

Caught Forever Between

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Tearing down the yellow crime-scene tape, Cass keyed open the door to INNER EYE TATTOO and stepped inside. Closing the door, she glanced around the shattered shop she and Alex shared.

Broken glass from the windows glittered like mica on the stone-tiled floor and on the sofa; night-glo inks, their pungent odor lingering still in the humid air, smeared the walls, ceiling, and floor in neon-bright Rorschach designs. Almost everything had been bashed or ripped apart — the computer, the phone, Alex's patterns and sketches and, behind her . . .

Cass turned, glass crunching beneath her Doc Martens, and looked past the remains of the sterilizer and the tat gun scattered on the bloodstained floor.

Alex's blood. Clotted and dried into eerie designs that rivaled some of his best work —

Throat tight, Cass looked away. Whoever had done this had hated Alex, hated him in secret until it had finally burst free, spattering the shop with a bitterness so thick she could feel it still; smell it bile-rank beneath the spicy-sweet odors of boiled shrimp and cayenne, magnolias and chicory coffee drifting in through the broken windows.

A week since That Night and Alex remained in a coma at Charity Hospital — would her Michelangelo dream forever? Never again open his eyes? — and *nothing* had been done.

Just like nothing had been done when her mother was murdered fifteen years ago in Boise.

Switching on the fan, Cass sank down onto the client lounge. She sighed in relief as the fan's breeze dried the sweat on her face and throat. The warm rush of air plastered her black mesh tank top against her perspiration-dampened skin and fluttered the hem of her red plaid skirt. From outside, jazz and faint laughter from Dumaine Street floated in to mingle with the fan's determined hum.

Another sultry N'awlins night. Her seventh night in hell. And counting — until Alex opened his eyes again.

If, a traitorous part of her whispered, repeating the doctor's words. *If. And even then, he could remain in a vegetative state, blue eyes open, but empty. Forever.*

Cass pulled her feet up onto the lounge and wrapped her arms around her fishnet-clad legs. She shut her eyes and rested her chin against her knees. She felt like a little kid again, no longer

eighteen, longing for the comfort of embracing arms.

In the darkness behind Cass's eyes, an image of her mother formed — the only one she had — bending over Cass's bed, long red hair shadowing her face, but something glittered — fairy sparkles? magic dust? tears? — on her mother's cheeks as she reached for Cass and shushed her, saying in her husky voice that everything was all right.

Cass often wondered what had brought her mother in to comfort her — a nightmare? fever? simple love? She'd asked Helena once. Her sister had stared at her, dark eyes shadowed by long red curls, looking so eerily like their mother in that moment that Cass's heart had started pounding hard and, for a split second, she'd been terrified of what Helena might say. In the end, though, Helena had shaken her head, and said, her voice low and taut, "Geez, Cass, I don't know. I was on my own then."

Cass half believed that Helena still wished she was on her own, not saddled with a kid sister. Helena had followed the free trade South, teaching Cass the Art along the way and with the years. They'd always had to hide since Helena refused to go legit, refused to join the Tattoo Artists Union, refused to be anyone's apprentice. Preferred to be an ink-slinging outlaw.

They'd settled in New Orleans when Cass was thirteen. That was the year they'd discovered that Cass was an Intuitive — an artist who could see into and symbolize the inner person.

Helena had abruptly stopped teaching her, insisting she wasn't qualified. Helena had found someone who could, though — Alexander "Michelangelo" Paris — another Intuitive and an apprentice to a *legitimate* ink-slinger. Over the next five years, between his regular duties, Alex had guided and taught Cass.

And when, six months ago, Alex had opened his own shop, and Cass'd left Helena to be his apprentice, she'd seen darkness brewing in her sister's eyes and, beneath her cigarette-and-vanilla scent, Cass'd smelled something bitter.

Like she did now.

The cops were dicking around, and the Union pretended to make an effort, but nothing was being done to find Alex's shooter. So Cass'd sent word that she sought justice through the streets, bars, and botanicas of the French Quarter, and even into the Projects. Sought justice and would pay for it.

Her mother's murder had never been solved, but that wasn't going to happen with Alex.

Tinkling bells, followed by the swoosh of the front door swinging shut, roused Cass. Her

eyes flew open, and she jumped up from the lounge, heart thudding.

The woman standing just inside the door appeared to be in her late fifties or early sixties. She wore a simple, flowered sundress and sandals. A red scarf hugged the gray-streaked black curls framing her face. Gold hooped through her earlobes and encircled her wrists, bright as sunshine on her cypress-brown skin. Her gaze met Cass's. Cass's skin prickled. Power radiated from the woman, dark and bayou-steeped.

Mambo.

"Be you M'selle Danger?" the woman asked.

Cass nodded and smoothed down her skirt. "Actually, it's Danzinger, but I work under the name Cassandra Danger . . . ma'am."

"I be Gabrielle LaRue."

"Ma'am. I wasn't expecting an answer so . . . soon," Cass said, more than aware of the shattered glass, ink, and blood on the floor. "I thought maybe . . . well . . . that I'd have to . . ." *What?* she wondered, her fingers pleating her skirt. *Undergo some midnight ritual, give a secret handshake, slaughter a chicken?*

"I don't have time for that kind of nonsense," the *mambo* snorted, as though Cass had spoken aloud. "How can I help you, *m'selle*?"

"Cass, if you please, ma'am," she said, forcing her fingers away from her skirt. Pondering how to answer the *mambo*'s question, Cass glanced into her eyes. Their hazel depths tugged at her like quicksand, and the harder she struggled, the deeper she sank. Gabrielle's scent — dark earth, water, and incense — whirled into her, dizzied her.

The *mambo* clasped Cass's hand; cool fingers latched around her wrist. "What is it you need?"

Cass shook her head and forced her gaze down to their linked hands. Summer dusk and pale winter noon, their hands. She felt the sudden urge to draw. She shook her head again, trying to focus.

"My Michelangelo. . . ." Cass said, then lapsed into silence. There were no words for what she needed to say. Still holding the *mambo*'s cool hand, she turned. She looked at the dried blood pooled on the floor, the designs streaking across stone tiles and spattering one wall. "My Michelangelo," she whispered.

The woman beside her drew in a breath. "Ah," she said, squeezing Cass's hand, then

releasing it. “The blood’s been spilled, child. You can’t put it back. Name the thing you want.”

“I want Alex to open his eyes,” Cass said, her gaze still on the floor. “And justice. I want justice.” She glanced at the *mambo*.

A wry smile curved Gabrielle’s lips. “So,” she murmured. “Justice.” She shook her head. The *mambo* stepped gingerly to the counter, glass and other broken things gritting beneath her sandals. She traced a design on the counter with a long-nailed finger.

“I wonder if you know what that truly means or what shape it can take,” Gabrielle said. Her finger stopped moving. She turned to face Cass. “Or how cold and brutal justice can be.”

“Colder than a bullet to the head?” Cass asked, throat tight. She strode over to the wall. With a trembling hand, she tore down one of the tacked-up patterns. Whirling, she held the blood-spattered paper up for the *mambo* to see. “More brutal than that?” She shook the pattern. “If so, then it’s justice I want.”

Lips compressed, Gabrielle stepped forward and gently tugged the pattern from Cass’s fingers. She looked at it for a long moment, then folded and tucked it into a pocket in her sundress. She sighed. A deep line creased the skin between her eyebrows. She held Cass’s gaze, and Cass thought she saw something submerged like a ’gator in those hazel depths.

“It won’t change a thing. You understand?” the *mambo* said. “The bullet still fired . . . the blood still spilled. And your Michelangelo, his eyes still closed.”

Cass dropped her gaze. Outside, summer thunder rumbled across the sky. She remembered Alex sprawled on the stone floor, his head pillowed on her lap; remembered her hand pressed against the wound, his blood hot against her fingers.

Her hands curled into fists. “Maybe so. But it’ll even things out,” she said, voice strained. “Blood for blood.”

“Nothing *ever* evens out spilled blood, child,” Gabrielle said, weariness edging her voice. “But . . . so be it. Come to the bayou tomorrow night, after sunset. Bring your tattoo gun and your inks. Tell *mon filleul* — my godson — what it is you want. If he lets you set your gun to work on his skin, then all you’ll need do is give him a name.”

Glass crunched under the *mambo*’s sandals as she walked to the front door. She opened it, tinkling the bell. Glancing over her shoulder, she said, “Then you will get your justice, child.” Neon light from the street flickered across the dark planes of her face, creating a mask of ever-shifting colors. “As cold and brutal as you could ever want.”

“Wait,” Cass called as the *mambo* started out the door. “I don’t know how to find you. I need directions.”

Gabrielle nodded toward the counter. “You already got ’em.” Then she was gone.

Cass looked down at the counter. There, glowing on the polished wood surface, was a map — drawn by the *mambo* as she’d talked to Cass. She stared at it, heart pounding, sweat trickling between her breasts and along her ribs. Thunder rumbled and drumrolled. Heat lightning flashed white across the horizon.

Going to the back room, Cass filled a bucket with hot water and cleanser. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror above the sink — long auburn hair streaked with purple to match her dark violet eyes; eyes blue-smudged from lack of sleep instead of outlined with the usual black kohl; pale face, rose-tinted lips — a ghost startled by her own unexpected reflection.

Struggling for air, Cass looked down. Her fingers clutched the cold porcelain edge of the sink. Head bowed, face shielded by her hair, she refused to look up again. Didn’t want to see Alex fading from her eyes.

Cass pushed away from the sink and gave the mirror her back. After tying up her sweat-dampened hair, she fetched a broom, dustpan, and a roll of trash bags. She had a night’s hard work ahead of her.

Fixing her gaze once again on the dried blood, Cass memorized every streak and spatter, needling its design like a tattoo onto her heart. “Whoever Madame LaRue’s godson is,” she whispered, “he’ll never be cold enough or brutal enough for me.”

An evening breeze blew in from the street, bringing the smell of distant rain and the river’s odor of fish, mud, and decay. As Cass set to sweeping, an image gleaned from Helena’s heart right after Alex’s shooting burned in her mind: a tiger rearing up on muscular hind legs, claws slashing, fangs bared in a snarl, guarding a sleeping cub behind it. A figure — just a black silhouette, really — went down beneath those claws. But Cass recognized her Michelangelo bleeding on the floor.

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Cass stopped and switched off her scooter when she reached the end of the dirt trail. Lifting her shades, she glanced at the map she’d copied from the counter. The scooter’s motor clicked as

it cooled, blending with the insect hum and buzz — the only sounds she heard. The air was thick with the smells of green things and wet tree roots and sun-heated swamp water.

She wiped sweat from her forehead as she looked up at the Spanish-moss-draped cypress. Beyond the dark trunks, the sunset blazed like a forest fire, searing the sky purple, orange, and red.

Sliding off the seat, Cass stood beside her scooter, squinting into the sunset-hazed darkness beyond the trees. She thought she saw a building of some kind ahead — maybe a swamp shack. Something tickled the back of her bug-spray-guarded knee, and Cass slapped the spot without looking, her gaze still locked on the barely discernible path through the cypress and along the edge of the swamp.

She shrugged her knapsack higher onto her shoulder, its weight pressing her sweat-damp velvet-and-mesh dress against her skin. Perspiration trickled between her shoulder blades, and her heart pounded so hard her body trembled with each beat. The humidity and heat sucked at each shallow breath as she drew it in.

Something rustled in the tall grass beside the swamp. Cass's heart ratcheted up to warp speed. She stared, frozen, at the heat-yellowed sawgrass. 'Gator! her mind babbled. But nothing moved. Nothing she could *see*, anyway.

Drawing in a deep breath, she stepped onto the path. Dirt crunched beneath her Docs. Dropping her shades back over her eyes, she walked in between the trees and into the sun-gilded mosquito-laden darkness. The insect buzz and chirping, croaking frog song stopped abruptly, abandoning her to a thick, watchful silence.

With each grass-muffled step she took, Cass became more certain she *was* being watched. The hair on the back of her neck prickled, and her muscles tensed. She kept her gaze straight ahead and her pace even. She fought the urge to run, sensing that if she did, whatever was out there would chase her. And catch her.

After five long minutes, the back of a weatherworn shack on flood stilts appeared out of the twilight. Cass stopped several yards short of it. She removed her shades, then tucked them into a side pocket of the knapsack. A motorcycle was parked beside the towering oaks behind the shack — a Harley, Cass judged.

Off to one side was a cistern to catch rainwater, and on the other side was an outhouse as weathered as the shack. As Cass walked along the right side, she passed a tree stump holding an

ax. She paused for a moment as unwanted slasher-film images popped into her mind; then, shaking her head, she circled around to the front of the shack. A porch with a dock extended to the swamp and the *piroque* tied to it. A short flight of steps in front led to the porch.

“Hello?” Cass called, her voice loud and uncertain in the silence. “Madame LaRue?”

A single cricket chirruped, then fell silent.

“*Oui*, girl,” said the *mambo*’s familiar voice. “Over here.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Cass glanced in the direction of the *mambo*’s voice. An engine chugged to life, filling the air with a mechanical hum. On the right side of the porch, Gabrielle LaRue straightened up from the generator she’d started. A blue scarf matching the royal blue dress she wore, covered her curls.

“I be right wit’ you,” the *mambo* said. Giving the generator one last glance, she descended the steps to join Cass. She looked Cass over from head to toe, then shook her head. “Ain’t you a sight in your red dress, girl? Mmm-mmm.” She shook her head again. “Nothing subtle about you, Cassandra Danzinger. You might as well be wearing your Michelangelo’s blood.”

Heat rushed to Cass’s cheeks, and she was grateful for the deepening dusk. “No, I . . . that is. . . .” She lapsed into silence, wondering if Gabrielle was right. *Had* she chosen red to symbolize the thing she sought — to win her cause with the *mambo*’s godson?

Gabrielle glanced past Cass. “Introduce yourself, boy,” she said.

Cass whirled, the knapsack flying off her shoulder and thudding hard onto the grass-matted ground. In the lingering shadows cast by the cypress and oak trees, the *mambo*’s godson stood no more than a handspan away from her.

“Evenin’, *m’selle*. I be Devlin Daniels,” he said, his voice low, the rhythm of his words Cajun-spiced.

“Uh . . . evening,” Cass managed.

She quickly looked him over, her artist’s eye noting details. He appeared to be in his mid-to-late twenties, taller than Cass’s five-two by eight or nine inches, his body lean, muscular, and broad-shouldered. Tangled black hair fell just past his shoulders and swept over the left side of his face, almost hiding the left eye. He was bare-chested and barefoot, his black jeans torn and weathered almost gray. A *vévé*-etched *ouanga* bag on a leather thong hung around his neck, and through the blackness of his hair, she caught a flash of silver. Two sets of scars — thick and white with age — crisscrossed his chest.

His ash-gray eyes gleamed, capturing and reflecting the dying sunset behind her. Cass's breath caught in her throat. Lambent eyes. Hungry and watchful — like something wild waiting in the brush, all glowing eyes and sharp teeth.

“Somethin’ wrong?” Devlin asked, leaning closer.

Cass shook her head, not wanting him to come nearer. But he did anyway, closing the short distance between them. The hair on the nape of her neck rose and her hands knotted. Survival instincts *insisted* she not run.