



AMANDA STEVENS

He watches. He covets. He takes...

the dollmaker

“The sinister world of Amanda Stevens will feed the dark side of your soul...and leave you hungry for more.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Christina Dodd

Praise for
Amanda Stevens

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—*New York Times* bestselling author Christina Dodd

“Breathless, chilling and unforgettable.
When you crack open an Amanda Stevens book,
prepare to be thrilled.”

—*USA TODAY* bestselling author Patricia Kay

“*Just Past Midnight* is a taut and suspenseful tale
guaranteed to keep readers on the edge of their
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—*Romantic Times BOOKreviews*

“Ms. Stevens shows her magic of writing tales to
snare the reader. She weaves intrigue,
believable characters, legends and emotion
together seamlessly for an engrossing read.”

—*Best Reviews on Secret Sanctuary*

Amanda Stevens

The Dollmaker



For Leanne, Lucas and Steven

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Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

Prologue

The doll was getting to him. Even though Travis McSwain wasn't a man easily spooked. She was so lifelike that anyone glancing through the shop window might mistake her for a pretty, little, blond-haired girl.

But up close, the eyes gave her away. They looked like pieces of turquoise. Travis had never seen real eyes that color.

He didn't like staring at her for too long because his mind kept playing tricks on him. Earlier, when he'd packed her up to bring her into the city, he could have sworn those glass eyes followed his every move. They gave him the chills so bad he'd had half a mind to chuck her in the swamp. But he needed the money and so here he was.

The shopkeeper glanced up from her inspection. "She's stunning. Absolutely breathtaking. If you just give me a few more minutes we can discuss your payment terms."

"Take your time," Travis muttered, but he wished to hell the woman would hurry up. The sooner he got rid of the doll the sooner he'd breathe a lot easier.

Something about that porcelain face creeped him out. It was almost as if Travis had seen her before, in a dream maybe, but he didn't know how that could be possible. She was one of a kind.

He'd gone up to the old Sweete place looking for work, and when he spotted the doll through the front window, he'd decided to snatch her, because that's what he did. He took things that didn't belong to him. It was some kind of sickness, he reckoned.

Before his Pentecostal mother went off the deep end, she used to weep and pray for his immortal soul, but his daddy had favored another approach. Whenever Travis got caught using the five-finger discount, the old man would take a belt to his hide, work him over good until his back and butt cheek resembled raw steak.

But after the first time Travis got sent off to juvenile detention in St. James Parish, Cletus McSwain's attitude had changed. He'd pretty much washed his hands of his son. "One of these days you'll pinch from the wrong person, boy, and end up with a bullet right between the eyeballs. And when that happens, I'll be damned if I shed a tear over your sorry ass."

Well, that was fair. Because Travis sure as hell hadn't done much crying when the pious old bastard got swept off a shrimp boat and drowned in the Gulf. And now here Travis stood, right as rain, while his daddy swam with the fishes down in Terrebonne Bay.

Sometimes you just had to laugh at how things worked out.

Travis leaned an elbow on the counter and tried to assume a casual air as the shopkeeper continued to study the doll. But every once in a while, when the woman wasn't looking, his gaze would dart to the front window. He didn't like to put much stock in his old man's predictions, but ever since he'd taken the doll, Travis had a real bad feeling that maybe, just maybe, he'd gotten in over his head this time. Boosting cars was one thing, but jacking that doll was starting to feel a little like kidnapping.

A shiver snaked up his spine. It was like the damn thing was hexed or something.

He fingered the mojo bag he carried around in his pocket. *It's just a toy.*

But the doll was more than a toy. Everyone in Terrebonne Parish knew that Savannah Sweete's dolls were one of a kind and worth a lot of money. And someone was going to want it back.

He cast another glance at the window. Rain was coming and the gloomy twilight deepened his unease. He was letting his nerves get the better of him, but he couldn't seem to help it. New Orleans

did that to him. He hadn't been back since Katrina, and the landscape had changed so much he'd hardly recognized the place, driving in. But the soul of the city—the Vieux Carré—remained the same. Travis didn't know if that was a good thing or not.

Earlier, he'd walked around for a little while before his appointment with the shop owner, and he'd been struck by how normal everything seemed. Normal for the Quarter, anyway. It was still early, but the strip joints on Bourbon Street were already open, giving passersby free peep shows from the doorways. Travis's attention had been captivated by a tall, leggy blonde undulating to a country and western song. Her back was to the door, but when she glanced over her shoulder, her dark eyes fastened like laser beams on Travis.

She was incredibly limber, and her ass and thighs were as tight as the skin on a snare drum. She smiled and curled a finger in his direction, inviting him in for a closer inspection, and Travis had been sorely tempted. But then she turned slowly to face him, and anger washed over him when he realized he'd been standing there gawking at a transvestite.

A throaty voice had said from the doorway, "Come on in, sugar, she don't bite. Her name is Cherry Rose. You like what Cherry Rose got down there, no?"

"No," Travis muttered, and turned away.

"Hey, don't be like that!" the voice called after him. "Come on back here, baby. Cherry Rose make a real man out of you."

Some of the tourists on the street overheard and started laughing, and Travis's fist itched to connect with the he-bitch's red mouth. But Bourbon Street drag queens were notorious for strapping switchblades to their thighs, and when they got all hopped up on speed, they'd as soon cut a man's balls off as look at him.

So Travis had hurried away. But as he crossed the street he'd glanced back and noticed someone standing on the sidewalk, staring after him. Not the dancer or the hawker in the doorway, but a strange-looking woman wearing silver earrings and a flowing green skirt.

Something about the way she gazed at him startled Travis, and he'd paused for a moment to stare back at her. Then he lost her in the noisy crowd on the street and moved on.

He thought about the woman now and wondered where she'd gone off to, wondered if he might be able to find her once his business with the shopkeeper was settled.

Then again, maybe he ought to leave well enough alone and get his ass on home, where he could tell what was what. But after taking that doll, Terrebonne Parish might not be the safest place for him right now.

Suppressing a shudder, he said impatiently, "Don't mean to rush you, ma'am, but I ain't got all night."

The woman looked up with an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry for making you wait, dear, but I rarely come across workmanship of this quality. The freckles across the nose...the tiny birthmark on her left arm...that kind of attention to detail is a Savannah Sweete trademark. I just can't get over how meticulous she is."

"Uh-huh."

"However..." The woman's tone sharpened, as if she was readying herself to get down to business. She was an old broad with steely blue eyes and cottony hair. Her glasses were the shape of cat's eyes and as she spoke, she kept slipping them off and chewing on one of the stems.

Travis frowned. "What's wrong? You don't like her so much all of a sudden?"

"No, it isn't that. As I said, the doll is beautiful. But there are some fairly convincing imitations making the rounds these days. A few of Savannah's former students have mastered her technique, and I know of one or two who have actually tried to pass off their work as hers." The woman paused, her gaze dropping to the doll. "Do you have the certificate of authenticity?"

Travis had thought that might be a problem, but he was prepared to bluff his way through it. After all, ~~bullshitting was second nature to him. Just like stealing.~~ “If you’re the expert you claim to be, you should be able to tell just by looking at her that she’s the real deal.” He reached out and flipped one of the doll’s golden curls with his fingertip. “You said yourself you’ve never seen such quality.”

The woman slid the glasses up her nose and bent back over the doll. “I’m ninety-nine percent certain she’s genuine, but if you could obtain her paperwork, the value would double.”

“Sorry, but I’m offering her as is. You don’t want her, I’ll go elsewhere. I figure there’s plenty of shops and private collectors out there who’d like to get their hands on a fine piece like this.”

“Perhaps. But you have to understand my position. My livelihood hinges on my reputation. If you could at least tell me how and where you acquired her...?”

Travis didn’t like the sound of that. The last thing he needed was for the old biddy to call the cops. “Why do you need to know that?”

“As I said, I have a reputation to consider. I have to be cautious.”

This wasn’t going as well as he’d hoped. The woman was playing hardball and he now had two options. Stay and haggle or take the doll and walk. By this time tomorrow he’d probably have another buyer, but he didn’t much like the notion of driving all the way back home, knowing those glass eyes would be watching him another night.

“Okay, it’s like this. The doll belonged to my girl-friend’s kid. The little girl up and died suddenly and my old lady can’t have a reminder like that lying around the house. She asked me to get rid of it for her. Considering everything she’s been through, I don’t see how I can worry her about the paperwork. You understand.”

“Of course I do. How awful to lose a child. And one so beautiful.” She stroked the doll’s smooth cheek. “I have two little granddaughters. I can’t imagine anything more tragic—”

“So we got us a deal or what?”

The shopkeeper’s attention lingered on the doll. She couldn’t seem to tear her gaze away. “Cut ten percent off the price we discussed on the phone and we’ll call it a day.”

“Sounds fair enough.”

She smiled, satisfied. “Good. If you’ll wait here, I’ll write you a check.”

Travis’s hand snaked out to curl around her wrist. “Like I said earlier, I’m partial to cash.”

The woman’s eyes flickered. He could see suspicion working its way back to the surface, but she wanted the doll so bad she was willing to ignore her instincts. She shook off his hand and gave a curt nod. “I’ll be right back.”

She reappeared a few moments later and handed him an envelope. “It’s all there—the amount we agreed on earlier, less ten percent. But feel free to count it, Mr...”

Travis pocketed the envelope with a grin. “I trust you. Besides, if you short me I know where to find you.”

The woman’s hand fluttered to her throat and she turned a little pale, as if suddenly realizing that she’d just struck a bargain with the devil.

Lady, if you only knew.

She followed him to the door and after he stepped outside, he heard the click of the dead bolt behind him. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the woman’s silhouette in the window, but she quickly shut off the light and pulled the shade.

Travis stood on the sidewalk for a moment, deciding whether he wanted to go straight home or stop off somewhere for a drink. It wasn’t often he had spare change in his pocket. Might as well do a little celebrating.

Across the street, a shadow darted into a doorway, and his heart raced. For a moment he thought it was the woman he’d seen earlier on Bourbon Street, but as he peered into the shadows, he couldn’t

make her out.

~~He was seeing things, probably. A guilty conscience could make a man jumpy.~~

Whatever the hell was wrong with him, he couldn't wait to get out of New Orleans. Too many weirdos hanging around to suit him. He'd leave the city before having that drink. Maybe stop off at a little place he knew on the way home, buy a bucket of shrimp and have a few beers. Later he'd make a liquor store run with Desiree, and the two of them could sit out on his back porch getting shit-faced as they watched heat lightning over the Gulf.

It all sounded good.

Hunching his shoulders against a light rain, he headed east toward Bourbon Street. At the corner of Chartres and St. Louis, a group of tourists had stopped to watch an old black man tap-dance beneath a balcony. The rat-a-tat-tat of his shoes resonated in the darkness, and for some reason the sound made Travis feel lonely.

He stopped to stuff a couple of bills into a beat-up coffee can, then quickly moved on, discomforted by the man's toothless grin. The old geezer looked to be pushing eighty. He should have been tucked away somewhere in a rest home instead of busting his hump on a street corner in the rain. But that was New Orleans for you. The old didn't die here. They were just forgotten.

"You don't get yourself straightened out, that'll be you someday, boy," he could hear his daddy goad him.

Travis didn't want to think about his father or the future or even what he was going to do with himself beyond the next drunk. He tuned out the echo of the old man's taps as he neared the cathedral and turned up St. Peter.

The street was nearly deserted here except for a woman who stood in the glow of a shop window. She wore a green skirt, and when she moved her head, light sparked off her silver earrings.

Travis slowed his steps. She was the same woman he'd seen earlier on Bourbon Street.

Their gazes connected as he approached, and a shiver slid up his spine. She had the palest face he'd ever laid eyes on. He knew he'd never seen her before tonight, but there was something eerily familiar about her features. He couldn't put his finger on what it was.

She smiled, and the skin at the back of his neck crawled. Who the hell *was* she?

Spooked by that smile, Travis decided to keep on walking, but as he passed her, she said in a low voice, "Can I trouble you for a light?"

Not exactly an original line, but curiosity got the better of him and he reached in his pocket for a lighter. Turning, he shielded the flame with his cupped hand as she lifted a cigarette to her lips. They were nice lips. Not too full, not too thin. It was only when she smiled that something seemed off about her mouth.

She took a pull and slowly exhaled the smoke, then handed the cigarette to Travis. He didn't know what he was supposed to do with it, but when he took a drag, she didn't seem to mind.

"So what are you doing out here all by your lonesome?" he asked.

"Killing time."

"Kind of dangerous to be here alone. Nothing but freaks in the Quarter."

She smiled. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

That smile. Travis wished she'd stop doing that. It wasn't a nice smile and it kind of ruined the mood for him. He glanced away.

"Do you like to party?" she asked.

"Doesn't everybody?"

"My place is just back there." She nodded toward a narrow alley that ran between two buildings. "Got a nice little courtyard where we can sit and watch the rain. Come on," she said, and started walking. "I'll buy you a drink."

Her smile might not do anything for him, but the way she walked sure as hell did. Travis followed her into the alley. He didn't know if she was a hooker or just some bitch out for a good time, but at the moment, he didn't really give a shit. The money he'd made from the doll was burning a hole in his pocket.

She was a few steps ahead of him, humming something under her breath.

"What's that you're singing?"

"It's an old song. Something my mother used to sing to me at bedtime." She glanced over her shoulder. "Do you like it?"

"Yeah, it's nice." He hurried to catch up with her. "My mama didn't believe in music. Or dancing."

"How sad for you." She paused to adjust the strap on her sandal, and when she lost her balance, she grabbed Travis's arm to right herself.

He stared down at her in the darkness. She laughed softly, and the next thing Travis knew, he had her backed up against the brick wall.

She laughed again, a breathy sound that spiked his heartbeat. But when he tried to kiss her, she turned her head so that his lips only grazed her pale cheek. He moved to her ear, then nuzzled her neck as he put a hand on her narrow waist, letting his thumb slide up beneath her breast. She was small there, too, but he didn't mind. "What's your name?"

After a slight hesitation, she said in a husky whisper, "Madeline."

"That's a nice name." Travis figured she'd made it up on the spur of the moment, but he didn't care if she had. After tonight, they'd never see each other again, anyway. "You smell good, Madeline."

He again tried to kiss her, but she gave him a playful shove. "Take it easy, okay? We've got all night. Don't you want that drink first?"

He rubbed up against her, grinding his hips against hers. "You know what I want."

"Sure I do, baby." Her hand slid between them and she ran it up and down his fly. "But it'll cost you."

"How much?"

"A hundred and fifty." Her hand squeezed him. "You got that much?"

He fished in his pocket for the money and handed it to her in the dark. "For that kind of dough, you better be something special."

"Oh, I am." She slipped the folded bills into her bra. "I'm very special. You've never been with anyone like me before, honey."

Reversing their positions, she pushed him up against the wall, then wet a finger in her mouth and traced his lips. "You want it fast or slow?"

"Right now, I want you on your knees," he said, and unzipped his pants.

"Patience, baby. Good things come to those who wait." Her fingers closed around him as she slid her other hand over his shoulder.

Travis let his head fall back against the brick wall, his breath quickening as he swelled in her hand. An instant later, he felt a sharp sting in the side of his neck, and pushed her away. "What the hell was that?"

She smiled in the dark. "You're going to need something for the pain."

"Pain?" His voice rose in fury as he lifted a hand to his neck. "What did you do to me, you fucking bitch?" Light from an apartment overhead filtered into the alley, and he could see her eyes staring back at him. He hadn't noticed before how blue they were. And then in a flash, it came to him where he'd seen that face before.

Fear and revulsion rose in his throat a split second before his muscles collapsed. He tried to stay on his feet, tried to grab her around the throat, but he had no control over his limbs. He fell to his knees, his gaze locked on hers. His mouth gaped open, but no sound came out.

“You took something of mine and now I’m going to have to do some very bad things to get her back.”

With a foot on his chest, she shoved him backward. Paralyzed, he fell to the dirty pavement, his gaze fixed on those blue eyes.

She removed a scalpel from her bag and knelt beside him. “This is going to be a little crude and messy, I’m afraid, but I can’t have the police tracing you or the doll back to me.”

A fresh wave of terror washed over Travis. He wanted to get up and run. He wanted to scream for help. He wanted to fight for his life.

But he could only lie there helplessly as she lowered the blade and began to cut off his fingers.

One

Twilight always fell anxiously over the Big Easy, especially when it rained. That's when the ghosts came out. A wisp of steam rising from the wet pavement. The murmur of voices from a hidden courtyard. Something dark and stealthy moving in the shadows, and suddenly you were reminded of a past that wouldn't stay buried.

New Orleans was like that. A city of memories, Dave Creasy always called it. A city of secrets and whispers and the kind of regret that could eat a man up inside. Like the wrong woman, she'd get in a man's blood, destroy his soul, make him feel alive and dead at the same time. And on a hot, rainy night—when the ghosts came out—it could be the loneliest place on earth.

Welcome back, a voice whispered in Dave's head as he lifted his face, eyes closed, and listened to the rustle of rain through the white oleanders that drooped over a crumbling brick wall along St. Peters.

It was strange how the city could still seduce him. He'd been born and raised in New Orleans, and like everyone else he knew, there'd been a time when he couldn't wait to get out. Now he couldn't seem to stay away. The ghosts wouldn't let him.

A car slowed on the street in front of him, and a child stared out at him from a rain-streaked window. She looked a little like Ruby, and Dave watched her until the car was out of sight, the pain in his chest as familiar now as his heartbeat. Then he started walking.

Around the next corner, a neon half-moon sputtered in the gathering darkness. He wanted to think of the light as a beacon, but he knew better. The Crescent City Bar could never in a million years be considered a haven. Not for him, at least.

As he entered the room, an infinitesimal chill slid over him. *Welcome back*, that taunting voice whispered again.

The bar was nearly empty. A handful of zombielike patrons sat with heads bowed over drinks, the only acknowledgment of their coexistence a mingling of cigarette smoke that drifted up from the tables. The old wood blades of the ceiling fans rotated overhead, barely stirring warm air that reeked of sweat, booze and despair.

Welcome back, welcome back, welcome back.

Dave took a seat at the end of the bar, where he could watch the door. He hadn't been a cop for nearly seven years, but old habits died hard.

From the other end, the hulk of a bartender watched him with open suspicion. He was tall and tough, with skin the texture of leather. Jubal Roach had to be at least sixty, but the forearms underneath his rolled-up shirtsleeves bulged with muscle, and his sullen expression reflected, as Dave knew only too well, a still-murderous disposition.

Dave's old partner had once warned him about Jubal's temper. They'd stopped in for a beer after their watch one night and the surly bartender had copped an attitude from the get-go. Back in the day Dave hadn't been one to turn the other cheek.

"Man, let it go," Titus had said in a nervous whisper. "You don't want to tangle with that S.O.B. Once he start in whaling on you, he like a big 'ol loggerhead. He ain't gonna let you go till it thunder Or till you dead."

It was good advice. Too bad Dave hadn't had the sense to heed it.

He and Jubal played the staring game for several more seconds, then, with a hardening of his

features, the older man ambled down to Dave's end of the bar.

"Jubal." Dave greeted him warily, mindful of the nightstick and brass knuckles the bartender kept under the counter. "How's it going?"

"Dave Creasy. Been a while since I saw your ugly mug in here. Kinda thought you might be dead."

Kinda *hoped* was the inference. "I bought a place in St. Mary Parish awhile back."

"Same difference, you ask me." Jubal got down a glass and a bottle of whiskey. "The usual?"

"Nah, I'm on the wagon these days."

"Since when?"

Eight months, four days, nine hours and counting. "Since the last time I got thrown in jail for disorderly conduct."

Jubal's gold tooth flashed in the light from the Abita Purple Haze sign over the bar.

Dave touched the area over his left eye. His memories of that night had faded, but the scar hadn't. It had taken him two days to get out of the drunk tank, another five before he'd stumbled into the nearest emergency room with a raging fever. The infection had laid him flat for nearly two weeks, and by the time he got out of the hospital, fifteen pounds lighter, a jagged scar was the least of his worries.

"You're lucky you didn't lose your eye," the young intern had scolded him. "However, at the moment, I'm more concerned about your liver. You have what is known as alcohol hepatitis, which can be treated but only if alcohol consumption is stopped. Otherwise, this condition is likely to cause cirrhosis, Mr. Creasy," he'd stated bluntly. "If you don't stop drinking, there's a good chance you won't make it to your fortieth birthday."

Dave wasn't particularly worried about dying, but he would prefer not to go out the way his old man had. So he'd stopped drinking...again, started going back to AA, and he'd moved down to Morgan City to work part-time for his uncle while reopening Creasy Investigations. Marsilius had found him a little house on the bayou where he could live and set up shop until he was able to afford office space in town. The only problem with that arrangement was that his uncle now considered it his moral duty to keep Dave on the straight and narrow.

As if testing Dave's resolve, Jubal poured a shot of Jack Daniel's and slid the tumbler across the bar. "First one's on the house. For old times' sake."

"No thanks, but I'll take a cup of that coffee I smell brewing."

"Suit yourself." Jubal filled a cup and passed it to Dave. "If you're not drinking, what brings you in here?"

"I'm meeting someone." Dave lifted the cup and took a sip of the strong chicory blend. The coffee was hot. It scalded his tongue and he swore as the front door swung open. And in walked Angelette Lapierre.

She stood in the doorway taking stock of the room just as she always did. That was Dave's first memory of her, the way she'd planted herself on the threshold of the captain's office, her gaze sweeping the room as the group of homicide detectives huddled over a map had looked up with a collective indrawn breath.

Dave had been married back then and in love with his wife, but he couldn't help noticing Angelette. Dark-haired, dark-eyed, she'd had that dog-in-heat quality that drew men to her side and made any woman unfortunate enough to be in the same room dislike her on sight.

Dave had tried to ignore her, but later in the crowded squad room, he'd glanced up to find her watching him, and her slow smile had sent a shiver down his backbone. Something that might have been a warning glinted in her sultry eyes that day, and Dave would later wish that he'd taken heed of it.

But instead, he'd told himself there was no harm in looking. What Claire didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

Claire.

Dave winced at the memory. He didn't want to think about her at that moment. He didn't want to think about her ever. She was a part of his past. One of the ghosts that came out to haunt him on rainy summer nights.

But he couldn't help himself. He closed his eyes briefly as an image of his ex-wife appeared in his head. She wasn't as curvy or as beautiful as Angelette, but her appeal was far more dangerous because she was the kind of woman you could never get out of your system. No matter how much you drank.

As if she was reading his mind, Angelette's expression hardened. Her gaze seemed to pierce right through him, and then she blinked and the daggers were gone. The familiar smile flashed, dazzled, even as her chin lifted in defiance.

Same old Angelette.

She wore a blue dress, transparent from where she stood in the doorway. Jubal leaned an elbow on the bar and swore under his breath. Together he and Dave watched her walk with fluid grace to the stool next to Dave's, a whiff of something seductive preceding her.

Still smiling, she placed her purse on the bar and crossed her legs, letting that blue dress skate up her slender thighs.

"I don't want no trouble," Jubal warned.

She tossed back her dark hair and laughed. "I don't want any trouble, either."

"You start throwing beer bottles like you did last time, I'm calling the law on both of you."

"I am the law, remember?" She laughed again, but her amusement didn't quite reach her eyes. "Jubal, relax, okay? Dave and I kissed and made up a long time ago. Didn't we, Dave?"

"If you say so." He was all for letting bygones be bygones, but when Angelette leaned over to brush her lips against his, he couldn't help tensing.

Her gaze lit on the scar above his eye. "Wow. Did I do that?"

"Better than a tattoo."

"Speaking of tattoos...I got myself a new one. Remind me to show it to you sometime."

Dave let that one go. He might not be the sharpest tool in the shed, as Marsilius frequently pointed out, but he'd learned his lesson with Angelette.

Not getting the response she wanted, she turned to Jubal. "Double whiskey."

There was something about Angelette that Dave hadn't remembered from before. She'd always had an edge. Had always been able to give as good as she got. An ambitious female detective had to know how to handle herself in a man's world. But it wasn't that. It wasn't her years as a cop that had given her face a brittle veneer. It was selling out. Being on the take for too long had chipped away at her sensuality and left in its wake something hard and unpleasant and faintly decadent.

Dave cradled his cup, gratified to note that his hands no longer trembled. He hadn't felt this steady in years. "So how did the anger management classes go?" He knew the question was likely to set her off. Angelette didn't like being called on her bullshit—by him or by the judge who'd ordered her into the classes—but Dave couldn't resist goading her a little.

She surprised him. Instead of rising to the bait, she gave an airy wave with one hand as she lifted her drink with the other. "Oh, I finished up months ago. You're looking at the new and improved Angelette. What do you think?"

"Not bad."

One brow lifted as her eyes seemed to challenge him. *Not bad? There was a time when you couldn't keep your hands off me, you bastard.* "You're not faring too badly yourself. You've put on a little weight, but it suits you. I was never all that partial to scrawny guys. A girl has to have something to hang on to, right, Jubal?" She gave the bartender a wink.

The older man glared at her with open suspicion. "You want another drink?"

“*Oui, bien sûr.*” She waited for him to pour the whiskey, then picked up her glass. “Let’s move over to a booth.” She slid off the stool, and as she turned, her full breasts brushed up against Dave’s arm for a split second before she moved away.

He got up and, taking his coffee with him, followed her to a back booth. By the time he sat down, she’d already finished her second drink.

“Maybe you ought to ease up on the hooch.”

“What is that? A friendly piece of advice from one drunk to another?” Her face was flushed and her voice sounded strained as she folded her arms on the table.

Something was wrong. Dave could feel it. Her eyes wouldn’t quite meet his. Instead, she watched the steam rising from his cup that drifted up between them.

“What did you want to see me about?”

Her gaze darted to the front door, and Dave noticed that she’d chosen a booth where they both had a view of the entrance. He’d taught her that. The things she’d taught him didn’t come in so handy these days.

“I’m seeing someone. I wanted you to hear it from me first.” She ran a fingernail around the rim of her empty glass and Dave could tell she wanted another drink. He knew that feeling, that hunger. It was like a needy old friend you could never get rid of.

He waited for a moment, thinking he might feel a twinge of regret at her news, but no. Not even a flicker of relief. He just didn’t care anymore. “Is it serious?”

“Who knows?” Angelette shook out a cigarette and lit up. The smoke mingled with the steam from his coffee, softening her features and making her face seem almost vulnerable, but Dave knew better than to believe in a mirage. “We’re taking things slow for now. Something you and I should have done, I guess.” She propped an elbow on the table, letting the Camel smolder between her fingers. “Never was anything slow about you, Dave.”

“Most men wouldn’t take that as a compliment.”

“But you’re not most men, now are you?” She gave him a dark smile. “We both liked it fast, didn’t we? And often.”

Her lowered voice conjured images best left in the past. Seedy motel rooms. The hood of his car. A deserted road with the smell of the river drifting in through the open windows.

“We were good for a while, baby. You can’t deny that.” She reached for his hand, but Dave pulled his away.

“Tell me about your new guy. Anyone I know?”

“It’s Lee Elliot.”

Dave was caught off guard by the name. The conservative Orleans Parish district attorney hardly seemed suited to Angelette’s free spirit, but then Elliot came from old money and that would most definitely appeal to her.

“Are you impressed?”

“Have to say that I am. Does he know about the payoffs?”

“I’m clean these days, Dave. I swear. So I’d appreciate it if you’d just keep your mouth shut about the past. I kind of like the idea of a stable relationship for a change and I don’t want you ruining this for me.”

“I wouldn’t do that. Besides, I don’t exactly operate in Elliot’s circle.”

“No, but Claire’s sister does.”

“I don’t talk to Claire’s family. You know that.”

“I thought things might be different now.”

“You mean because I’m not seeing you anymore?”

Angelette took a quick drag on her cigarette. “I did wonder.”

“Claire and I are over,” Dave said slowly. “We’ve been over for a long time. You know she’s remarried.” ~~And wasn’t it pretty damn remarkable how he was able to say it without punching a wall or shattering a window?~~

But the outbursts of temper and the drunken brawls were behind him. Dave had accepted his life for the way it was, and he’d finally figured out there was no profit in dwelling on what he’d lost.

He could almost hear his AA sponsor coaxing him: *Say it with me, Dave. God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.*

A nice sentiment, but it didn’t mean shit when you were lying facedown in a gutter.

“You said there were two reasons why you wanted to see me. What’s the other?”

Angelette’s gaze flashed to the door again. Dave wondered if she was expecting someone. Her nerves were right beneath the surface and he couldn’t help wondering why. “This conversation is going to stay between us, right?”

“Sure.”

She waited a moment longer, then slid the empty glass aside. “Have you been following the Losier case?”

“The murdered Tulane student? Hard not to. Her picture’s been plastered all over the news for weeks.” Nina Losier’s girl-next-door looks had captured the public’s attention, but after nearly a month with no arrests and nothing new to report, media interest was starting to wane. A sure sign the investigation was going nowhere. Dave had learned that lesson the hard way.

Angelette blew a stream of smoke from the corner of her mouth. “The father is looking to hire a P.I. I told him about you.”

“Since when does NOPD recommend a private dick for an active investigation?”

“Since it’s not my case.” She grinned, but her eyes were sober as she gazed across the table at him. “Let’s just say the official investigation has run into some problems.”

“What kind of problems?”

“There’s a lot about this case that hasn’t been released to the public. Nina Losier was from a wealthy family in Baton Rouge. Her father has a lot of political clout and NOPD has been pressured to keep certain aspects of the investigation out of the news.”

“Like what?”

“Like the fact that when Nina wasn’t in class, she sometimes danced at a strip club on Bourbon Street. The Gold Medallion.” Angelette paused. “That’s where Renee Savaria worked, isn’t it?”

Dave suddenly realized how badly he wanted a drink. It hit him like that sometimes. Everything would be going along fine, and then *bam*. A face, a memory...even a name could smash his control to hell.

The Savaria homicide was the last case he’d worked before his resignation. He’d been knee-deep in the investigation when his daughter went missing. Snatched in broad daylight as she rode her new bicycle up and down the sidewalk in front of their home.

Images were already flashing in Dave’s head. The kind of visions that had made him reach for a bottle—or his gun—on more sleepless nights than he cared to remember.

Ruby had been seven when she was taken. Just seven years old.

“If Nina Losier comes from the kind of background you say she does, how’d she end up stripping on Bourbon Street?”

“You make it sound like she was an anomaly, but rich girls slumming to embarrass their powerful daddies is nothing new in this town.”

“What about leads?”

“One dead end after another, just like the Savaria case. I remember how frustrated you were back

then. You told me once it was like beating your head against a stone wall. Then all of a sudden you turned up a new lead. You thought you were getting close to a breakthrough when Ruby went missing. Maybe you were getting a little too close.”

For a moment Dave felt as if the air had been squeezed from his lungs. He’d never told anyone about those phone calls, not even Angelette. She couldn’t know about the missing page from the dead woman’s diary, either. No one knew about that except Dave and Renee Savaria’s murderer.

He’d destroyed evidence in a homicide investigation in order to save his daughter’s life, but Ruby hadn’t been returned as promised. Instead, her trail had grown cold while Dave collaborated with a killer.

A muscle in his jaw began to throb. Seven years and the guilt was still as fresh and deep as the day he’d answered Claire’s frantic phone call.

Angelette’s eyes searched his face. “I always wondered if there was a link between Renee Savaria’s murder and Ruby’s kidnapping. I think you did, too.”

Dave looked down at his hands. They weren’t trembling, but his fingers had curled so tight, his knuckles whitened. “It doesn’t matter what I thought. It’s all in the past.”

“A guy like you lives in the past.”

“Not anymore.”

“I call bullshit on that.”

Dave shrugged.

“After you left, the active investigations on your desk fell through the cracks. Nobody wanted to get tainted by your bad karma. So the Savaria case has been sitting in the cold case files all this time, and the way I see it, that old unfinished business has been eating away at you for too damn long. Maybe it’s time for a little closure.”

Dave wanted to believe it was as simple as that, but Angelette never did anything without demanding something in return. “What are you really after, Angie?”

“Nothing. I owe you one, that’s all.”

“Now why don’t I believe you?”

She looked hurt. “Hey, I’ll be the first to admit I haven’t exactly conducted myself like a Girl Scout in the past, but I’m still a cop and, believe it or not, I’d like to see justice done. Renee Savaria and Nina Losier got in over their heads at that club. Drugs, prostitution...God knows what else. But that doesn’t mean they deserved what happened to them. And your little girl sure as hell didn’t deserve what happened to her.”

He didn’t say anything. He couldn’t.

Angelette leaned toward him. “What if I tell you I can put a copy of the case file in your hands? Would you be willing to at least take a look?”

“You sure you want to risk your career over this one?”

“You let me worry about my career. I know what I’m doing. You game or not?”

“I’ll take a look at what you’ve got, but I’m not promising anything.”

“Fair enough. You don’t like what you see, you walk away and that’s that. We don’t mention it again.” She gathered up her purse and stood. “Give me a call when you decide something. Or better yet, drop by the Monteleone on Saturday night. Graydon Losier is making an appearance at Lee’s fund-raiser. I’ll see that you get an introduction.”

She started toward the door, then turned back. “One other thing I forgot to mention.” She leaned over the table to slowly grind out her cigarette. “I’ve been hearing some talk around town. Claire and Alex Girard...they’ve split up. Not that you give a shit about your ex-wife, right, Dave?”

Two

The Dollmaker had been working steadily ever since he returned home from New Orleans a few hours ago, but he wasn't happy with his progress. For one thing, the smile was all wrong. The shape of the jaw, the angle of the nose...everything about her eluded him tonight.

His hand tightened on the knife, but instead of slicing away the offending features as he usually did, he took a step back from his work and drew a calming breath. He was letting anger and fear interfere with his concentration, and for him that could be a very dangerous thing. He needed to get his emotions under control before he did something rash. Something he might live to regret.

He sucked in more air, but the breathing exercises weren't working this time. The voice inside his head kept needling him.

She's gone, you fool! And it's all your fault. You lost her!

"I didn't lose her," he muttered. "She was taken."

Because you were so careless!

He couldn't deny that. Leaving her alone had been imprudent, to say the least, but he'd been called away on an emergency and hadn't taken the time to lock her up before he rushed out. When he came home hours later, she was missing.

Snatched in broad daylight from her home.

A part of him wanted to appreciate the irony even as his conscience continued to berate him. He'd flown under the radar of the local authorities and even the FBI for so long, he'd become too complacent, even a bit reckless at times. It had all been so easy until now, and he wondered if he should regard this as a test. How he conducted himself could be crucial.

"It's all right," he whispered. "I know where she is. I'll get her back."

By this time tomorrow she would be home where she belonged. In the meantime, he had plenty to do to keep busy.

With an effort, he relaxed his grip on the knife. Everything would be okay if he just kept his cool. After all, there was no way now that she could be traced back to him. He'd seen to that. And even if someone came sniffing around, he wouldn't draw attention. He'd learned at an early age the advantage of maintaining a low profile. Nothing in his appearance or lifestyle would ever arouse suspicion. He even wore contacts in addition to his glasses to subdue the color of his blue eyes so they wouldn't be remembered. He was the very epitome of decorum.

Everything was fine. The party would go off without a hitch. All he had to do was close his eyes and remember Maddy's face.

If only it were that simple. But even with the old photograph he'd squirreled away years ago, he'd always had a difficult time reconstructing her winsome features.

Not that he wasn't talented enough. He was quite gifted, in fact, and he'd learned from a master. But for the Maddy doll and for the others in his private collection, each and every detail had to be perfect. Such precision could be maddening without a live model, but he wouldn't give up. *Couldn't* give up. For Maddy's sake, he had to keep trying. He owed her that much.

Closing his eyes, he waited for the shivering to pass, and then, wielding the sculptor's knife as precisely as a scalpel, he set to work remolding the delicate features one sliver at a time until the lovely little face seemed to take on a life of its own.

"You're in there," he whispered. "I can feel you...."

He kept at it for a long time, refusing to stop even when his fingers became so cramped that every stroke of the blade was agony. Clay molds and sketches cluttered the studio, and as the evening hours turned into early morning, the disorder subtly wore on his nerves. Even the orchid he'd placed on the corner of his worktable drooped from neglect, and that wasn't like him.

Ever since the doll had been stolen, his regimen had been severely disrupted. Normally he nurtured his orchids just as he pampered himself. He was accustomed to showering several times a day when his schedule permitted, and he kept his clothes pristine, his hair trimmed just so. He strove for nothing less than perfection in his personal appearance and in his surroundings. But until he had her back—one way or another—he wouldn't be able to eat or sleep, much less indulge himself in his time-consuming routine.

He stepped away from his workbench and studied the doll's features yet again. Better. Almost there...but not quite...

Something was missing.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror that hung on the wall across the room, and froze, arrested as he always was by the sight of his own reflection. The man who stared back at him still seemed a stranger. Brownish-blond curls. Blue eyes rimmed with thick lashes. A rather weak jawline but the mouth was good and the complexion was to die for. Not a single blemish or mole to mar his smooth skin. No morning shadow, either. He almost looked airbrushed.

But his new glasses would take some getting used to. They gave him a bookish air that wasn't to his liking, but for now the look suited his purposes.

Unable to resist, he walked over to the mirror for a closer scrutiny. Turning first one way then the other, he frowned. His nose was still not right, but the cartilage was too weak for another surgery. He supposed he would have to make do with what he had.

He removed his glasses because his eyes looked bluer without them, and when he smiled a certain way, his dimples flashed sweetly. He'd practiced that smile for years.

Yes, when he smiled *in just that way*, he could almost catch a glimpse of her....

"You're in there," he whispered to his reflection. "I can feel you."

He lifted the blade to his face, the compulsion to peel away the flesh until he found what he needed almost irresistible. After all, he was no stranger to the knife. His body had been carved and mutilated so badly that his distaste for his own appearance sometimes forced him to use a sponge and gloves to clean himself in the shower. But no matter how often he washed, he couldn't scrub away the scars. He couldn't rinse away the memories.

"Why did you have to die?" he whispered.

Because you let me.

His voice became petulant. "But I was just a child."

You should have found a way to stop him.

"I've stopped him now."

Too late.

"It's not too late. You're not dead. You're just...hiding."

Then come and find me.

He leaned closer, searching and searching his reflection until the ringing of his cell phone jarred him. He didn't want to answer it. He hated disturbances while he worked, but his concentration was already broken. Fetching the phone from his jacket pocket, he checked the caller ID and, recognizing the number of the nursing home, didn't bother to answer.

Tossing the phone aside, he returned to the unfinished doll and placed a gentle hand on her sculpted head. "I have to go out for a while, but I'll be back soon, I promise."

Leaving the door to the studio open, he hurried up the steps to the kitchen to fix a tray. He toasted

bread and poured a bowl of cereal, then, once he had the dishes and silverware arranged just so, carried everything back down the steps and placed the tray on his worktable while he unlocked and slid open a hidden compartment in one wall. He bent down to peer inside.

The lights were out. He couldn't see anything in the shadowy room, but he knew she was already awake because he could hear her whimpers. The sound irritated him. So did her persistence.

I want to go home.

She must have said it a hundred times already. They all did. And his answer was always the same.

You can't go home. Not until after the party.

Slipping the tray through the opening, he waited a moment, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, but when she didn't appear, he shut the compartment and locked it without a word, then hung the key on a peg near the door.

If he'd learned anything in the past seven years it was that even the most stubborn girl would eventually eat when she got hungry.

Three

The dark clouds piling up over the Gulf of Mexico brought an early twilight to the city, but Claire Doucett barely noticed the sporadic raindrops that splashed against her cotton blouse as she hurried along the sidewalk. Her gaze was fastened on a group of teenage girls in front of her, and as they stopped to admire something in a shop window, she paused, too, her heart beating a painful staccato inside her chest. Their backs were to her, but when the one in the middle turned just so...dear God, she looked like Ruby.

At least the way Claire imagined her daughter would look at fourteen. The way she appeared in the age-progressed photo created by a forensic artist at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

She would be tall like her dad, but with Claire's thin stature and her grandmother Lucille's golden ringlets.

The girl in front of her shook her head and her blond curls shifted against her narrow back. She wore shorts and flip-flops, and her legs were long and tanned and gorgeous. Her laughter drifted back to Claire, sending a fine chill along her spine, and her heart started to beat even harder. There was something so sweet and innocent and familiar about that sound.

Claire closed her eyes and tried to conjure Ruby's laugh. It was getting harder and harder to do. After seven years, the memories were sometimes elusive.

But, no, there it was...the image of a two-year-old Ruby at the zoo, tugging on Claire's hand as she laughed up at her. "Bears, Mama!"

Even as a toddler, Ruby had been such a happy child. Sweet and tenderhearted, and yet so willful and stubborn at times that Claire's patience had been sorely tested.

"That child would argue with a fence post," Claire's mother used to say with an exaggerated sigh. "Yes, and I wonder who she gets that from," Claire would counter.

Secretly, Claire had been grateful that her daughter inherited more of Lucille's disposition than hers. Claire was too much like her moody father, although she hoped to God she never succumbed to the same demons that had driven him to suicide when she was just a baby.

Even in her deepest despair after Ruby's kidnapping, Claire had never contemplated taking her own life, and for one good reason—she'd never given up hope that her daughter would someday come home to her. The flame had grown dimmer with each passing year, but on days like today, the glimpse of a familiar face on a crowded street could rekindle her faith, and she'd find herself indulging in the same old fantasy.

Ruby was still alive and she'd been happy and healthy all these years. A childless couple had seen her riding her bike on the sidewalk that day and had been enchanted by her blond curls and sunny smile.

They'd taken her home with them, loved her as if she was their very own, and in time, Ruby had responded to their kindness and affection. In time, she'd adjusted to her new home, and for the past seven years, she'd led a perfectly normal life. Maybe she no longer even remembered her real family. Her real mother.

Claire blinked back unexpected tears.

The fantasy was just that. Nothing more than a wishful daydream that had helped sustain her through some of her darkest days. And the girl on the street in front of her wasn't Ruby. The

likelihood of her daughter still being alive was miniscule. To even consider for a moment that Ruby might have been in New Orleans all this time, that fate would have miraculously brought them together on this very street, was ludicrous.

And yet...

Claire whispered her daughter's name. The sound slipped through her lips as a plea.

The girl turned, as if responding to the soft entreaty, and Claire saw her clearly for the first time. The girl's face split into a broad smile, and Claire's breath caught. Everything around her seemed to still. The noise from the street faded, and the palm fronds and banana trees in a nearby courtyard stood motionless in the heat, as if nature itself was holding a breath.

And then Claire exhaled in a painful rush. It wasn't Ruby. Of course it wasn't Ruby. But for that one fleeting moment when their gazes touched, Claire had a glimpse of what it might be like to see her daughter's face again after all these years.

The girl's attention moved past her and she waved at someone behind Claire. Someone who had called out her name.

Megan. The girl's name was Megan. Not Ruby.

Claire glanced at her reflection in a store window, saw the pinched look on her face, the whitened knuckles where her hand gripped her purse strap, and slowly she let out another breath.

Ruby was dead and she wasn't coming back. She'd been taken from the sidewalk in front of their home while riding her bike, the victim of an abduction that had never been solved. Claire knew the statistics. Her daughter had probably been dead within the first twenty-four to forty-eight hours after she'd been grabbed, her body discarded in some remote field or shallow grave, where she had been lying all these years. Alone.

Claire put a hand to her mouth. Tears scalded her eyes, but she held them back as she scoured the street in front of her. The girl and her friends had scurried beneath an awning to get out of the drizzle. Claire deliberately turned and started walking in the opposite direction.

"Did you hear about the body they found in the Quarter?" Charlotte LeBlanc asked casually when she and Claire met a few minutes later at their designated rendezvous.

"I saw it on the local news before I left the house this morning. Do the police know who did it?"

Claire's sister was an assistant D.A. for Orleans Parish and usually had an open pipeline to the police department, but she shook her head. "They think it was probably drug-related. So far they haven't even been able to identify the body. Poor bastard was sliced up pretty bad. All his fingers were missing."

Claire shuddered. "I don't know how you do it, dealing with that kind of violence on a daily basis. I think it would start to get to me after a while."

"I think it would, too, but I'm not you. And someone has to keep the baddies off the street."

Charlotte snapped open her umbrella as the drizzle turned into a full-fledged shower and the gray clouds over the Gulf vibrated with lightning. Within a matter of moments the city was soaked and dripping, and as they walked along Decatur, Charlotte tried to hold the umbrella over both of them.

"Here, let me," Claire said as she took the handle. "I'm taller."

"Okay, but just make sure I'm covered. I'm wearing silk. *Damn.*" Charlotte swore as she stepped into a puddle. "And these shoes are brand-new."

Claire glanced down at her sister's high heels. The delicate footwear had obviously not been designed for wet weather, but certainly looked elegant and sophisticated on Charlotte's dainty feet.

Claire felt a stab of envy. She couldn't remember the last time she'd splurged on a pair of expensive shoes. As a matter of fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd enjoyed any indulgence whatsoever, but with her divorce nearly final, she had to keep her belt tightened. Now was

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