
SELF SACRIFICE

Crescent City Kings - Book 5

ANYA SUMMERS



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Chapter 1

June

Gen woke, coughing, in her hotel room. The acrid stench of smoke suffused the air. Fire alarms blared at deafening decibels that could wake the dead—or someone who had imbibed one too many voodoo daquiris, as she had that evening. The loud screech jarred her into action. She fumbled with the bedside lamp and hit the button on the light.

Nothing happened.

The hotel's power must have switched into emergency mode and shut everything off. Struggling from the nest she had made with the blankets, disentangling her limbs, she rose from bed and used her cell phone to light her way around the room, her vision hazy from the profusion of smoke filling the space.

Fire. There was a fire.

She had to get out. The hotel was on fire.

This was *not* the way Gen wanted to celebrate the incredible interview she'd had that morning at one of the top advertising firms in the country. She had celebrated with voodoo daquiris at Lafitte's on Bourbon Street, and had the headache to prove it—

although perhaps her headache stemmed from the smoke and not the drinks. It didn't matter where it originated from, all she knew was that her temples were pounding as if she had an entire second line band blasting away in her skull, keeping a furious beat.

How bad was the fire? How close was it to her room? And would she make it out alive?

Questions swirled in her mind as she slipped on tennis shoes and grabbed her purse, all while trying to keep the rising tide of panic at a manageable level. Inside her purse were all her vital documents: license, passport, cash, and credit cards. Her clothes and laptop didn't matter. Those were items that could be replaced. Her entire laptop was backed up to an online server anyhow, so she wouldn't lose the work stored on it. Through gaps in the curtains, she noticed flashing red and blue lights. She peered out the window at a bevy of firetrucks on the street, five stories down.

She could do this: escape from a burning building intact and alive. Then a coughing fit took hold until she felt like she'd hawked up half a lung. Gen let the curtain fall back into place.

Resolved, her purse slung crosswise across her chest, she headed to the door that led into the hall and, fingers crossed, her salvation. The smoke thickened as she approached. She placed her palm against the wood, trying to determine if there were flames right outside, meaning she was seconds away from death. If it was hot, then she would have to try to break the window and get the firefighters' attention below.

And if none of those options worked, she would have to figure out something else. The only thing that came to mind was stop, drop, and roll, which she had learned in grade school. Why couldn't she get her brain to function? She was a competent, successful advertising artist.

This was what she got for taking a ghost tour that evening

and drinking not one but two voodoo daquiris. The alcohol had turned her brain into sludge.

The smoke was debilitating. It scorched her eyes and lungs, and invaded her nostrils and mouth to the point where she could taste the revolting ash flavor. The wooden door was cool to the touch. Gen ran her hand over the surface, searching for hotspots. When she didn't find any, she moved to the handle. She tapped it first to see if it burned, then battled through another fit of coughing.

The handle was cool too.

With a prayer to whomever would listen, she opened the door and peered through the haze created by the smoke down the carpeted hall. Stark, unfettered terror seized her. Bright orange and gold flames raged at the opposite end of the hall from where her room was situated. She had to find the stairs and escape. Fast. Gen refused to burn to death, refused to have her story end this way just as life was getting good.

She coughed and fought back a wave of dizziness.

She needed oxygen. She needed air.

And the flames crept ever closer toward her.

Gen studied the map on the door of her hotel room and battled waves of nausea. She was just so tired. It had to be the smoke she was inhaling, she knew that, even as her lungs labored for oxygen.

There was a stairwell around the corner in the opposite direction from the flames. She could do this: reach the stairs, and get out of the building. As she left her room, she wondered where all the other guests were. Lightheaded, she staggered as she walked. Should she knock on doors? Yell at people that they need to get out? Another wave of dizziness hit her so hard, she sank to her knees on the floor to keep from passing out.

On her hands and knees, she crawled in the direction of the stairs, away from the flames.

It took all Gen's focus to concentrate on the route she was

headed, and her objective. The carpet abraded her bare knees. She was fit, but this trek—fighting against the nausea, the dizziness, and keeping herself awake and moving—was rapidly draining her reserves of strength. The smoke cast a fog over everything in the hallway. But at least the emergency lights illuminated her path forward, as did the eerie, terrifying light from the fire. The flames roared loudly behind her. Every few feet, she checked over her shoulder at the advancing inferno.

Had everyone else gotten out? Why weren't there people in the hall?

"Hello. Can anyone hear me?" she yelled, but it came out as more of a croak.

She pushed her body on, even as her strength waned. She was just so lightheaded. All she wanted to do was close her eyes. But she knew that if she stopped, she died. If that wasn't motivation to continue crawling on all fours, she didn't know what would be.

"Hello," she yelled again. She couldn't be the only person in the building. Had they left her behind by mistake? She fought against crippling panic and the desire to sob over her predicament. She rounded the corner. The door was now in her sights.

When she was ten feet from the stairwell, the door burst open.

She screamed. It was a knee jerk response.

A man dressed in full personal protective firefighting equipment, looming larger than life in his tan and yellow gear, entered the hall and glanced down at her. "Found one. I've got her. Check the rest of the rooms for any stragglers, and do it fast."

Strong, gloved hands gripped her shoulders. "Ma'am, are you injured? Can you stand?"

"Yes," she croaked, her throat sore from the smoke. With his help, she staggered to her feet. The world swam. She couldn't get seem to get her bearings. Firefighters filled the hall. She took a step forward, toward the stairwell, and almost faceplanted.

Gen found herself hoisted into strong arms. Looking up at a face mostly hidden by a face shield and breathing apparatus, she stared into eyes the color of the blue waters in Tahiti. They raked her form, making her suddenly very aware that she was in her pajamas, her silk pajamas that were little more than a strappy chemise and sleep shorts, with her purse still strapped around her torso.

“I can make it,” she stated stubbornly, her voice breathy and not at all firm like she wanted it to appear. She hated showing weakness of any kind. It wasn’t how a Holt behaved. She clenched her jaw at hearing her father’s voice in her head. This was not the time for a Howard Holt lecture.

The firefighter holding her snapped, “Sugar, I’m here to save your ass, not kiss it. And in your present state, you couldn’t move ten feet on your own, let alone go down five flights of stairs at the pace we need to go. And I don’t have time to argue semantics with you. This hotel doesn’t have an automatic extinguishing system, and I’d rather not have you or anyone else die from stupidity.

“Sanders, Barnes, we need to go. Now!” he shouted, glancing past her to the other firefighters in the hall.

“Yes, Lieutenant. The rooms are all clear. The other side is unreachable and completely engulfed.”

“Shit. I’m getting this one out. You two stop on four on the way down, see if Vasquez and Richards need help finding all remaining stragglers.” Gen’s savior barked out the command, authority dripping from his voice and demeanor.

“Yes, sir,” the firefighters replied, and were right behind them as they entered the stairwell.

The staircase was full of action as he carried her down five flights of stairs. Firefighters jogged up and down the stairs. Some assisted hotel guests in their pajamas. The lieutenant yelled out orders as they descended. He carted Gen as if she weighed noth-

ing. She couldn't think about the fact that she was wearing barely anything, or that her hair was a ruffled mess.

All she could think about were the man's eyes through his face mask, his solid strength, and absolute authority as they exited the building onto Canal Street. She inhaled oxygen, and sighed with her head against his firm chest.

Flashing lights lit up the New Orleans street, turning night into day.

He conveyed her past the group of firetrucks to a waiting ambulance. Only then did he hand her over to paramedics. He shoved his face shield up, removed his breathing apparatus, and stated, "She's suffering from smoke inhalation."

"We're on it, Lieutenant," the medic closest to her replied, and covered her with a blanket once she was on the gurney. "What's your name, miss?" he asked, his tawny hair military short. He had kind eyes, the color of molten chocolate.

"Genevieve. Genevieve Holt," she replied, her voice scratchy from all the smoke.

"You should be all right now." The firefighter lieutenant assessed her as the medics took over her care. Now that she could see his face clearly, without the smoke or the mask shielding his face, she could see the firefighter was drop dead, panty meltingly gorgeous. His face was symmetrical, his skin tanned, with a full bottom lip just made to be sucked on. His nose was slightly crooked, like it had been broken once. Thick dark brows framed those Tahiti sea blue eyes, their intensity even more startling amidst the lights. He had a clean shaven, angular jaw that relayed strength and uber masculinity, and there was even a small cleft in his chin that Gen had the sudden urge to sweep her tongue over.

Before he headed back toward the danger, she grabbed his gloved hand and stopped him. "Thank you for getting me out."

Squeezing her hand in his, he shot her a cocky, lopsided grin that had her ovaries swooning. "Any time, sugar. Love the pjs."

He winked and strode back into the fray, shouting out orders and commands as he walked.

As the paramedics administered oxygen and took Gen's vitals, she asked, "What's his name?"

"That's Lieutenant Raveau out of station two," the medic explained. "Now, I want you to relax. After we've got your vitals, I think it's best if we take you into the emergency room and have you examined further. I think you're going to need a full treatment for smoke inhalation, Miss Holt. Might even need to have you spend the night in the emergency room."

Too exhausted to argue, she nodded. "If that's what you think is best."

"I do. If you're agreed, we'll get you in the truck and take you there in style."

"Well, when you put it that way, how could I refuse such a gallant offer?" She swallowed, her throat aching.

"Give us a minute to get you strapped in, and we'll be on our way," he said with a wink.

In minutes, she was in the back of the ambulance, sirens ablaze, speeding away from the fire and her hotel room that still had her suitcase and laptop. She tried not to think about what the coming days would bring. She very much doubted she would be flying home tomorrow. If she had to cancel her flight and reschedule it for a later date, she would.

She closed her eyes, recalling the firefighter's last look, his breathtaking smile, and simmering blue gaze raking her form. That look had ignited Gen's entire body, like she had plugged herself into the City of New Orleans power grid.

And all because the hot-as-hell firefighter had caused needs she usually kept at bay to emerge and take hold. If he had told her that he was carrying her off to his place to do wicked, naughty things with her, Gen doubted she would have stopped him.

Wasn't it too bad that she likely would never see him again?