

BREW by Salvatore Buttaci

Black magic. The dark underworld arts. What did Charley care! From the time that holy picture burned to a crisp in his palms, he'd been holding hands with Satan and loving it. Eleven years since he became a soldier in Don Pietro's family. Where did those bloody years go? he wondered as he sat in one of Mammy Voo's dilapidated wicker chairs.

"Buy yourself some new furniture," he said, peeling off some fifties from a wad of bills he took from the side pocket of his blue blazer. "First impression's important. They see this crap and it's out the door. Bad for business."

Mammy Voo was stirring a huge cauldron so large it sat on its own sturdy steel table. Smoke from the cauldron wafted as Mammy sang an old song Charley couldn't recognize.

"No sense in dat," she said. "Peoples don't come here to be sitting in de parlor. Clients wants some magic. What I brew for dem. Maybe love. Fortune. An' like you, Mr. Slaughter, a new identity. I s'ppose I could gets me some 'xpensive sofa. A love seat." Mammy laughed. "But den dis here room jus' might lose de magic touch. Atmosphere. Know what I mean, Mr. Slaughter?"

"My name ain't Slaughter. They call me that because I'm good at what I do. My clients pay up or they shut up. For good. Know what I mean, Mammy Voo?"

She saw the diabolical glare in his dark eyes, but that didn't frighten her. In her lifetime, here and back in the Congo, she'd met too many scary fools and not one of them was stronger or scarier than what her magic could do. She let Charley go on.

"Charley Spoto. Simple as that. You saw that story in the paper. Even the FBI calling me Charley Slaughter. Look where it got me."

Her back to him, Mammy Voo nodded her white-trestled head. "I understands, Mr. Spoto. Don't mean no disrespect'." Then she turned from the cauldron to face him. "You needs to empty yo' pockets now. Show me what you got."

Charley stood up carefully from the falling-apart chair and walked the few steps to the small, wicker table. First he removed his Rolex, then the three gold rings from his thick fingers. Out of one trouser pocket he extracted a black leather wallet he bought in Florence, a ring of keys, an amber comb missing some front teeth. He placed the objects on the table. Then the other trouser pocket. A key to a permanent room at the Hotel Drake, some credit card receipts, an opened package of spearmint chewing gum. Now from his back pockets he removed a white handkerchief, a small pad, a broken number-two pencil.

"I keep digging gonna find the kitchen sink!" he said and Mammy Voo pretended that was funny and let her black face light up. "I only carry a ballpoint pen in my jacket. And my cigarettes. Never could kick that nasty habit. Always felt it calmed me down. And cancer was for the other guy, not me."

Charley shook his head. "What a dumb ass! Just like I figured Don Pietro was like my father. He made me one of his captains. Someday. Who knows! He kicks off and I sit my ass down in his Don Chair. But word is 'Charley's got to go.' What the hell did I do? I told the FBI quit coming around. I didn't have anything for them to make their case against organized crime. I was a nobody trying to make a freaking salary. I had a wife and three kids. I went to church on Sunday. PTA meetings. A regular guy. They showed me a list of names. Asked if I recognized any of them. Sure, I didn't tell them. I killed them all; I didn't tell them. 'Never heard of them' is what I did tell them, but they weren't buying.

"We tapped your phone, Slaughterhouse. We got it all down. Conversations with your brother-in-law, that other piece of crap in the don's happy family, and yours. Either you sit and talk with us or we multiply the number of your victims by 50 to life. Which means you should be getting out of the can by the time Nostradamus's prediction of the world ending in 3016 comes around."

"So you finds yo' way to Mammy Voo," she said in an attempt to make his long story short.

He nodded his head, standing there with the whites of his pockets hanging out, looking like a modern version of Punchinello in the Italian *Commedia*. "Somebody said you work miracles. You could give me a new face. I could go somewhere, start over. Leave it all behind. No jail time. No shallow grave after somebody I trust takes me on that last ride and gives me a

beating I don't deserve."

Mammy Voo began tossing Charley's pocket contents into the steaming broth.

"Hey! What the hell you doing?"

"It's part of de magic. Symbolic, know what I mean? You dies to yo'self and you gets reborn."

He waved his hand OK and Mammy threw the rest of it into the cauldron. Then she began taking from her black apron some things she lay on the table where Charley had placed his. "Dis is a chicken's liver," she said, "but not fo' eatin'. Dis I'm holdin' up is de pretty eye of an alley cat. This, de bloody heart of a pig. And last in de pot the wing of a crow. Mix 'em all up," sang Mammy Voo, "an' what does you get? A new Mr. Charley, you sure can bet!"

Charley joined the old black witch in laughter. Thanks to her he would be free again. The mob and the FBI could go eat the rest of that crow! He had paid Voo a not-so-small fortune to brew him up a new identity. He didn't need to sing to the law. Let those other rats live bored lives in Witness Protection. And he didn't need to lay his neck on the chopping block of Don Pietro. He could escape and not get caught.

Now he watched her stirring the cauldron. A peek over her fat shoulder gave him cause to pinch his nostrils, to see on the cup of her ladle the melting strands of his leather wallet, a tooth-decaying comb gnarled with crow feathers, a froth of pig blood on the surface of the cauldron that still bubbled and popped.

"Ok, so?" Charley said. "You gonna ask me to jump in now?"

Still stirring, Mammy Voo turned sideways and smiled at him. "Oh, no, Mr. S., why we be doin' dat?"

Then as if something important that had slipped his mind slipped back in, Charley asked the magic lady, "Can I go anywhere once we're done? I can walk right out this door?"

"You must hide first. Week or two. Dey be lookin' fo' you. Even in yo' new self dey may suspicion you and lock up yo' sorry backside till de kingdom come!"

"I have to go hide out?"

"Fo' a wee time." Then when she saw the look on his face, she said, "If yo' mind's changin', I sugges' we call dis done right now." With that she let the ladle rest at the inside wall of the cauldron, wiped her wet hands on the apron, and showed him her scowling face. "You may be a bigshot where you come from, Mr. Whoever-You-Are, but here in my realm o' magic, you best talk clear. You in or you out! Dey ain't no middle road in de world o' black magic. You pay an' we play. What's it gonna be?"

"I go hide out," said Charley with his head bowed like the victims he had sent to their deaths.

"Now dat's a whole lot better. Dere's a farm not more 'n a few yards from my house here. Old McDonald we all calls de farmer who run it. You hide dere for a week. Den you be free."

Charley nodded, then said, "What happens now? Am I supposed to drink the magic potion in that pot? Let's get this magic show on the road. I'm hungry as hell!"

"I needs to recite some magic. We calls it 'incantation.' You jus' stand an' be quiet."

And with that Mammy Voo held her palms up in the air and began chanting in a tongue Charley surmised was from her native Africa, though he thought he heard a few Latin words he remembered from his long-ago altar-boy days at St. Brendan's.

"Ego varoomatra jaboo," it sounded like to Charley, who wished she get it done. It was giving him the willies. And her voice kept changing from Mammy Voo's delicate old-lady voice to a strong baritone that had Charley searching the room for the voice thrower. Then at last Mammy Voo raised her arms and forced tremors into them as her voice still booming began trailing away into silence. When she spun around away from the simmering cauldron, she was not at all surprised Charley was gone. In his place in a new identity, hardly able to stand still, was the gift she had promised Old McDonald before the day ended. And she had kept her end of the bargain with Charley too. True to her promise, he would never be found again. Not by his murdering friends, not by the FBI agents, not by anyone this side of hell.

Mammy Voo reached down to greet the new Charley. She was so relieved her magic spell had worked as planned. Still it was no easy chore carrying to the farm a wiggling piglet hungry as hell for some slop.