



DEAD **LANDBY**
NOIR



BLOOD & ROSES

BY JOHN GOFF



PINNACLE

ENTERTAINMENT GROUP



DEAD LANDS NOIR

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A Night Stalker Dime Novel for Deadlands Noir

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DEDICATION

David's Dedication: To my father, cause I learned to balance good and evil with his help, all the creators at Pinnacle for the years of fun Deadlands has given me, and dedicated to Adam Green, without whom Jacob would have never been "born".



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Jacob sat alone in Boudreaux's, relaxing in the emptiness of the room. The last of the crowd had left over an hour ago seeking the late, late clubs, taking with them the endless requests for *The Dixieland Band*, *Begin the Beguine*, and *Body and Soul*. The bartenders and cigarette girls had fled into the night shortly after, heading for their lonely apartments or maybe another bar to drink away their troubles. Now it was just him, a bouquet of roses beside his tip jar, and his music.

He always cherished the quiet after a club emptied. He could pull off his concealing gloves and unwind through the piano in a way he never could when playing for an audience. Jazz might put money in the tip jar, but the classics were his true love. Tonight he'd settled on Beethoven's *Sonata Opus 16*. To make the piece more challenging, he used the tempo of the rotating ceiling fans as a metronome. He was just beginning to work on a few nuances even Ludwig hadn't thought of when the stranger walked through the main entrance.

The intruder was wearing a black fedora and a long black coat more suited to a Northern clime than the humidity of New Orleans. A long moustache adorned a face rough enough to break a few knuckles. The man walked with an air of self-importance and assumed authority that almost smothered the piano player, even from the far side of the room.

His eyes fell on Jacob. A couple of tables kept him from being able to walk directly from the door to where Jacob sat behind the piano. The man seemed to take personal insult from having to detour even slightly from his route. The tables and chairs, being made of stern stuff, remained unimpressed. Once past the dining area, his steps took out his frustration, threatening to punch divots out of the dance floor.

Jacob let out a sigh and stopped playing just long enough to slip his white, tailor-

made gloves back on. They were made of the purest silk, incredibly comfortable, but he hated them. He always played better without them, but those closest to him knew why. Of course, it was unlikely the usual patrons could tell the difference between a true prodigy and merely great even without a couple of drinks in them. And there were precious few in the French Quarter bars who'd not downed a considerable number more than a couple of drinks this time of night.

When he put his fingers back to the keys, he played a few bars of Chopin's *Sonata No. 2*. He opted for the first movement rather than the more obvious third. After all, clever satire is always best delivered with a razor rather than a baseball bat, he had always believed. Not surprisingly, the man's face remained utterly unchanged.

Jacob suspected he wouldn't recognize Chopin if the man walked up and introduced himself. Which would be a feat in itself—but not entirely unheard of.

"Don't get involved, Toso," the man said without preamble.

Jacob took stock of the stranger as he mounted the three steps leading to the low stage where the piano sat. He was tall and lean. A slight asymmetry to his shoulders pulled his left arm further from his body than his right. A gunman then, and one packing considerable metal from the looks of it.

His skin had the burned-in tan of someone who'd spent enough time outdoors to be on a first name basis with the sun. His hair, though brown, showed just a touch of blond. Clearly not the pure-blooded Sicilian the Black Hand preferred. He might be a freelance hitter, but his officious air made Jacob suspect he was used to using authority like a club.

"I don't think you've got anything to worry about. I've not even decided if I'll let you buy me a drink. A commitment is the



furthest thing from my mind."

He wore boots, not shoes. Black cotton slacks, the threads slightly worn on the cuffs. The same on the black overcoat. Definitely not standard issue for the local flatfoots—plus he hadn't looked once at the tip jar filled with ones and fives. Jacob had never met a Crescent City cop who could turn a blind eye to unguarded cash.

"Crack wise all you want, but you'll stay out of it, if you know what's good for you."

"I'm playing piano in a dive for tips. That alone should tell you I have a fairly poor record for knowing what's good for me, even without the disadvantage of having absolutely no inkling as to what you are talking about."

"Whatever the filly asked you to do. No matter what she's offering, don't do it. We clear?"

Jacob stopped playing, but said nothing. The men stared at each other for nearly a minute, with only the sound of the ceiling fans cutting the thick air in the room. Finally, the man spoke again.

"Well, ain't you got nothin' to say?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Jacob said. "I was waiting for the 'or else' part of your speech. Did I miss it?"

"Or else there'll be Hell to pay. How's that?"

"That's a little cliché. I really was hoping for better," Jacob said. "Besides, Hell's already keeping a tab open for me, my good man."

"You might find yourself settling accounts sooner than you intended." The man in black pulled his long coat back, exposing a massive revolver in a shoulder holster. Jacob wasn't surprised to see that it sported a shotgun barrel along with the usual pistol barrel. A Lemat Patrolman.

"I still have no idea what you're talking about," Jacob said. "Or why the Rangers

give a damn about what a piano player does in his off hours."

"You are a smart one, ain't you?" the man said with a snarl. He flashed a badge with the signature star in a circle of the Rangers. "I'm Sergeant Dauterive, Texas Rangers. We know who you are too, Jacob 'Toso.' Keep your nose where it belongs and maybe you can keep it a little longer."

The Ranger turned and walked toward the exit with the same purpose with which he entered. Jacob played him out with the third movement of *Sonata No. 2*. Only fools continue to throw pearls to swine—or waste finesse on a brute. Jacob had been called a great many things, most unflattering and some even true, but never once a fool.

When he reached his hotel about half an hour later, the doorman greeted him with a tired nod. The Rossington wasn't the swankest joint in New Orleans, but it was a long way from a dive. It cost Jacob nearly fifteen dollars a week to keep a room in the place, but he planned to be in the Crescent City for a while and didn't relish the thought of holing up in a French Quarter dive. He had enough cockroaches for friends; he didn't need to share a room with any. Besides, money had never been a problem.

As Jacob passed the doorman, he said almost as an afterthought, "There was a young chippy here asking about you earlier, Mr. Toso. I gave her the rush. I told her you didn't have no use for low-class broads."

After a moment's pause, Jacob said, "Thank you, Thomas. Did she give a name by any chance?"

"I think it was Greta something-or-other. I didn't pay much attention. I just figured her for a party girl looking to line her purse. Her dress sure advertised the goods, if you know what I'm sayin'. Hey, you don't know her, do you?" The doorman seemed offended by the very idea, or at least he felt his job required him to seem to be offended.

"Off-hand, no. However, unless I'm mistaken, I was recently informed I should expect a visitor. If she comes by again, send her right up. I'll sort this out myself." Jacob slipped the man a grayback to insure his compliance and took the elevator to his fourth-floor room.

Upon entering, he doffed his coat and poured two ounces of absinthe into a glass. He needed to consider why the Rangers were getting involved in his life now. He'd been in the Crescent City nearly two years, fleeing south a few steps ahead of Hoover's agents. Clearly, the Rangers had had him in their sights for a while now.

He was sure they had a file on him, and his appearance—even with the gloves—made it hard to hide, short of crawling into a not-too-shallow grave. And pulling it in after him.

Yet they'd kept their distance until now. Granted, he'd played nice and hadn't had any bad spells lately. Still, with his history and pedigree, he couldn't figure out why they hadn't paid at least a social visit. The

sort where they either brought him onto the payroll or used those big revolvers to increase his body's lead content beyond healthy limits.

Now that he thought about it, it was almost insulting that they'd ignored him.

Placing the absinthe spoon across the lip of the glass, he set a sugar cube on it, then pulled a box of matches from his pocket. He struck one and used it to light the cube. Jacob was pretty sure his father would have cringed had he lived to see him prepare the drink in this manner. Of course, were his father still alive, a critique of his bartending skills would be the least of Jacob's concerns.

A light, but insistent pounding on the door interrupted his thoughts and drink mixing. He quickly extinguished the sugar cube. He had no tolerance for over-sweetened absinthe. When he answered the door, he saw he was either more popular with women than he thought or the young woman the doorman had mentioned had returned.



A nearly breathless young woman, wearing a cheap, fur-trimmed jacket over a rather gaudy but tight dress stood at his door. Like the doorman said, it plunged from her neckline more than far enough to draw attention to her ample bust. Her hair was bobbed into a page boy that was a little out of date, and she was wearing just a tad too much makeup for the likes of the Rossington. Still, underneath all the paint, she was rather attractive, if a tad young for him.

He wasn't immune to such temptations, but she was playing it a little heavy. He'd learned years ago that there was always a hook hidden in the most tempting bait.

After a moment, Jacob recognized her as Greta Holloway, a cigarette girl from the Blue Room, one of the higher class joints he'd played. He hadn't been there for a few weeks, so he was even more curious about what brought her to his door.

"Come in before we offend the neighbors." She followed him quickly into the room. "I usually don't entertain visitors after hours, but I'm not sure that leaving a young woman pounding my door would be any less scandalous."

Like most of the higher-rent rooms in the hotel, Jacob's suite consisted of a sitting room and private bath in addition to the sleeping quarters. He directed her to a chair near the door and produced a bottle from a nearby cabinet. She pulled the jacket off, deliberately turning to show that the back was cut so low a dressmaker would have to let out the hem at the bottom before it could go lower. Greta was definitely on the hunt—and loaded for bear.

"Brandy? The only other drink I have is absinthe, and contrary to what the tourists believe, I've found few of the city's residents actually enjoy the stuff."

Ignoring the offer, she said, "I'm in trouble and I need help."

"Well, so much for my ego. I was certain you'd found my charms overwhelming and were drawn to my room by sheer personal magnetism. I suppose I'll survive the disappointment, but I'm not sure how—or more importantly why—you think I might help. I am a piano player. An immensely talented one, I'll grant you, but regardless, only a piano player. Might I suggest contacting the police?"

Greta shook her head vigorously. "I can't. It's Donnie. He's gotten into a mess with the Black Hand. If the police get involved, we could both end up in Angola—or dead!"

"That doesn't answer my question. What do you think I can do against the mafia?"

"I don't know who else to go to. I remember when you played at the Blue Room, you said I reminded you of your sister. Or was it your cousin?"

He waved the question off. "Six in one, as they say. I believe you misunderstood what I meant, Greta."

"It doesn't matter! You have to help me. There's no one else." Her voice rose and threatened to break, but whether in frustration or despair, he wasn't sure. Jacob quite liked the Rossington and didn't want to provoke his neighbors or the management, so he decided to play along if for no other reason than averting any complications with his residence there.

"All right. Perhaps you should start by explaining exactly how you expect me to help you?"

"Okay, okay. Thank you. Donnie, he's my boyfriend, see—Donnie Constanza, maybe you remember me telling you about him?" Jacob didn't, but that didn't mean she'd never talked about him. As he recalled, Greta talked a lot. His time playing at the Blue Room was accompanied in his memory by the constant drone of her rambling on about this customer or that bartender in the background.

"Anyway, Donnie, he came into this thing. He showed it to me once. It just looked like a little bag to me, but he said it was worth big bucks to the right buyer. The problem is it ain't exactly Donnie's. He got it off this hitter for the Black Hand, some guy by the name of John Gaunt or Gault or somethin' like that. The hitch is, this guy, he don't exactly know Donnie took it, if you know what I'm sayin', so Donnie says we gotta get outta town, before Gaunt or whoever knows it's gone.

"Today, Donnie told me he found somebody who'd buy it—and get us out of town to boot."

Jacob sipped his drink and watched the girl. He'd mixed it nearly perfectly for his taste, almost licorice-like in its sweetness, but with a hint of bitterness. Greta was digging nervously through her purse as she spoke. She stopped her story for a moment and gazed up at the piano player.

"You don't have a smoke for a lady, do you?"

"Sorry. I never touch the things. In spite of what the doctors tell me, I can't help but believe they're unhealthy. You were saying?"

"Donnie was supposed to come by the club and pick me up when I got off shift tonight so we could leave town. He never showed, and I'm afraid something's happened to him."

"Have you considered that Donnie may have decided to go solo—leave you and run himself?"

Greta looked as if the thought not only hadn't occurred to her, but was impossible on its face. "No. Me and Donnie, we're in love. Besides, men don't ditch me." She added the last with a look that not only smoldered, but actually threatened to set fire to the wallpaper.

"Have you checked his place? Maybe there was a miscommunication and he's

waiting for you to come to him."

There was the briefest delay, then a look of sudden realization dawned under her makeup. "I bet you're right, Mr. Tosso. He's probably sitting at his apartment waiting for me right now!" As quickly as they arose, the expressions subsided.

"But..."she began haltingly, "I mean if the Hand is looking for him, it might be dangerous for me to go alone."

"That does seem a reasonable conclusion, all things considered."

"Would you go with me? To Donnie's, I mean. It's probably nothing, and if everything's fine, I can go with him."

Jacob arched an eyebrow. "And if not?"

"They'd be less likely to try something with you there, right? I mean they wouldn't want any witnesses or nothin'."

"It's my understanding the Black Hand just shoots witnesses too, Greta. I suspect the loss of one more bullet or two probably wouldn't do much to dissuade them."

"I just don't know what else to do..." Greta's shoulders started to hitch as she worked herself up for a good cry.

Jacob considered the Ranger's threat. Unless another young woman was due to show up at his door, the organization didn't want him involved with Greta for some reason. He was certain the Black Hand probably wouldn't appreciate him getting embroiled in their business either. Even common sense told him it was a bad idea. This didn't seem to be the type of thing for which the average person would seek help from someone who was, in all honesty, little more than a passing acquaintance.

"Why not? Let's go see Donnie." Like he told the Ranger, Jacob had a history of bad decisions. And he usually made them with a very clear understanding of exactly how bad they were at the time.

"Do you have a gun? Maybe we should

take a gun or something.”

“Sorry, I don’t touch them. Like cigarettes, I’m fairly certain they’re unhealthy. Usually that’s because someone else has been pointing them at me, but if you want the truth, they really throw off the cut of my suits and I have to draw the line somewhere.”

His answer obviously confused or mollified her; she opened and closed her mouth a few times like a fish gasping for breath on a dock beside a fisherman. Either way, Jacob was happy with the respite and it lasted most of the way to Donnie’s apartment.

Donnie lived on the top floor of a four-story Tremé dump. Jacob hadn’t known they piled landfill that tall, but if it was going to happen anywhere it would be in Tremé. The neighborhood produced enough decay and corruption to export. Only the fact that the French Quarter favored a slightly more refined corruption prevented it from oozing all the way to the Mississippi.

After the cab driver dropped them off with an uncharacteristic look of concern, Jacob said, “We’d better get inside. We don’t look like locals in these clothes. We look like targets.” Greta was dressed to the nines and he was still wearing his tux from playing at the club.

Inside what passed for the lobby of the building, there was, unsurprisingly, no elevator. Greta led him up a stairway that was lit begrudgingly every few flights. The crunch under his feet in the first dark patch told Jacob the residents were probably breaking the bulbs on purpose.

The silver lining to that was the darkness served to hide the life-threatening nature of the construction. It also concealed the vermin that scuttled through the shadows, leaving the piano player uncertain as to whether they were moving out of the couple’s way or just better positioning themselves for an ambush.

One broken step, three rat bites on his shoe, and a single, sleeping wino later, they reached the fourth floor. Donnie’s door was the last on the hall, which was lit almost as badly as the stairway. Greta’s knock went unanswered. Jacob narrowed his eyes as he considered the next step, but the cigarette girl pulled a key from her purse.

“I’ve got a key. Donnie gave me one.” She unlocked the door and the two stepped into her boyfriend’s apartment. A single, already-lit bulb hung from the ceiling. In its grimy, yellow light, three things struck Jacob immediately upon entering.

First, it was a toss-up for which had more space, Donnie’s apartment or a matchbox—a cheap, nightclub matchbox that was still half full of unused matches. There was a bed, a nightstand, a small table, two chairs, a dresser, and not much else. Opposite the door the room’s single window provided a view guaranteed to remind the occupant that the grass definitely wasn’t any better on the other side of the fence, mostly because there wasn’t any grass on either side of the fence.

Second, the place had been searched. With the sparse furnishings, it hadn’t taken that long. Drawers were pulled and the contents emptied. The bed sheets were pulled back and the mattress shifted on the box spring. Items on the dresser top and night stand were overturned and scattered.

Third, and this was actually the first thing he noticed, a man sat sagged across the lone table. The bullet hole in his forehead told Jacob why he hadn’t answered Greta’s knock. A gasp followed by the sound of Greta hitting the floor told him the corpse was probably Donnie.

Jacob took a quick look up and down the hallway, then pulled Greta inside the room. While an unconscious body probably wasn’t an uncommon occurrence in the building, there was no reason to tempt the rats—whether of the four or two-legged

varieties. He got her through the door, then as far from Donnie's body as he could in the tiny room.

He pulled her onto the bed, stretching her out to make her as comfortable as possible. A quick check of her pulse found it strong and steady. He pulled a pillow under her head and took a closer look at the room.

Donnie sat in one of the two chairs and his upper body sprawled across the table, a pool of blood slowly drying beneath him. Some of the blood had dripped onto the floor before it had begun to congeal. Jacob turned and saw it splattered on the wall near the door. The pattern morbidly reminded him of the flowers on his piano at Boudreaux's.

Obviously no one had called the cops. The only response most Tremé residents had to a single gunshot was relief that there weren't more.

Jacob checked the man's pockets and found a few bills in his wallet and some change in the front pocket. A .32 automatic lay on the floor under the table. Jacob picked it up and held it to his nose. There was a sharp odor of gunpowder. He dropped the magazine and counted the rounds. It was one short.

The pistol was a pocket gun, a holdout piece at best. Still, even a little bullet in the back of the head was still a bullet in the back of the head.

A moan from Greta told him she was coming to. He laid the gun on the table and helped her up, shielding her from the sight of Donnie's corpse as best he could with his body.

"You can wait in the hall if you want. There's not much I can do about...your beau."

The girl pulled a handkerchief from her purse and held it to her nose, allowing it to drape so it covered her mouth. She shook her head quickly, nervously. Her first

words were, "They killed him."

"I'm not sure, but it clearly wasn't a suicide. He was shot from behind."

"We've got to find the bag. If I have it, I can still buy my way out of here tonight."

Jacob frowned, confused. "Even if whoever shot Donnie didn't take it, how will you find the buyer?"

"Oh, Donnie told me. I thought I mentioned that. I've got it on a piece of paper."

"We can look, but don't hold out much hope. I can give you enough for a train ticket. Get out of town before this falls on you."

"No! We can find it. I know it's still here," she was almost shouting. She took a breath and regained control. "Donnie's dead and I don't want him to be dead for nothing."

Jacob rubbed his chin and face. He looked around the room. "The place has been tossed, but whoever did it was an amateur. They might have missed it."

"What do you mean? It looks pretty torn up to me."

He didn't answer, but instead focused on the room. The dresser drawers were pulled open and emptied, but still in it. A pro would have checked behind them, too.

Jacob took a slow turn as he looked the place over. In spite of the sloppiness, whoever had tossed the joint had checked most of the obvious spots. The furniture hadn't been moved—other than the mattress shifted a little—but Jacob had a suspicion the bag wasn't behind any of it anyway.

Donnie sounded like he'd been around the block once or twice, if he could get close enough to a top-flight hitman like Gaunt to swipe something valuable. He wouldn't make the mistake of hiding it anywhere it was likely to be found.

Greta, in the meantime, began rifling through the debris and generally adding to the chaos. Jacob noticed she didn't seem too grief-stricken to turn out her recently ex-boyfriend's pockets.

"A little room like this doesn't have many places to hide something, especially if Donnie was expecting Black Hand hoods to be looking for it." Jacob paced the perimeter of the apartment as he spoke. "I don't think he would have hidden it in the room."

"Then it could be anywhere." Greta flopped onto the bed in desperate frustration.

"No, he'd have kept something he thought was valuable close by." Jacob looked out the window. The frame had been painted and repainted over the years, but it was cracked around the sash and rail. The paint was also broken loose around the latch.

Jacob slid the window open and felt along the lower outside edge. His fingers found a nail. Hanging from it was a leather pouch.

"You found it!" Greta squealed. "Give it here!"

He looked at the bag as he brought it into the lit room. He sensed, rather than actually saw, a squirming in the bag, like it was filled with snakes or scorpions trying to wriggle free. There was power in the bag. *Real* power, dark power; the likes of which he'd not seen for decades.

Imagine what someone with my talents could do with this. Nothing could contain me. No one could stand against me. I could seize my birthright and...

Jacob dropped it to the floor and stepped back reflexively. She darted from the bed and snatched the bag from the floor.

"Greta, there's something wrong about that bag. What did Donnie say it was?"

"What are you talking about? It's just some crazy mojo bag or something. A bunch of malarkey that some sap was going

to pay a pretty penny for."

He frowned. "Let's just say I've got a feeling for this sort of thing and that's the real deal. You'd be better off just tossing that down a sewer and taking that bus ticket I offered."

"Go tell it to Sweeney, sugar. I'm getting a ticket all right, but one that takes me to the top. Play your cards right and I'll cut you in on a share. Now let's go fleece us a rube."

Now that she could taste the money, Jacob saw no sign of the grief she'd first expressed over Donnie's death. With greed riding shotgun on her shoulder, he knew there was no reasoning with her. Tempting as it was to just cut bait and walk, the thing she was carrying was simply too dangerous to let out of his sight.

He opened the door to the hall as they prepared to leave only to find his way barred by the cavernous maw of a .45 aimed square at his right eye. Realizing the stranger had the drop on him, his nearly preternatural reflexes took over just in time to save his life. He froze in place, giving the unidentified gunman no reason to pull the trigger.

"Who the Hell do you think you are, mister?" Greta demanded, her confidence bolstered by her vision of riches.

"I'm the one with the gun." The man finished his introduction by way of a swift strike across Jacob's cheek with the barrel of his pistol. The piano player staggered back under the force of the blow, stopping only when his legs struck the edge of the bed. He sat heavily on the mattress.

The thug pushed into the room, followed by another goon brandishing a heater of his own. Both men looked like they had spent the better part of their lives winning fights by punching other people's fists with their faces until the fists broke. The first one shoved Greta into the empty chair next to her dead lover.

A third man entered, dressed a slight step up from his partners in a pin-stripe suit. A thin moustache adorned his face and there was a fresh carnation in his jacket. The Tommy gun he carried in one hand at his hip completed the outfit. Although he was still addled from the pistol whipping, Jacob felt it was the jaunty angle that helped the killer pull off his look.

"We came here to talk to a born loser by the name of Donnie," the third man said. "My name's Dan Gault. Maybe you heard of me? I see by that look you have. That's good, good. It means I don't have to prove anything to you. You know I'm a man of my word.

"To get back to the topic at hand, Donnie used to run errands for me. He took advantage of my trust and made off with somethin' of mine. Something valuable. I've seen you with him before, *ma petite fille*, and since it seems the poor son of a bitch done aired out his brains on the table here, I'm hopin' you might be able to help. Now toots, I'm guessing you or the fancy-pants on the bed over there might—just might—have laid your hands on my property.

"Frankly, if you have, that makes my life easier, 'cause that means I don't have to go digging through this mess. I'll be honest, I hate digging around in brains and blood. I'll do it, mind you, but if I have to I don't mind if it's one person's brains or three, 'cause when you get down to it, brains is just brains.

"What I'm sayin' is, if you got the bag, it's gonna go a whole lot easier if you just hand it over now."

The room had stopped swaying and Jacob touched his hand to his cheek. The fingers of his glove were colored bright red when he looked at them.

"Your man cut my cheek, Gault," he said.

"Oh, *pardon, monsieur*. But I'll tell you straight, if you or the broad don't hand over

that bag, I'm gonna split your whole head."

"You didn't let me finish," Jacob said. "I was about to thank him for spilling the blood. Saves me the effort. You can't imagine how tiring that becomes."

He whispered a few words that rolled and hissed, but slipped past the ears of the others in the room. Before either of the men could respond, Jacob blew forcefully, casting a fine spray of his blood at the men. The droplets spread into a translucent, crimson mist which spread rapidly as it sped across the room.

One of the men took the majority of the strange blast. It shredded his clothes and skin both, as if it were composed of razorblades coated in acid. He twitched like a marionette controlled by a drunken puppet master and then dropped as fast as if his strings had been cut.

His partner was shielded from most of the mist by his friend. He took a few lacerations, but Jacob could tell he was far from out of the fight. Gault had ducked back into the hallway. Whether he'd been hurt or not, the piano man couldn't tell.

Jacob took the moment's respite to strip off one of his gloves. Even in the heat of the moment, he felt a brief relaxation pass over him as his fingers were freed from the confinement. He waggled them quickly to return circulation.

He quickly pulled a ring of keys from his pocket and gouged his thumb with a particularly sharp one. A large droplet of blood welled up from the tear in his flesh. He used his injured thumb to trace a line in front of him from eye level to the floor. When he finished, the wound on his thumb was completely cleaned of any blood, and the thumb itself even paler than usual.

The second gunman had gotten his head about him by the time he finished. He upended the table, spilling Donnie's corpse onto the floor. Greta fell out of her chair

and scabbled to the far corner behind the dresser. The goon's gat fired twice, but the bullets struck the wall to either side of Jacob.

The echo from the .45 hadn't even faded when Gault stepped back through the door. He held the Tommy gun level in both hands, but it was still at hip level. He held down the trigger and hosed the room with a stream of lead.

Not a one struck home.

"It's some kind of hoodoo, boss!" shouted the remaining goon.

Jacob dug the key into his index finger and flicked the bead of blood that formed at Gault's henchman. It shot across the room almost too fast to see and hit the man square in the chest. The goon's jacket and shirt burned away at the missile's touch and it punched into his torso.

The thug looked down in shock as his lifeblood began to pour from the wound. The pistol tumbled from his grasp as he dropped slowly to his knees. He managed to stay upright for a long second before falling face down onto the floor with a thud.

"You got some kinda charm against bullets, eh?" Gault said. He dropped his Tommy gun and pulled a wicked-looking stiletto from his pocket. "That's fine, magic man. I'm gonna cut your heart out and choke you with it."

The hit man moved forward in a crouch, tracing a deadly web in the air in front of him with his switchblade. Jacob gashed his palm open in a jagged wound. Blood poured from the wound, pooling in his palm.

"Cut you deep, fancy man—but I won't cut you so deep you die right away. No, I'm gonna make sure you last *beaucoup temps*, my friend. It will hurt though, hurt so bad you'll curse your mama for bringing you into the world."

"I already do, Mr. Gault." Jacob slapped his hands together, splashing blood into the air. The droplets stretched and swirled

around him in a cyclone of cerise bouquet.

The contract killer hesitated for a moment. When the whirling mist did nothing further, an evil grin appeared under his meager moustache.

"It looks like your magic gun is shooting blanks, *mon ami*. That's too bad."

Gault closed the distance and slashed with his knife. Jacob didn't move. The blade caught Jacob on the left arm, ripping through his tuxedo's sleeve and cutting into his forearm.

As soon as the knife broke the skin, the whirlwind of blood washed over and up Gault's own arm. The wave poured over his body, slicing his clothes and melting his flesh. The hit man staggered back, tripping over his own feet and landing hard on his backside.

The impact jarred the switchblade from his grasp. He swatted at his face and body as if being stung by a swarm of wasps.

Jacob, still in the eye of the blood storm, walked forward to where Gault sat preoccupied by his pain. He leaned down, slowly—almost deliberately—and whispered something Greta couldn't make out. Then he laid his hand gently on the assassin's forehead.

Once again, the red haze descended onto Gault, but this time it started at his head. The hit man jerked and spasmed as if he had grabbed a live wire. Jacob removed his hand and the mist retreated back to the vortex surrounding him. Gault stopped his gyrations and then slowly toppled backward to the floor.

The gangster lay still.

Jacob felt a familiar darkness welling up inside him. *There's only one left. Take the bag. She can't stop you, and if she tries...* He fought it back. He tried to believe it was the remnants of the bag's influence, but this had an all-too-familiar feel to it. One he'd known for decades.

"Are...are they dead?" Greta asked.

"One or two of them might survive, but I wouldn't take odds on it." He bent over Gault and retrieved the machine gun. With a speed that told the girl it wasn't the first time he'd handled such a weapon, he dropped the magazine and cleared the chamber before tossing it to the other side of the bed.

Jacob moved on to the next gunman and did the same with his pistol. As he worked his way around the overturned table, he told her, "Be a dear and see if you can find a set of keys on any of these men. We could use a car, and they don't seem the public transportation type to me."

Her squeamishness seemed to have returned, at least briefly. She tentatively patted the pockets on each of the gangsters before turning up a set on one of Gault's henchman.

"A Caddy. At least these guys had a classy car," she said, holding them for Jacob to see. "That was some serious mojo, by the way."

"Well, you might say it's in my blood." He slipped his glove back over his injured hand—hiding it from her as he did so. "We'd should probably clear out before anyone else stops by for a visit, though."

Once in the car, a well-kept Fleetwood, Jacob took the wheel. "I hope that paper of yours tells you where we go from here or we'll literally be left holding the bag."

"I need to get to a telephone. I've got a number and a name, that's all." She pointed at the next intersection. "Take a left. I know the night manager at the Roosevelt. He'll let me call from there."

The Roosevelt Hotel was a higher-end hotel not too far from the central business district. It housed both the Roosevelt Bar and the Blue Room. The Blue Room drew a wide variety of patrons—most with fat wallets—thanks to the wide range of drinks its bartenders could prepare. If it was

available somewhere in the world, odds were the shot jockeys there could mix it for you.

It also drew plenty of ambitious hangers-on looking to make friends with money and prestige. Greta had fit right in.

"I couldn't help noticing you've got an extra finger on your hand," she said as they turned onto Baronne Street a few blocks from the Roosevelt.

"On both, actually," Jacob answered.

"Is that why you always wear the gloves? You're afraid people will be put off by it?"

"That and the fact no one forgets the piano player with six fingers. I don't usually like to draw that much attention."

"That hoodoo you pulled back there, how's that work?" Her voice was a little too measured as she asked the question. He realized there was one more passenger in the car with them—Greta's old friend, greed.

"My family claims it was hereditary. Or maybe claimed is the right word. I might be the last of the line." He hoped that would put her off, but knew deep down it wouldn't.

"What, you mean like your fingers?"

"That's a part of it. Do you believe in Hell, Greta?" he asked.

"I guess. I mean I was brought up Baptist, but I don't go to church no more."

"You should. It's quite real. Different people might call it different things, but it's as real as the sun or moon. There are things that live there—call them demons, devils, spirits, manitous, whatever—and they've got a taste for my family's blood. They're willing to give up a little...power in exchange for it."

"So you give them a little blood and they give you magic in exchange?"

"That's what I was always taught, but I

think it's actually that they just like to see me hurt myself. There are people out there who can do most of what you saw using alcohol, tobacco, or worse to sate those things on the other side. Maybe my way's just more direct.

"For obvious reasons, I can only do so much at a time, what with needing my own blood to survive and all. After that run-in with Gault, I'm pretty tapped, if you'll excuse the pun, at least until I get a little rest."

"Still sounds like a sweet deal to me," she said staring out the windshield with a strangely thoughtful look. "There's the Roosevelt. Find a spot and let me out."

She was back in less than five minutes. "Head to Jackson Square. They'll meet us there within the hour."

"Now it's 'they'?" Jacob asked. "I don't like the sound of this. It could be a set up. I'm pretty sure I saw the same Model B pass by twice while you were in there, as well."

"Oh, I meant the buyer and his driver. It's all on the level—trust me—and I think you're just imagining things with that other car." Her tone was a little airier than he felt the situation warranted. Before he said so, she asked, "What did you say to Gault back there before you...you know?"

"I told him to keep an eye out for my father."

"Is he in New Orleans, too?"

"No. If there's any justice in the world, he's in Hell." Finally, Jacob's response shut Greta up for the rest of the drive.

Jacob parked the car at the edge of the French Market and the couple walked back to the southern edge of Lafayette Square. Other than the statue honoring the square's namesake, the park was empty. This was no surprise as technically it closed before midnight each night. The police usually made a pass through shortly afterward to roust any vagrants or drunks looking for

a cheap bed, leaving the square effectively abandoned until sunrise.

Even though it sat at the edge of the French Quarter and all the bars the Quarter housed, Jackson Square was the perfect spot for a private meeting.

Greta led them to Andrew Jackson's statue in the center. Once there, she stopped and looked around expectantly. "We're supposed to wait here."

A pair of men stepped out of the shadows near the opposite side of the statue. The piano man immediately picked out the delicate shape of a Luger pistol in each of the men's hands. "You are quick, *fraulein*," one said, in a distinct Germanic accent.

"Do you have the items?" he asked.

"I brought them both like I said," Greta answered. She pulled the gris-gris bag from her purse. Jacob knew immediately what the second 'item' was.

"Are you certain he is the one we spoke about?" the man asked, turning his pistol to cover Jacob.

"He took out Gault with some sort of hoodoo. I saw it with my own eyes," she said. "But you ain't gotta worry about him. He told me he's used up all his mojo for a while."

"Good, good. It was wise of you to suggest tipping the gangster off to your visit. The trial by fire seems to have, how do you say, 'killed two birds with a single stone', did it not?" the man said. "Mr. Toso—or should I call you Mr. Whateley?—please step closer, and keep your hands where I can see them."

"He ain't armed," Greta said with just a touch of a giggle. "I think he's afraid of guns."

"Nonetheless...Mr. Whateley, if you would?" He wagged the gun, motioning Jacob to his side.

Jacob looked at Greta. "I did say you reminded me of my sister."



"I thought you said your cousin," Greta said.

"I'm pretty sure it was sister." His lips formed a wry, disappointed smile, then he grimaced briefly, like he'd bitten into an apple and found half a worm. He stepped toward his captor with his arms raised. He stopped when the two were face to face.

"I know your type as well, *mein freund*," Jacob said. The piano man made a strange, out-of-place grimace then continued, "You're so intent on getting your hands on a weapon that you never take time to make sure it's not pointed at your head when you grab it."

He spit in the man's face, startling him, then the man began screaming in a high-pitched, almost feminine voice. A small hole opened in his face where Jacob's bloody spit had struck. Bone, then other, softer parts of his anatomy were exposed as the glob dug into his head.

His companion looked on in horror as his partner's squeal rose in pitch to even

higher notes. The man was so distracted by the horrific spectacle he didn't even notice Jacob pull the .45 from the waistband of his trousers.

"Drop the pistol, please," Jacob ordered.

He heard the distinctive sound of a hammer being cocked behind him. "You drop it, Toso or Whateley or whatever your name is." Greta sounded far too pleased with herself. "I picked up Donnie's gun back at the apartment, you idiot."

"Then you'll be wanting the bullets in my pocket," Jacob said without turning. Without any further word, he shot the other German. Then once more to be certain. Shouts were raised from all sides of the square. He turned to face Greta.

"Was half the money not enough for you—is that why you killed Donnie?"

"What makes you think I did it?"

Jacob snatched the gris-gris bag from her hand, careful to hold it only by the strings. The empty pistol he ignored.

"It wasn't that hard to figure out. No signs of a struggle. Donnie was facing the door when he was shot from behind with his own gun. Only someone he trusted is likely to have gotten the drop on him like that. Someone like his girlfriend.

"Not only had the apartment not been broken into, the door was locked again after his killer left. There was no reason to do that unless the killer didn't want to risk someone stumbling into the apartment by mistake. Say if they couldn't find what they were looking for. You were very certain the bag was still in the room and you had the key.

"The room had been searched, but the furniture wasn't moved. That meant either the person doing the searching didn't think to move it or simply couldn't do so physically."

He paused as a number of men in overcoats moved into the center of the square. All had large revolvers or Tommy guns in hand. Jacob recognized Dauterive leading the men. "I did wonder why you were so interested in involving me, but I think our German friends explained it. What if I couldn't have handled Gault?"

"I'd have cut a deal with him. They were offering a lot of money."

"You're the one that made the original deal, aren't you? Donnie just happened to have something worth selling."

Sgt. Dauterive interrupted before she could answer. "You screwed this one up, Whateley."

"You'll forgive me if I disagree, since the other likely outcome was me lying on the cobblestones."

"We were hoping to draw those two out. Their boss, Herr Marshall, is the head of the local consulate. He's been snatching up several items of...unusual provenance and shipping them back to his goose-stepping bosses in Europe in diplomatic pouches. So

far they've dodged the law by falling back on immunity, but we were set to catch them red-handed.

"You were enough of a catch to draw them out. One of them recognized you as a Whateley a few weeks ago. When the little filly over there came to them with that little bag for sale, they told her to sucker you in. I figured you might just be smart enough to tell her to take a hike if she tried to draw you into the scam. But I also knew you'd buck hard if I pulled the reins.

"We were going to put the muscle to them to get to Marshall, or at least boot him out of the country. Now, thanks to you, all we've got are a pair of dead Krauts."

"I do make a poor Judas goat. If it's any consolation, you've got Miss Holloway. She's a murderer and a traitor to the Confederacy."

"There is that," the Ranger said. "Plus there's that little bag of juju you've got in your hand. You know we ain't lettin' you keep that."

"I never intended to keep it," Jacob said. "I've worked hard to keep my...natural tendencies in check. This little horror would be just too much temptation."

"Hand it over then." Dauterive held out a gloved palm and motioned impatiently.

"Oh, I didn't say I was going to give it to you, either. I'm pretty sure your employers would find even more questionable uses for it than I could. And that is saying a lot."

With a flick of the wrist, he tossed the leather bag into a sewer drain near his feet. Dauterive let slip a string of curse words the piano man hadn't heard since the Great War. The other lawmen erupted into a swarm of activity as the Ranger began ordering them to find a way into the sewers.

Walking off into the Quarter amidst the chaos, Jacob whistled *Ode to Joy* as the sky brightened in the new dawn.

JACOB TOSO

(AKA JACOB WHATELEY)

Attributes: Agility d10, Smarts d8, Spirit d10, Strength d6, Vigor d8

Skills: Driving d4, Fighting d4, Healing d4, Intimidation d8, Investigation d6, Lockpicking d4, Notice d8, Knowledge (Occult) d10, Perform (Piano) d12, Persuasion d6, Riding d4, Shooting d4, Spellcasting d10, Streetwise d4, Stealth d6, Taunt d6

Charisma -2; Pace 6; Parry 4; Toughness 6

Hindrances:

- **Bad Dreams:** Toso doesn't always play well with others, and sometimes it haunts him.
- **Enemy (Minor):** Toso's sister, Jessica, was also once his bride-to-be. The Whateleys are a...close family. Jessica did *not* appreciate being left at the altar.
- **Wanted (Minor):** If your last name is Whateley, the Texas Rangers and the Agency will always be keeping tabs on you. Since Jacob tends to do more good than harm, both groups tend to use him rather than arrest him—but it all depends on who's in charge at the time, and what Toso's been up to.

Edges:

- **Alertness:** +2 to Notice rolls.
- **Arcane Background (Grifter):** Jacob's grift is his own blood—a trait peculiar to his particular heritage.
- **Filthy Rich:** Jacob has accumulated a fair amount of cash over the years, both from family inheritance and occasional odd but high-paying jobs.
- **Power Points x 2:** Jacob is a veteran grifter with large reserves of personal power.

- **Virtuoso (Piano):** Six-fingers and a keen mind make for a great pianist.
- **Polydactylism:** Thanks to centuries of family inbreeding and other, even less wholesome practices, Jacob has six fingers on each hand. The extra digits are fully functional, but most people seeing them find their appearance unsettling, giving him a -2 penalty to his Charisma. As a result, he usually wears specially tailored gloves that disguise this fact.
- **Veteran of the Weird West:** Jacob, due to a combination of arcane rituals and his family's Hellish heritage, is nearly 70 years old, but physically still appears to be in only early middle age.

Gear: Jacob usually carries \$600 in cash on his person and a small pocketknife (for probing around during investigations, not for fighting).

Powers: *Bolt* (a crimson bolt of acidic blood), *burst* (a spray of razor-like shards composed of blood), *damage field* (a bloody mist slices attackers), *deflection* (attacks cause ripples as if passing through water), *detect/conceal arcana* (Jacob's eyes turn blood red), *entangle* (crimson bands of viscous liquid bind victims), *teleport* (Jacob steps through shadows), and *wall walker*.

Power Points: 20

