

THE MAP OF MOMENTS

A Novel of the Hidden Cities

By Christopher Golden and Tim Lebbon

© 2009

This excerpt of Chapter 5 is for viewing purposes only. Do not repost or reprint.

-- 5 --

Digg's was on a narrow back street, away from the bright lights of the French Quarter, a block away from a fish market and a Cajun seafood take-out place. This wasn't a place for tourists. The combination of Katrina and the flood hadn't done much damage here, but the neighborhood felt like it had started holding its breath when the storm swept in, and had yet to exhale.

Max walked past Digg's twice before noticing the doorway. A faded wooden sign was screwed into the brickwork, announcing the name. The door was ajar, and immediately inside a stairway led down, its walls papered with decades of overlapping music and gig posters. Hundreds of names publicized dates long since passed, and perhaps some of those names were long-gone too. The stairway was poorly lit, but standing by the open door Max caught a mouthwatering waft of gumbo and fried chicken, and the familiar scents of bars everywhere; spilled drinks, old wood, good times.

Digg's certainly wasn't doing much to draw attention to itself, but in his six months here, guided by Gabrielle, Max had come to love local bars and shun the more commercialized tourist areas of the city.

But she had never brought him here.

He wondered whether Coco came here sometimes, sat alone at the bar and thought about Gabrielle. And then he wondered why the man had not been present at her funeral.

Max went down. As he passed the half-landing, the sound of subdued conversation, the clink of glasses and soft laughter rose to meet him. He hoped none of that would stop when he entered.

It was a small bar with brick walls, a vaulted ceiling and flagstone floor. The bar itself was brick-fronted, and the furniture scattered around the place was all dark, old wood, well used and comfortable. A candle on each table gave an intimate lighting level. There were maybe thirty people sitting around in small groups or couples, men and women, black and white and every hue in between. A skinny guy working the bar might have been Native American, or some perfect mélange of heritage that gave him skin with the color and gleam of bronze.

Max walked directly to the bar as though he belonged, smiling and nodding at the barman and receiving a smile in return.

“What’ll it be?”

“You do Crustas?”

The barman’s grin widened, and he uttered a deep, slow laugh. “Do we do Crustas?” He went about mixing the cocktail, his movements smooth and fluid without verging on cocky, the product of experience rather than practice.

Max put the book on the bar, leaned sideways, and looked around. He caught a couple of patrons’ eyes, and swapped polite nods and smiles. Most of the people here seemed upbeat, but there were enough sad faces to remind the still air of the place that a storm had passed them by. The laughter was low but honest, and to Max it felt like an easy place.

He wondered whether Coco was down here right now, but he thought not. He wasn't quite sure *why* he thought that—he had no idea what the guy looked like—but he'd have a *feeling* if Gabrielle's other love were in the same room with him. A hint. Maybe he'd see a similar loss in that other man's eyes.

"Here you go," the bartender said, sliding a glass across to Max.

Max nodded his thanks and handed over a ten, then took one of the bar stools and sat down.

"Nice place," he said. "You the owner?"

"Been in my family fifty years," the barman said. He swilled the cocktail shaker and dried it, repositioned clean glasses, wiped the bar, always on the move, always working. His smile looked painted on, but the paint was contentment, not fakery.

"I've only just come back," Max said, then decided not to elaborate. If he admitted to being an outsider, maybe the barman would feel less inclined to help him.

"Yeah, well ..." He poured a glass of soda, dropped in a slice of lime and took a drink. "Lotsa people still away. Lotsa people not gonna make it back."

"Plenty." Max drank and sighed, feeling the alcohol hit instantly. Maybe whatever shit had been in that clay bottle had lowered his tolerance. "Actually, I'm looking for a guy called Coco. You seen him around?"

Something changed. The bartender's smile remained, but the muscles used to keep it there altered, strained rather than flexed. He took another drink of his soda, perhaps so that he could look away from Max and up at the ceiling.

Max glanced around the bar again, as if looking for the man himself. He was pretty sure no one else had heard the question, and he wished he'd asked louder.

"What you want him for?" the bartender asked.

Max turned back, and the man was mopping the bar top again. It was clean and dry, but obviously it needed to be cleaner, and drier.

“Just to chat,” Max said.

“Don’t know any Coco,” the bartender said, shrugging.

Max frowned. What was this? The guy was obviously lying. He’d just asked what Max wanted with him.

“What about Gabrielle Doucette?”

“Who?” This time the man’s shrug seemed genuine.

“Guess not,” Max said.

“Refill?” the bartender said, taking the empty glass. Even his smile had slipped now, and it was clear that he really didn’t want to serve Max another.

“I’m good,” Max said. “Just hoping to meet an old friend.”

“Well, good luck,” the bartender said, even before Max had slid from the stool.

Max nodded, then walked slowly back towards the stairs. He glanced around as he went, trying to see what had changed, why this place no longer felt at ease. Maybe it was simply the bartender’s abruptly altered manner.

So who the fuck is Coco? he thought. On the bottom step he paused and turned back, considering asking out loud if anyone knew him.

Several pairs of eyes flickered from him, and a swell of loud talk and laughter rose up. Digg’s suddenly looked and felt like a very different place.

Max hurried up the stairs and back onto the street, turned left and headed away from Bourbon Street. He remembered he’d left the book about the Biloxi on the bar, but he had no desire to go back. He was confused and frustrated, because every time he looked into part of Gabrielle’s life, it revealed more mystery. The bartender down

there had known Coco, he was certain of that, and he'd clammed up as soon as his name was mentioned. *He knew I was an outsider.* But there was more to it than that.

If only Corinne had known more, or trusted him enough to tell him whatever else she *did* know. But he was starting to wonder now if, cousin or not, Corinne had really known Gabrielle any better than he had. There were family secrets and secret histories, but perhaps Corinne had been too far away from both sides to be immersed in either. Maybe the sadness in the woman's eyes was for herself more than for Gabrielle; for her city, and a family she had betrayed for a girl she'd never understood.

He had to find this Coco guy.

Max reached the end of the street and paused. He could hear the sound of a funeral procession, the slow dirge and hymns echoing between buildings, and he stepped up onto the raised sidewalk to show respect. As the procession approached, he wondered whether this was another victim of the floods only just recovered from the ruins.

Funeral marches in New Orleans were usually accompanied—once away from church—by vibrant, upbeat music celebrating the life of the deceased. He was surprised there would be any processions at all in these dark days. But in New Orleans, tradition was everything. The music was an expression of sadness and loss, but he knew that this somber sound would soon turn into a celebration of the life of a lost loved one, not a mourning of their death.

Gabrielle should have had this, he thought. Max glanced at his watch, amazed that it was still only mid-afternoon. He sighed, looked up at the sky, listened to the funeral procession passing by, and then sensed someone standing behind him.

“Don't turn 'round,” the voice growled.

Something pressed against the base of Max's spine. It could have been the person scaring him with their fingertip, or it could have been a knife or gun.

"Lookin' for Coco?" A waft of garlic breath washed over Max, indicating just how close the man was.

Someone in the procession looked at him with sad, heavy eyes, then glanced at the face behind his shoulder and looked quickly away.

"Yeah." He scanned the street, desperate to set eyes on a cop.

"You buyin'?"

Max had no idea what he was talking about, but he nodded.

"Keep walking and you'll find him."

"Which way?"

The man pushed at Max, sending him stumbling into the street. "Just keep walking."

Max was tempted to turn around and ask more, but just because he no longer felt the touch on his back did not mean the threat was gone. So he walked, and as he crossed the road and mounted the opposite sidewalk, he heard laughter.

He turned around, but several pedestrians had gathered on the corner he had just left. They looked toward the disappearing tail of the funeral, and any one of the men could have been his assailant.

Max gasped, breathing deeply and slowly to try and settle his sprinting heart. Then he started walking again, passing shops and bars and restaurants, waiting for inspiration to strike.

You buyin'? the guy had asked. Drugs? Is that what Gabrielle had been mixed up in? It was frightening, and it might explain the way her family had turned their backs on her, but in a way there was also something anti-climactic about it.

Gabrielle's mystery was growing in his mind, and something as prosaic as drugs just did not feel right.

Keep walking, you'll find him. But where? And how, if he didn't even know what Coco looked like?

He crossed an intersection and kept moving, staying on the same street, wondering what he'd do when he reached its end. Five minutes later he did, and he waited there for a while before turning around and walking back along the street. He browsed shop windows, then bought a coffee and sat on a wooden bench outside a café, watching the world go by. He stayed there for half an hour, thoughts slowing turning to that Second Moment once more. He could be at Jackson Square in fifteen minutes if he started walking now, and maybe—

Someone sat down on the bench beside him, and he discovered what the unseen man had meant.

Coco had found *him*.

The man lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, relaxing back on the bench and not once looking at Max. His manner spoke of complete control.

"What's your name?" Coco asked at last.

"Max."

"And you want to buy something?"

"Well ..." Max trailed off, hit by a moment of indecision. If he pursued this false line, he could get into trouble. Maybe it was better just to ask outright.

"Don't be shy," Coco said, laughing softly. He had a smooth, coaxing voice, nothing like the gruffness of the man who'd pressed something into Max's back.

"Should we be doing this out here?" Max asked. People walked up and down the street, cars passed by.

Coco looked at him for the first time, and there was something about his eyes that shocked Max. They were intelligent, yet distant, as though he'd seen something somewhere else that was much more interesting than the here and now.

"You afraid," Coco said at last, and it was not a question.

"I've had a bad couple of days," Max said.

Coco put his head back and laughed, and Max was conscious of a few faces turning their way. The man rocked on the bench, dropping his cigarette and seeming not to notice, and he had to wipe tears from his eyes. "Haven't we all?" he said, then laughed again.

As Max waited for the laughter to subside, he had a chance to appraise him. He was smartly dressed, with hair cut close to the scalp and a goatee. His skin was smooth and unmarred. He looked strong and fit. There was something chilling about him, but it was more in his manner than appearance.

Max realized there and then that he did not want to fuck with Coco.

"So, decided what you want yet, boy?" the man asked. Max found it strange being called 'boy' by someone probably younger than him, but with Coco it seemed to fit. "Got stuff that'll make you see the whole world. Got stuff, it'll take the pain away, if pain's your worry. Got girls who'll suck the pain right outta you."

A drug dealer? A pimp? Surely not Gabrielle ... surely not.

"Gabrielle Doucette," Max said.

"Ah." The last of Coco's smile filtered away. He withdrew another cigarette, lit it and leaned back against the café wall, looking along the street past Max.

"You didn't go to her funeral."

"She's dead?" Coco asked, his expression unchanging.

Max was sure he knew the truth. Either that, or Coco was completely unconcerned. Yet there was opportunity here, he could sense that. A chance to find out more of Gabrielle's background, delve into those dark parts that even she had wanted to keep from him, and perhaps to know the woman as he had never known her before. Right then, that seemed so important. It was all part of the mystery that Max sensed nestled around him. And the thicker it grew, the more he wanted to solve it.

"One of your hookers?" Max said, hating the idea, dreading the answer.

"Gaby?" Coco smiled, and perhaps there was even a hint of sadness there.

"You really think that, boy?"

"No," Max said.

Coco nodded and smoked some more. Mention of Gabrielle had changed his whole manner, and Max thought it might be caution. Coco looked him up and down, a very frank appraisal that Max found uncomfortable.

"Friend of hers?" the man said at last.

Max nodded. A few more people were sitting outside the café now. It felt busy, but it did not feel safe. He wondered how much of that feeling grew from inside rather than without.

"The people she hung around with ..." Max said, trailing off, intending it as an opener rather than a question.

But Coco's answer was instant. He flicked his cigarette into the street, stood, and pressed a flick-knife hard against Max's throat.

Max leaned back, head pressed against the café's wall, but Coco came closer, and for a beat Max was sure the man was going to slit his throat there and then. He grunted, trying to call for help but unable to talk. He looked around, certain that someone must be seeing this, but everyone was looking away. People sat drinking

coffee, smoking, walking past, driving slowly along the road, and not one of them seemed to be looking at him and Coco. Conversation was louder than ever ... perhaps to drown out the sound of his imminent death.

He looked up into Coco's face, just a few inches from his own. The man's eyes seemed to be searching deep. He looked all around Max's face, coming to rest on his eyes, his expression totally blank.

"Tordu don't take kindly to people asking after them," he said at last.

"Tordu?"

Coco pursed his lips and tensed his arms, and Max brought his hands up, terrified that this was his last moment on Earth.

Coco batted his hands aside and pressed his nose against Max's. Max could smell his smoky breath, and beneath it something more spicy and exotic.

The knife edge was cold against his throat. It was only them, and the rest of the world. No one interrupted, nothing was said, and Max had never felt so far from the heart of this city.

"Your only warning," Coco said. Then he stood slowly, folded the knife, lit another cigarette, stared at Max for a few more seconds and walked away. Never once did he look around at the other patrons of the café, or those people walking along the street, and he did not look back.

Gasping, pressing his hands to his neck and dreading what he would feel, a sudden faintness blurred Max's vision and dried his throat. He leaned forward and checked his hands, but they were not bloodied. Breathing deeply, head between his knees, he looked down at one of Coco's crushed cigarettes.

Tordu?

When he sat up again, a few people were looking at him. “Did you see that?” he asked. But none of them had. Maybe in the wake of the storm they had become blind to violence and death, like Charlie, who’d walked around a dead woman on the sidewalk at Tulane for weeks. Or maybe like Max, they were terrified.

Coco was gone, just as quickly as he had arrived. And in his wake he left even more mystery.

I almost died just now, Max thought.

He left the café, and that street, and the people who had seen but done nothing. The thought crossed his mind that he should tell the police, but he had no proof or witnesses, and it would be a waste of time.

But who or what was Tordu? That was a question for Corinne. She would not volunteer the information, but he had a feeling that if he found things out for himself, she’d be more than willing to talk about it. Maybe she *needed* to talk about it.

And then, of course, there was Coco’s warning ...

He walked until he found an old pay phone on the side-wall of a convenience store. Digging in his pocket for some change, he racked his brain for Corinne’s number. He’d called it often enough over the past couple of weeks, arranging his trip down here, and he cleared his mind and tried tapping it in.

On the third try, he got it right.

“Hey,” he said when she answered, “it’s me.”

“Max. Didn’t think I’d hear from you again, today, at least. Meet your friends at Tulane?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, waving his hand dismissively. “Corinne, what’s Tordu?” Silence. Max shifted and the line crackled. “Corinne?”

The silence continued. He was sure she was still there, but he heard nothing; no breathing, no heartbeat.

“Corinne, I need to know—”

“Go back to Boston, Max,” she said. “Really. If you ever listen to anything I say, listen to this: go back to Boston.” Then she hung up.

Max dialed her number three more times, but she did not pick up.

“Shit!” He banged the receiver down, looking around to see if anyone was watching him. He seemed to be alone in the busy street.

Dropping the change back in his pocket, he felt Ray’s map. He looked up at the clear sky and thought of rain coming from nowhere, and then he remembered the name of the Second Moment on the map: *The Pere’s Kyrie*.

He’d only come down here to say goodbye, to close the door on a part of his life that had left him scarred. Instead, with every passing moment he seemed to be opening more doors, and each one led into mystery.

Max was sick of mysteries. He needed to stop asking politely for answers. He could still feel the point of Coco’s knife on his throat, still hear the threat in that silky voice. It should have made him do just what Corinne recommended. Run back to Boston.

Well, fuck that. Corinne obviously had some of the answers he was looking for, and she wasn’t likely to cut his throat for asking. And if whatever he’d seen or witnessed yesterday was more than a drunken, drugged hallucination, there was one other mystery he could solve right now.

Jackson Square was ten minutes away. He started walking.

The Square was beautiful. He'd been here a few times with Gabrielle, sitting in the park and eating lunch, throwing down bread for the birds, staring at St Louis Cathedral and wondering at the history of the place. It wasn't busy now—none of New Orleans was—but there were still a few people wandering through the circular park, eating from paper bags, smoking, staring at their feet.

Even here Max saw the scars of Katrina in the boarded windows, broken trees, and the air of dejection that seemed to flow from the shops and restaurants around the Square. It felt like a place where the last parade had already marched by, and all that remained was the clean-up. Then God would put up the chairs, lock the doors, and turn out the lights forever.

Max really hoped that didn't happen. A lot of people obviously still had faith in New Orleans. And maybe faith could be enough.

He sat on a bench in the park and opened the map. The Moment was still there, and the box it was written in ended in a sharp point in front of the cathedral.

Max looked up. There was nothing out of place, here, no mysterious other-world where he would witness events from the past and taste the air of yesteryear. People walked back and forth before the cathedral steps, and nothing disturbed them.

They haven't drunk that stuff from Ray's clay bottle, Max thought. But he shook his head, confused. In the cool light of day, and so soon after having his life threatened, yesterday was starting to seem even more like a dream.

He folded the map, stood and walked toward the cathedral.

And he heard singing. He paused, head tilted to one side. Was there a service today? Nobody else seemed to be listening, and he walked on, realizing he must present an odd sight standing there in the afternoon sun.

A dozen yards from the cathedral steps he stopped again. Two young women parted to walk around him, and one of them muttered something that made the other one laugh. Max turned to watch them go, and when the taller woman looked back, the smile dropped from her face.

What does she see? Max thought. What is it about me that dries her laughter?

He took another step—

--and the rain struck him, driving him to his knees. Heavy and unrelenting, it battered him down to the rough stones that had been smooth a moment before. The rain, and the darkness ...

It was daytime in the square, but night time for Max. His guts knotted and he felt sick, but he swallowed it down, tensing his muscles against the spate of cramps that twisted them up.

Twisted ... Tordu is French for twisted!

The singing grew louder, a deep, beautiful tenor singing the Kyrie. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled. Another Moment. Another storm. Once again he had slipped into long ago. The Square here was old, less arranged, functional rather than beautified for tourists. And it was strange. Some of the buildings he recognized, yet even in the downpour they seemed newer, their stone not so weathered and the façades smoother.

A priest stood before the cathedral, hands clasped before his chest as he sang that wonderful chant. *The Father's Kyrie!* Max thought. Before the priest, a group of people were gathered around six rough, pine coffins that were lined up in front of the steps. On the steps themselves were the stinking, rotten remains of six human beings.

The priest said something in thickly accented French that Max could not translate, and the people started trying to lift the remains. The bodies fell apart. They

must have been here for a long time, lying rotting on these steps with no one removing them—like the bodies left all over New Orleans after Katrina; like Gabrielle in her attic—and Max could not understand why.

Criminals? Heretics? Blasphemers?

But the priest sang on, and the weeping people ignored the stench of the dead to nail their loved ones at last into their coffins.

Shadows moved through the rain and flitted at the limits of Max's perception. They wore armor and carried weapons, but the downpour seemed to keep them at bay. And the rain, he realized, carried the priest's song. His words did not emerge from one place, but all around, coming at him from left and right, up and down. Each splash of a raindrop was part of the priest's voice, and every touch of water on Max's head felt like a baptism into this man's complete and wonderful faith.

"Who are you?" Max shouted, but nobody heard.

He stood and started backing away. The rain and the voice followed.

The priest and his funeral entourage walked away from the square, passing out of view along an alley beside the cathedral. As darkness swallowed them, those armed shapes moved again, casting shadows on the rain that were washed away with another burst of that voice. They wanted to get at those coffins and the people who dared join the procession, but the Pere's Kyrie kept them out.

The singing continued, as though every drop of rain was making a small part of the sound, lifting it and echoing it from the sodden ground.

Max backed away some more, his clothes soaked through, and he wondered what song the rain would sing next.

He was lying on the ground, and an old black woman knelt over him.

“You okay, baby?” she asked.

Max blinked up at the clear blue sky. The song was gone, but it echoed in his mind.

“You shouted at me, asked who I am. Then you fell down. Sorry if I startled you. I’m no one, really.”

Max sat up and looked around. The square was real, this woman was real, and his clothes were dry once more.

“Where’s the rain gone?” he asked. “There was a storm.”

“Sure was,” the old woman said. “Sure was. But we’ll get by.” Then she stood slowly, groaning as her old joints creaked, and walked away.

Max found his feet and staggered back to the park, dropping onto a bench. *That was no dream*, he thought. *That was no hallucination*. He wondered whether, if he approached those steps, he’d see it again. But then he remembered the map. And when he took it out and unfolded it, he was just in time to see the last traces of the Second Moment’s ink fading away, and the first of the Third Moment appear.