



said. "I'm usually better at keeping up with him, but I got distracted."

Chase led the search, moving at a snail's crawl so the old man could keep up with them. Claire's gaze darted frantically back and forth between the tombs, sweeping the ground for any sign of the black-gloved hand.

They retraced their path back to the entrance and its double wall of oven tombs, those built into the walls surrounding the cemetery, and still found no sign of the hand. Claire was visibly fighting back tears.

"I don't know what I'm going to do." She sniffed, composed herself, and turned back to her grandfather. "Grandpa, are you sure you don't remember what you did with your hand?"

Mr. Wicker blinked and dipped his chin, seeming to actually consider her words. He finally, slowly shook his head.

"Damn." Claire ran her hand back through her loose brown hair. Her lower lip quivered again.

"Hang on, we'll find it."

Chase again scanned the ground, desperate to find that missing hand. She started back down the walkway, but another tour group had blocked the path in front of Marie Laveau's tomb. She tapped her foot as they waited for another group to finish up and clear the path. A few of the tourists kept shooting them dirty looks. Mr. Wicker's stench was becoming unbearable in the Louisiana heat, but that wasn't his fault. Chase squared her stance and gave them a stern look, daring them to say anything. They finally turned back to the group and then they began to move away.

Chase put her hands on her hips and waited them out, and finally looked down to read the plaque in front of Marie Laveau's tomb.

The missing hand was lying with the other trinkets that had been left behind.

"Uh, there it is." Chase pointed with the toe of her shoe. No way was she picking it up. She definitely wasn't getting paid that kind of money.

"Oh, for goodness sake!" Claire shook her head and picked up the hand with a handkerchief. "That was sweet of you, Grandpa, but I think Marie would like for you to keep your hand."

The zombie made an effort of grinning. Claire patted his arm.

Chase turned in a circle and spotted her aunt among the tombs heading back toward the entrance. She led the Wickers back through the maze of tombs to the entrance, where Uncle Pat was already waiting with the tour bus. Chase and her aunt helped the handlers get their zombies loaded onboard.

Mr. Wicker and his daughter were last in line. As she passed, Claire took Chase's hand and passed something to her.

"Thanks," she said, then helped her grandfather up the steps. Chase looked down and found a folded fifty dollar bill in her hand.

"How is everything?" Liza asked.

"So far, so good." She quickly jammed it into her pocket and grinned. "Mr. Wicker lost his hand."

"Did you find it?"

"Yeah, finally," Chase said. "Are we done yet?"

"That's everyone," Liza said, checking the names off her list. "I guess that means it's time we headed back for home."

Chase only barely hid her sigh of relief. She'd had a lot of fun on this trip, and learned a lot about both New Orleans and zombies, but she was ready to go home.

Chase took off her Zombie Tours of America cap and wiped the sweat from her forehead.

"I dare anyone to ask me to write a paper on what I did for my summer vacation."

**THE END!**

**Check back next Thursday for another summer story!**

Summer Serials are a project of the Times-News Newspaper-In-Education Program.

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**Chase pressed closer** to the

group and stood on her toes to see over the heads of the zombies gathered around her Aunt Liza. She wanted to see the tomb of Marie Laveau, the world's most notorious voodoo queen.

"Scoot up front, kiddo." Uncle Pat gave her a little push. She squeezed past a couple of portly zombies and brushed against one of the tombs. Concrete scratched her bare arm, but she managed to push by. She edged her way around the crowd to her aunt's side.

The tomb was smaller than she expected. It was larger than a tool shed, though not very much so. The roof was steeped, with a small plaque near the bottom and another mounted on the ground in front of it.

"This is the tomb of the famous Marie Laveau, the most notorious voodoo practitioner who ever lived." Liza motioned the zombies and their handlers closer. Chase took an involuntary step closer to her aunt, thinking of all the zombie movies she'd seen that had ended this way – the last lone survivors slowly encircled and devoured by a rampaging horde of bloodthirsty zombies.

Thankfully, the zombies only shuffled closer and turned their sad, somber gazes fully on her aunt.

"She lived in the 1800's, and she was considered the most powerful voodoo practitioner of all time. She was a hairdresser by profession, and she had a network of spies spread throughout the city. Everybody knows hairdressers have the best gossip!"

An elderly zombie in the back huffed a dry chuckle. Mrs. Ramseyer, who was here with her daughter Mae and son-in-law Ben, had covered her mouth with one thin gloved hand to stifle her laugh. She'd been a beautician in life with her own hair salon. Both her daughter and son-in-law shared a look of surprise. It was the first sound Mrs. Ramseyer had made on the entire trip.

Liza beamed at the older woman and then turned back to the group. "Needless to say, she knew everything about everyone in New Orleans, from its richest down to its poorest. This allowed her to gain influence and power over nearly every citizen in the city. Everyone knew Marie Laveau, and everyone was afraid of her."

Liza stepped aside, allowing the group to venture closer. She pointed to some of the markings covering the tomb. Most were three small black x's, placed all over its surface.

"People still come to Marie's grave to this day and leave little offerings for her. They draw three black X's on her tomb and ask her to grant them wishes. Who knows if they come true, but there must be something to it, for people to keep coming back more than a century later!"

Chase moved back a little to inspect the pile at the foot of the tomb. There was a little bit of everything there. Half-burned candles, a deck of playing cards. A couple of tiny flags for the New Orleans Saints. Chase smirked. Guess Saints fans were a lot like Vols fans when it came to team loyalty. A couple of dolls, some kid's toys, a Matchbox race car. Pennies, some plastic flowers. She leaned down and squinted.

"Is that a credit card?"

Liza looked down and frowned. "Oh my, there really are some trusting souls out there, aren't there?"

She laughed breezily and motioned for the crowd to follow her.

Chase hung toward the back, helping her uncle herd the lagging zombies and their handlers with the rest of the group. It was like herding cats,

because the zombies kept wandering off from the group. The summer heat was beating down on them, and the smell was getting worse. Chase was thankful this was only a twenty-five minute tour. She was starting to wilt herself. She couldn't imagine how bad the zombies must be feeling.

"Now, if you'll follow me, there are so many more sites to see. Marie Laveau isn't the only celebrity buried here. Actor Nicholas Cage has recently had a tomb built here, I'm sure you'd love to see that."

Chase stepped back, allowing the zombies to pass by. She mentally checked them off her list. A lot of the handlers merely guided their charges along, but some were actually making an effort to connect with their relations. Mrs. Ramseyer trundled by, pointing at one of the tombs. Her daughter and son-in-law each held one of her arms, bending down to listen to whatever she was trying to say. She babbled happily as they helped her shuffle along.

Chase and her uncle followed behind the group, herding the occasional straggler back with the others. The walkways between the tombs were sometimes only barely large enough for one person. The guidebook called them "streets." New Orleans, more than any place she'd ever seen, seemed to have a strong connection to those who'd already passed on. They built little houses for their deceased, even though that came more from necessity than for sensibilities. New Orleans was built on a swamp below the water table, and every attempt to dig a grave had ended with a coffin bobbing to the surface during the next flood. New Orleans had dealt with the problem by building above ground tombs.

"Chase?"

She looked up from her clipboard, squinting in the harsh sunlight. Claire stood at the outside of the group, holding onto her grandfather's arm. She waved her arm above her head. Chase ducked out of line and edged back to the couple, holding her clipboard against her chest.

"I hate to ask this, I'm so embarrassed, but can you help us?" Claire asked. "My grandpa lost something while we were walking through the cemetery. Can you help us find it?"

Chase looked back at the veritable rat's maze of tombs they'd walked through. Unless he'd lost something the size of a car, she doubted they'd find anything.

"I'll do my best," she said. "What did he lose?"

The woman blushed, shook her head with an embarrassed grin. "He lost his hand."

"Excuse me?" Chase just blinked at her.

Claire pulled the old man's hand free from his pocket, but instead of it ending in a hand encased in a black driver's glove like the other hand, it merely ended in a nub of a bone. Chase just stared at it, even as Liza's earlier warning against staring banged around between her ears like an overturned RV full of pots and pans.

"Uh, sure. I guess I can help with that."

Claire smiled, her eyes full of genuine relief. "Thank you so much! Grandpa is always losing little pieces of himself. I don't know what we're going to do with him."

The old zombie, perhaps registering that he was the topic of conversation, managed a watery, toothless grin. Chase grimaced back, wondering if she'd been better off working the drive-thru.

They moved aside and let the rest of the crowd shuffle past, and then began retracing their steps through the cemetery.

"I just don't know where he lost it," Claire