of fate, spinning wildly and uncontrollably, were about send his life swerving and careening straight into Serafina Boudreaux.

After that fateful meeting, John and Serafina were rarely apart. John's rigorous schedule often meant they enjoyed only fleeting but treasured moments stolen between his shifts. In an effort to atone for his absence, he gave her sweet and imaginative little gifts – poems and wild flowers from the roadside – and when his meager intern's salary allowed, flea market bijoux. His heartfelt tokens were always delivered within the velvety soft Crown Royal bags she had loved since childhood. Serafina's father had often relaxed with a Crown and ginger after a long day's work, and each purple bag surrounding his Crown bottle was soon repurposed, hidden in her room until a treasure hunt revealed the bag, without fail holding a tiny new doll or toy from her father. After learning about this rite between Serafina and her father, John perpetuated the tradition, touching Serafina and often moving her to tears.

After nearly three years and countless Crown Royal bags, John's and Serafina's love had become as expansive as the universe; their mystical fairy tale romance seemed unfathomable to even those Louisianans firmly in touch with the ethereal, the arcane, the unexplainable. No one was surprised when Metairie's oldest jeweler, purveyor of precious estate heirlooms from venerable old families along Plantation Row, reported in strictest

confidence that John had purchased a singularly unique engagement ring for Serafina. John's plan was to surprise her with the ring on the third anniversary of their meeting, and he asked her to pick him up at the hospital that evening.

Much to Serafina's delight, John pulled a Crown Royal bag from his breast pocket when he opened the car door. Despite her excitement, he elicited her solemn promise to open it only when they reached their very top-secret destination, to which she would be directed in a convoluted series of turns and back-roads intentionally intended to confuse and disorient. The excitement was simply too great for Serafina, and try as she might to ignore the temptation, she found her glance straying far too often from the road and toward the bag lying tauntingly on the huge expanse created by the bench seat in her grand-mère's old car.

Serafina still has that Crown Royal bag, clearly more special to her than all the rest, and in it she stores one lonely and solitary \$100 bill, money John doesn't know about. Everyone here has a stash, and whether it contains money or herbs gathered deep in the bayou or pig bones is of little consequence. Everyone keeps secrets and everyone dwells in the clutches of imagined hexes and spells as surely as Serafina leans on her own crutches, real and tangible implements that help her navigate her home, the sidewalks, and her life.

More importantly, the crutches herald, as their rubber tips meet the ground a few inches before her footfall, the sorcery waiting to claim its next victim, lurking just below the surface of the scummy swamps like the cruel fate lurking below her perfect right thigh. Like her left, it is beautiful, exquisite and muscular. The lower half of her right leg, however, now exists only in fading pictures and in her dreams and nightmares, and provides nothing except phantom pains.

Her new prosthetic leg, the latest in a long line of models assuring the latest technology and guaranteeing ambulatory ease, differs little from the others she has tried, and guarantees only continued reliance upon crutches. Today, her eagerness to spend the \$100 bill on a special anniversary gift for John will be tempered by the reality that she must again rely on someone to drive her from Metairie into New Orleans. Serafina is fortunate enough, upon leaving her apartment, to find John on duty; he is her favorite cabbie and the lone Metairie taxi driver who steers a mangled Chevrolet Impala around the city's streets. She actually finds him in her neighborhood more than random coincidence allows, but is always thrilled because she loves his taxi, the same kind of car her grand-mère Antoinette drove during the years before she died.

Despite Serafina's now otherworldly beauty, people avoid her. Her eyes are tinged with a sadness that has deepened their azure blue, changing it forever into the color of the angry and violent storm-tossed seas. The quiet sorrow emanating so subtly from her invokes sympathy, yet her neighbors cannot offer her solace, frightened lest such a cataclysmic desolation seep unwittingly into their own lives, and petrified that Serafina's misfortune will, through the force of some mysterious hex or spell, become their own.

For in this backwater land, teeming with the powerful undercurrents of spells and incantations, such a transference of tragedy is entirely within the realm of possibility. Serafina's neighbors cross the street to shut out the sound of her voice as she speaks animatedly into the driver's-side window of the empty car left to her by her dead grand-mère. It is a rusted and twisted shell of the Chevrolet Impala long abandoned in the alley beside the apartment she shared with John Pardonner until the night he died in the fiery car crash that took Serafina's leg and her love. More than they fear the powers of voodoo and

obeah, her neighbors fear the long and grisly fingers of insanity that have entwined Serafina in their icy grip as inextricably as the faded Crown Royal bag she carries everywhere, its gold rope threaded through her fingers like a rosary.

