Zack and Addie were Katrina's most hopeful love story—two plucky partiers who rode out the storm in the French Quarter, tossing back drinks and making love in the empty street. They were, at least, until Addie's head was found in an oven and Zack had thrown himself off the roof of the Omni Royal Orleans hotel. Ethan Brown uncovers the story of two turbulent souls who survived Katrina but couldn't survive each other.

By Ethan Brown
Illustration by Brad Holland
Leo Watermeier couldn't bring himself to open his front door. It was just after 10 P.M. on October 16 and Watermeier stood outside one of the buildings he owns on New Orleans' North Rampart Street, stalling. A few minutes earlier, the police had delivered the disturbing news that Watermeier's 28-year-old tenant, Zackery Bowen, had jumped off the roof of the Omni Royal Orleans hotel. More disturbing, he had left a suicide note directing cops to the apartment, saying police would find the dismembered body of his girlfriend, Adriane "Addie" Hall.

"I got the keys, opened the door, and stood at the steps inside," Watermeier says. "But I didn't want to go upstairs."

It would be hard to blame him. When the New Orleans police burst into the apartment, they found Hall's charred head on the stove. Her hands and feet were in pots of water on the range, and her limbs had been baked. What remained of Hall's body was packed in black garbage bags in the refrigerator. This gruesome crime scene had been moldering for nearly two weeks; in his suicide note, Bowen confessed that he had killed his girlfriend on October 5.

News of Addie Hall and Zackery Bowen's deaths spread rapidly through the French Quarter, whose close-knit residents were even more bound together because so few remained post-Katrina. The Louisiana Recovery Authority recently estimated that the city's population, which was half a million in 2000, now stands at 190,000.

Just about everybody in the French Quarter, and many outside New Orleans, knew Hall and Bowen. Because they'd ridden out the storm together, the couple had become a national symbol of the city's seemingly indomitable spirit. In the days following the hurricane, Hall and Bowen were profiled everywhere—from the New York Times (on the front page, no less) to Alabama's Mobile Press-Register—described as strange survivalists who endured the storm's aftermath by fashioning paper plates into fly-swatters and using felled tree limbs as kindling for campfires. The New York Times recounted Hall's habit of "flash[ing] her breasts to permeate the entire city—had a soothing effect on the couple. But neither of them could escape their histories, and the story of how Hurricane Katrina's most celebrated couple became one of New Orleans' most horrifying murders is not the story of a storm, but of the deep and persistent emotional scars that re-emerged in its wake.

"I wish this love for every human being on the planet," Addie gushed to their party guests. It was just weeks after Katrina slammed the Gulf Coast, and Hall and Bowen were hosting a barbecue in the courtyard of Hall's apartment at 1012 Governor Nicholls Street. Bowen had just moved in with Hall and the couple was regaling friends with stories of how they rode out the storm together: cooking meals over an open fire and making love in the middle of Governor Nicholls Street.

Bowen was big and burly, he had a strong romantic streak: He married his first wife, Lana, in 2000 at St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans' historic Jackson Square; and he would often fete female friends with raw oysters at the city's classic seafood joint, Cooter Brown's Tavern and Oyster Bar.

Hall and Bowen shared a near-religious devotion to the dark barroom blues of singer-songwriter Ray LaMontagne,
hones, and, ultimately, a difficult decision about whether to remain in the city.

A different reality was intruding on Hall and Bowen. Bowen began bringing his two children to their Governor Nicholls apartment, which angered Hall. Adding to the tension was the fact that he was separated from—but had not divorced—their mother. “She wanted him to be a creation only for her,” DeVellas says of Hall. “It was the same with him: He fell in love with the goddess of the French Quarter. But that was not reality—and reality started forcing its way in.”

Hall was a heavy drinker who became abusive when drunk, often putting Bowen in her crosshairs. She’d deliver withering insults or tell him to stay away from their mother. “She wanted him to be a home for her,” DeVellas says of Hall. “I don’t want to be the last-ditch stop on your free-drink escapade.” Bowen, meanwhile, seemed unable to come to grips with his tours of duty, which ended in December 2004. His mood would lurch from gregarious to brooding, during which he would literally grunt responses to questions. Though a few of Bowen’s friends have claimed that he confessed to wartime atrocities, DeVellas says that Bowen was simply disillusioned when the ideological foundations for the Iraq war crumbled. “Zack might have been able to reconcile what he was doing,” DeVellas says, “but when you send a man to war and you find out the actual reasons are not what your leaders said they were, it makes it 100 times worse.”

As New Orleans slowly began to rebuild itself, Hall and Bowen’s relationship began to drown in booze and chaos. The couple took to playing a card game called suicide kings, which requires an entire pitcher of beer to be consumed whenever a king is pulled. While the game sometimes yielded inspired conversation, it induced as many epic fights as tears. After one clash, Bowen told Inez Quintanilla, a French Quarter bartender, that “women are bloodsuckers and money whores.” When Quintanilla responded, “Dude, you got issues,” Bowen shot back, “We all got issues. If you been through what I been through, maybe you would feel the same way.”

The end of summer 2006 was a particularly turbulent time, even by Hall and Bowen’s standards. In August, Hall was arrested for pulling a gun on a man in the French Quarter. A month or so later, Bowen was cuffed when police responded to complaints about his pounding on Hall’s apartment door and found a bag of his marijuana. By Labor Day, the two were living apart. Bowen got a job tending bar at a French Quarter bar called Buffa’s and moved into the Empress, a cheap hotel on a seedy block. He and Hall would seemingly get back together every few days, with Bowen carting his belongings to Addie’s Governor Nicholls Street apartment in his delivery bike’s basket. “I offered to let Zack move in with me,” says Rhonda Steff, a bartender at Buffa’s, “but he refused. I think they both enjoyed the drama.” In the midst of one of those reconciliations, the couple moved into Leo Watermeier’s 826 North Rampart Street. Because they had enough cash for the first month’s rent and a one-month deposit—a rarity in the post-Katrina city—Watermeier handed over the keys without a lease.

On the morning of October 4, however, Hall came to Watermeier’s office and demanded a six-month lease, so Watermeier hastily prepared a document on a piece of yellow legal paper. “Five minutes later, I get a phone call from Zack,” Watermeier recalls. “He says, ‘Did you just sign a six-month lease with Addie?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ He said, ‘Oh man, I’m screwed. She’s kicking me out and the lease is in her name.’ I said, ‘Well, I

“Sunday night I sawed off the rest of the legs and arms and put them in roasting pans, stuck them in the oven, and passed out.”

thought it was for the two of you. Don’t get mad at me.’ Then he hung up.”

Watermeier rushed over to 826 North Rampart and found the couple arguing in the doorway. “She said, ‘I caught him cheating on me!’” Watermeier recalls. He was surprised to hear tenants reveal such personal details and Hall, sensing his discomfort, tried to convince the landlord that she wouldn’t be causing any more trouble. “I’m gonna look after your place,” she promised Watermeier. “I’m gonna be a good tenant.” But as Watermeier settled in for the night, Hall and Bowen’s fighting raged on.

In his suicide note, Bowen described in measured detail what happened next: “She had stolen this apartment (ask Leo Watermeier. He’ll explain that one), tried to kick me out, then would not shut the
fuck up so I very calmly strangled her. It was very quick. Then after sexually defiling the body a few times I was posed with the question of how to dispose of the corpse.

Bowen passed out in a drunken stupor, waking in time for work at Matassa's, where he encountered DeVellas. "Zack was unshaven and quiet and smoking a cigarette," DeVellas remembers. "So I said, 'What happened?' He looks at me and goes, 'Me and Addie split, man. We had a real falling-out. She packed her bags, took some of my money, and went to North Carolina.'"

Later that day, DeVellas says he wondered if Bowen had killed Hali but dismissed the idea both times. After hours later turned off the stove, filled the tub with water and passed out.

Eventually, he finished taking apart the body: Sunday night I sawed off the rest of the legs and arms and put them in roasting pans, stuck them in the oven, and passed out. I came to seven hours later with an awful smell emanating [sic] from the kitchen. I turned off the oven and went to work Monday. This would be the last day I'd work.

Arriving home that night, Bowen found himself overcome with horror and self-hatred. To blot out what he had done, he plunged into an oblivion of drinking and drugs, guzzling bottles of Jameson's, snorting thick rails of cocaine, throwing cause it was "not something you can even comprehend a friend doing."

When Bowen returned to North Rampart Street just after 9 that night, he began dismembering Hali's corpse: I came home, moved the body to the tub, got a saw and hacked off her feet, hands and head, he wrote. Put her head in the oven (after giving it an awful haircut) put her hands and feet in the water on the range. Then I got drunk(er) and some down hundreds of dollars for lap dances, and disappearing for two days. When he emerged, he and DeVellas took a cab into the French Quarter, where Bowen bought DeVellas drinks and lap dances with a stripper dressed as a policewoman. "He was back to being old Zack—happy-go-lucky, smiling, having a great time," DeVellas remembers. "But then he said something that mirrored exactly what Addie had said about him the last time I saw her: 'I'm not who everybody thinks I am.'"

At a housewarming party DeVellas threw three nights later, Bowen kept the party rolling, bartending and singing drinks until sunrise. When the last guest went home, he sat with DeVellas in the living room and listened to Ray LaMontagne's "Trouble"—the album that he and Addie had loved, the music that had carried them through the harrowing storm.

New Orleans has always attracted a particularly hardy type of bohemian who refuses to be bowed by the city's challenges, from its high crime rate to its hellishly hot weather. But since Katrina, New Orleans seems overwhelmed by scars, both physical and emotional. Even in the mostly unscathed French Quarter, piles of debris remain. On one street, someone stacked refuse into a truck and placed a sign on it reading NAGIN'S LIMO—a jab at New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin. That bitter humor is detectable elsewhere—on Bourbon Street there are T-shirts for sale featuring fuck-you rants to Allstate Insurance Company and FEMA—but it's often subsumed by a near-tangible fear that the city might never come back.

The feel of a city in transition is only magnified by the transience of its population; nearly one-third of the city's residents will never come back. Only the strongest of souls seem willing to weather such persistent despair.

In November, Zack and Addie's belongings—the red delivery bike, the doll's car and her posessions back and forth, their toaster oven and coffee machine—sat unclaimed in the leafy courtyard of their North Rampart Street apartment. And like the other debris gathered along the street, and the spirit of the city itself, it seemed no one was coming to pick them up.