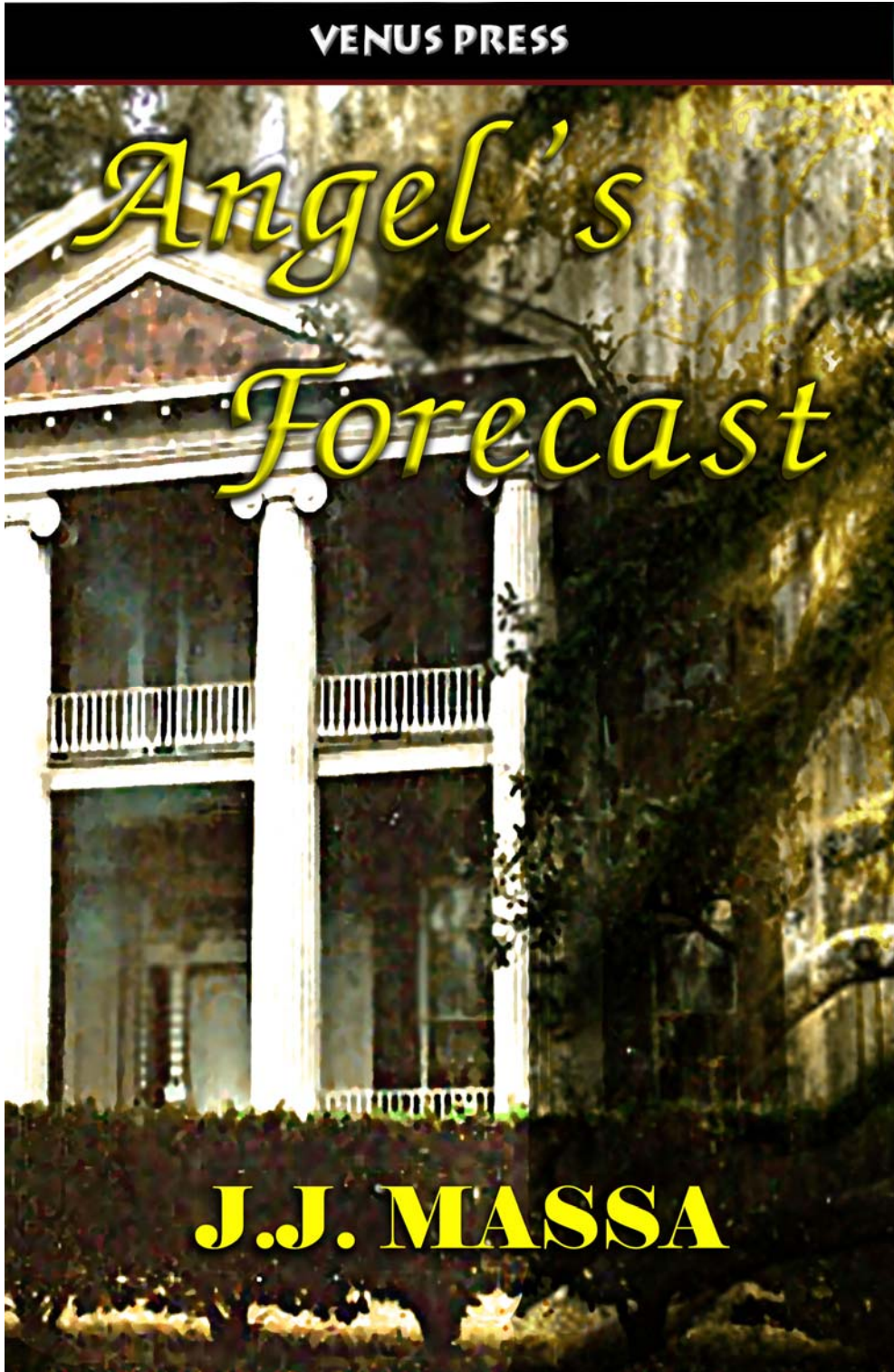


VENUS PRESS

*Angel's  
Forecast*

**J.J. MASSA**



*J.J. Massa*

**The Weather Series, Book 3:  
ANGEL'S FORECAST**

**BY**

**J.J. MASSA**

[www.VenusPress.com](http://www.VenusPress.com)

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

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*J.J. Massa*

**Dedication:**

I dedicate this book to a very special Angel—Angel Lavette. Here's that Cajun man. There's one just like him out there waiting for you.

And to Tracey—you've been Deke's biggest fan since the beginning. He and I both have you to thank for giving him a future. Thank you for being there for me.

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

### Prologue

*Bullets smacked the water around him as Deke rushed his niece to safety. Two officers from his own Parish waited in a flatboat, urging him on. He wasn't certain what Ashlynn had gotten mixed up in, but he sure as hell knew that it was dangerous.*

*That silly girl always managed to embroil herself in the riskiest pursuits she could find, no matter that she was a Treasury Officer and shouldn't be threatened with gunfire at any time. He wished his good friend Gabriel much success in calming and controlling his little fire-starting niece. Someone had to take care of her. From now on, it would be Gabriel.*

*It was something Deke was going to have to accept. He'd always looked out for her, they had a connection that he treasured, but knew he'd have to step aside and let his best friend—and now Ashlynn's lover—be the man she turned to.*

*Deke ignored the biting sting of whatever vicious creatures were feeding on him as he forced himself and Ashlynn through waist-deep water.*

*"Deputy," Marie Collins, one of Gabe Theroit's officers, called low and urgently, "Deputy Doucette..."*

*"Help her get in there and Ledet, give me your gun, you two get her out of here. Collins, shoot anyone not in uniform from here on out, you got me?"*

*"Sir," Officer Ledet croaked, his voice high and tight.*

*"Your gun, officer," Deke demanded sharply, irritated at the delay. "Mine's all wet."*

*"Uncle Deke!" Deke had been surprised when Ashlynn called him Uncle. Her accent was very European, like her mother's. "Uncle Deke!" she screamed again.*

*And then he felt it...a sledgehammer to his back, bursting into flames. Surprised...he was very surprised. He'd been shot. Had he thought he was bullet-proof or something, he wondered.*

*That was his last thought before the muddy water of the bayou rushed up to embrace him.*

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*J.J. Massa*

Angel Baptiste saw it all. Saw a hint of it the day he kissed her, the day she knew he was hers...saw it the night before it happened, in a dream.

She made it to the hospital in time to greet the ambulance. Would she grieve, or would she celebrate? If only her forecast could tell her that...

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

### Chapter One

“Dekon Cassion Doucette! Don't you dare take that out!”

Deke groaned inside. For all he knew he'd groaned aloud. He still didn't know if he was in heaven, hell or just purgatory. All he knew for sure was that his own personal angel wasn't acting all that heavenly right now.

“Don't you growl at me, either,” she snapped, dark glossy hair sliding forward across his cheek as she reached behind him.

“*Non*,” he exhaled, his breathing still shallow from whatever was wrong with him. “Not growl,” he declared, pleased to get that much out, sounding more like a gasp than a statement.

His voice was rusty from disuse and his body felt like it had been hauled through a gravel pit and then dumped on. He wondered how long he'd been wherever he was. He *should* know and it would come clear to him soon, he was sure.

“Deke?” She stopped reaching and her face was directly above his. “Dekon?” she asked again.

He grinned, pleased that she was back to being a sweet angel again. “'s me,” he told her. “'m Deke.”

“Oh, Deke!” she rained kisses on his face and dislodged the cold tubes in his nose that he'd been trying to rid himself of when she'd snapped at him. “Deke! You're back!”

“Yeah?” he closed his eyes and snuck an arm around her waist, letting its weight pull her closer against him. “Where was I?” he murmured, loving the feeling of her soft lips on his face and silky hair brushing his neck and shoulder.

“Deke?” her hand cupped his cheek and he remembered, as if in a dream, she'd done that before. He nuzzled against it, not opening his eyes. “You know you were shot, right?”

His eyes flew open. “Ashlynn! He hit Ashlynn,” he fought with the words now, his breath coming in gasps.

He remembered a man backhanding his sweet little niece and knocking her backward into the murky swamp. After that, he couldn't recall much at all.

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“Shhh,” she soothed, her fingers carding through his hair. “Ashlynn is fine. So is Gabriel. They’re so fine, *shai*. No fear.”

He did feel reassured and he was exhausted now just from the adrenaline rush of remembering and fear, but, “*Non*,” he’d *meant* to growl that time instead of the whisper he heard. Still, it brought her face close to his. “Dekon. Not *shai*. ‘M your Deke. ‘r *mon ange*, no *shai*, no child.”

He struggled against sleep, forcing his eyes to open just a little, hoping she’d see he was serious. He meant it. Something had happened to him, okay. He was alive, not dead and he’d need care. But he would not be thought of as a child. Not by this woman.

“All right,” she crooned, her face against his neck, he could feel moisture, she was crying. “I won’t call you that, Dekon, I promise.”

Pushing against air that weighed more than air had any right to, Deke pulled his arm around her, stroking down her long hair and spine.

“S’ry, don’ cry, *ange*,” he murmured.

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Angel let herself stay cuddled against him a moment longer, tears of relief leaking from her eyes. It had been two long weeks, and into the third, that Deke had been in and out of surgery and in and out of consciousness.

She’d stayed at his bedside as much as possible, turning over his care only to the most trusted of her friends. She was grateful that her last class had ended the month before and that she’d taken all of her specialty certification exams well before all this had happened.

Deke’s even breathing told her that he’d succumbed to sleep once more. A real sleep, not drug induced. What was she going to do with him? What was she going to do, period? She stayed where she was, mumbling a health charm into his shoulder.

Levering herself away from the reassuring comfort of his body, tucking his arm back at his side, Angel reached for the telephone. With a wry smile, she reminded herself that she might not really need it, and called her cousin Gabriel who would be thrilled to be the first person she called.

It might take him a little while to get used to the unique way the Doucette family kept in touch with each other.

“*So it will*,” a sweet voice filled her head and Angel brushed away a tear, feeling like she’d been hugged from the inside out.

“Madame Doucette!” she addressed her mental intruder. “Dekon is...Deke is, well, not awake but better.”



## ANGEL'S FORECAST

*“Il ira bien, ma chère, il est hors de danger.”* Angel heard the smile in Rayne Doucette's voice as she promised that Deke was out of danger. The older woman's wry, *“Appelez votre cousin et reposez vous. Je suis sûre que vous en avez besoin,”* was an admonishment to rest after calling Gabe, telling her that she would need it.

*He will be well, my dear, he is out of danger. Call your cousin and then rest. I am certain you will need it.* That was what Rayne Doucette had thought to Angel in her native French, but somehow, it just sounded like music that made perfect sense. She considered how easy it was to share thoughts this way.

Deke shifted on the bed and Angel shook her head. She really did need to get some rest, Madame Doucette was right. As she dialed her cousin Gabe, who was Deke's best friend and his niece's fiancé, Angel wondered at the Doucette family.

Ashlynn Doucette was her closest friend in the world. They'd met when Angel had first moved to Napoleon Parish, had gone to school together, had even gone on their first date, a double, together. Angel was a year older than Ash, but she'd avoided serious relationships, always had.

She wasn't afraid of men, she just didn't trust easily. In addition to that, she wasn't pretty and tiny like her friend. She wasn't all that tall, but she wasn't all that small, either.

Angel considered herself normal-sized, somewhere in the neighborhood of one-fifty—and not a small neighborhood at that. As long as her clothes fit and she was healthy, she wasn't worried about looking like a cover model. With long, wavy, chocolate brown hair and eyes the color of dark butterscotch, she figured she'd do. When the right man came along, he would be happy with how she looked, she just knew it.

Though her interactions with Deke were limited, he seemed to like her looks just fine. Now, it appeared that he might just live long enough to find out if he liked the rest of her.

## Chapter Two

“The pelvis protects the digestive and reproductive organs in the lower part of the body, and a lot of large nerves and blood vessels that pass through it to supply the legs. Not to mention it’s an important load-bearing part of the skeletal system.”

“While I *do* thank you for that anatomy lesson, Doc, you have failed to answer my question,” Deke enunciated carefully, his patience all but non-existent. “What I asked you is what the damages are and when I take my leave of this place.”

Dr. Santiny rolled his eyes while releasing a cleansing breath. “I am trying to explain, Deputy Doucette, but I find I must tell the entire story...”

“Don’t use his title,” Remy Doucette threw an arm around the frail doctor, causing Deke to roll *his* eyes now. “It jus’ makes him feel bigger and more ornery.”

The small doctor didn’t appear to be impressed by either man, shrugging off Remy’s arm and earning himself a mock-wounded look. “And what about *your* title, Sheriff? Should I stop using that, too?”

“Naw, mine’s important, his is jus’ for show,” Remy laughed, causing Deke to laugh with him.

“Aw, that hurts,” he moaned. “Hush,” he glared at his brother.

“Where is Angel when I need her?” Dr. Santiny addressed to no one and everyone. “She’s the only one around here who has a chance at managing you,” he sighed.

Deke felt a zing of awareness flash through his body at just the sound of her name. How had a woman he barely knew found her way into his heart like this? Into his very psyche?

“Look, Doc, just tell me,” Deke was feeling tired again, and he missed his Angel. *His Angel?* “What broke, how’d you fix it, and when can I use it again?” he snapped.

“You got shot, *shai*.” There she was, in the doorway. She was also using a nickname for him that he wasn’t overly fond of...the fact that it was just a habit somehow irritated him more. He wanted everything about her view of him to be new, special, unique to them.

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

“*Shai?*” Deke narrowed his eyes at her.

A flash of dimple on the left side of her mouth told him that she was in no way intimidated. “Dekon,” she challenged, head tilted, both eyebrows arched.

“It’s my name,” he rumbled back at her, noticing that Doc Santiny had beat a hasty and grateful retreat. “It’ll do nice and fine.”

She rolled her eyes and picked up the accounting of events. “The bullet pierced near the center of your ilium, the wide bone of your pelvis, which now has a small, titanium plate covering the hole that the bullet left,” Angel explained as she moved further into the room, stepping around Remy toward a chair by the bed.

Deke smoothed the sheet next to his waist, hoping she’d take the hint. “You lost a *lot* of blood, so you were transfused. The same bullet went through your right kidney where it made a big mess, and finally lodged in your large intestine,” she went on, seating herself near his feet at the end of the bed. “You’ve had one kidney removed and part of your colon, too. They took out your appendix while they were in there.”

“No wonder it hurts,” Deke murmured, leaning back and closing his eyes.

He was disappointed and confused about why he felt that way. He barely knew this woman, but he wanted her—wanted her badly. It wasn’t just a body thing, though there was that...it was a whole life thing. He had to have her. Once he got her, he reckoned he’d have to figure out what to do with her. He sighed.

“Dekon?” A silky brown-sugar hand, fine boned and soft, gripped his knee where the sheet had slipped away. “Are you in pain? How bad does it hurt?”

Deke opened his eyes just a little and mumbled something, he had no idea what. Angel leaned a little closer, her hand on his forearm now.

“Don’ mind him, he’s shamin’,” Remy accused, laughing at him from next to the open door.

Angel looked from one brother to the other, obviously trying to gauge the truth of that statement.

“It *does* hurt some,” Deke opted for honesty. “But I’m okay. It ain’ that bad.”

Virtue is truly its own reward, he decided, when Angel leaned over him, cupping his cheek. “Are you sure you’re okay? There’s nothing to be gained by suffering needlessly.” She smoothed his hair back from his face and peered intently into his eyes.

Deke reached up, two fingers combing a lock of wavy dark hair off of her face, pulling it from its elastic confinement. “m fine,” he mumbled. “I like your hair.” He felt himself slipping away again. “Sit by me f’r a spell?”

Angel moved to sit at Deke's waist, taking one of his hands in both of hers. Deke knew when Remy moved forward and took a seat in the chair. He could see them both through slitted eyes, he just couldn't call up the energy to move or talk. Listening didn't seem to be a problem.

"Are you goanna tell him the rest of it?" Remy asked Angel.

*There's more?* He wished he could interject, speak up for himself, demand the information.

"In a little while, I expect," Angel murmured. "He's doing so much better now. I thought...I worried..."

*She thought and worried...what?* Deke saw a dark tear track its way down her face and wanted to roar his objection when his brother reached up and swept it away with the tip of his finger.

"It's over now, *petit*," Remy covered Deke's hand and Angel's. "It's the Doucette blood. We're all meaner than bayou backwater in the summertime. No more infection, yeah?"

*Infection...okay, so that's why I'm so weak.* That wasn't such a big deal. He wasn't going to die and nobody was keeping deep, dark secrets from him.

"Doc Santiny says it'll linger a little, but the antibiotics are doing their job. It was just something in the swamp, I guess."

"They're testing the soil and water 'round there," Remy mumbled. Much to Deke's hazy surprise, his brother stood and brushed a lock of hair off of his forehead, pausing to rub Deke's cheekbone with a thumb. "I need him to hurry up and get better so I can kick his..." he hesitated, "...hindquarters good for scaring me this way."

"You're not fooling anyone at all, Sheriff Doucette," Angel laughed at him. "Now you'd better hurry and go take Madame Doucette out for supper. Ashlynn's heading her way right this minute with a bridal magazine and it's goanna cost you a big one if you let them alone together."

Remy looked alarmed. If Deke could have right then, he would have laughed out loud. He heard his brother leave, heard the nurse come in and exchange a few words with Angel.

Something cold around his forearm, rhythmic pumping, tight, and then the hiss of air escaping. Vitals...the nurse was taking his vitals now. Along came the *beep* of an ear thermometer—he didn't even feel it.

Soon, all was quiet again, and Angel shifted a little at his side, as if she wanted to get up. With great determination, he managed to close his hand more firmly around hers.

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

"*Mon ange,*" he mumbled, tugging. He forced himself to open bleary eyes. Willed her to come into his arms. He'd be strong for her any chance he got, but for now, he needed her, needed every bit of her, right beside him.

"Oh, Deke," she sighed, leaning against him, her soft hand stroking his arm, his shoulder.

Maybe she'd fall asleep with him, possibly still be here when he woke up. He'd never wanted such a thing before, couldn't believe he wanted it now. Would he still feel so strongly when his body was closer to healed? He suspected he would. For now, he would sleep.

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*The sun was just dipping down the far side of the bayou. Birds trilled from deep in the trees. A light wind kept the marsh grasses riffling. Angel could see Deke from the window in their room. The angel's trumpets had just opened their blooms, and their fragrance filled the air.*

*What was he doing? It looked like he was just standing there, but now she could see that he'd brought both hands up, one crutch dropping to the soft earth, the other caught on the trunk of a cypress tree.*

*He was stumbling backward...*

Angel shot up in bed, "No, Deke!" she reached around...he wasn't there. Why not? The hospital? But...

She lay back down on her pillow. Deke was *still* in the hospital, not newly in the hospital. What was this dream? She couldn't imagine, couldn't think.

Instead, she thought back to earlier that day when she'd lay against his chest, listening to the solid, strong, steady beating of his heart.

She fell asleep again, imagining his arms around her, his chest under her cheek.

## Chapter Three

“You need to use those muscles, Mr. Doucette. You need to work with me here. It can’t hurt that much, we used phonophoresis to get pain relievers to your pelvic bone...”

Angel smiled to herself, stopping outside Deke’s hospital room door to review his chart. The doctor hadn’t been in yet, it seemed.

“I didn’t see you put no phonophoresis on me!” Deke yelled in alarm. “When did you do that?”

The physical therapist, Janine Hebert, if Angel remembered correctly, heaved a longsuffering sigh. “Remember, just about twenty minutes ago, when we did that ultrasound? They showed you the little plate attached to the bone?”

“Yeah?” Deke responded suspiciously.

“There was cortisone in the gel they used. Sound waves, ultrasonic energy from the ultrasound, drive the ointment through the skin. That’s what phonophoresis is. You can’t tell me it doesn’t feel better,” Janine stated firmly, almost a challenge.

“Where is Angel?” Deke growled, bringing a grin to Angel’s face. She’d known he wouldn’t appreciate Janine’s all-business, not so friendly, put-upon manner.

“Right here, Dekon,” Angel entered the room, surprised when Janine got up and hugged her. They’d only worked together a few times. “Is this bad boy givin’ you a fit, *shai*?” she murmured.

“Lord, yes!” Janine groaned.

“I am not!” Deke objected. “I just...I think she wants me to go dancin’ or some odd thing like that,” he glared at Janine.

“We’re trying to get him up,” Janine said, almost a whisper. “I think he’s nervous.”

“I ain’ no *capon*!” He expelled an impatient breath. “It’s jus’...well, I was waitin’ for you, *Béb*,” he aimed a half-smile at her, melting Angel’s heart. How had he gotten inside her boundaries so quickly? It must have been while he was sleeping, she mused.

“Oh, gawd,” Janine groaned, rolling her eyes. Angel didn’t know if that was in response to Deke’s blatant manipulation of the facts, or his adorable countenance.

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

"Nobody thinks you're a coward, Dekon. But you'll never get out of here if you don't get up." She turned to Janine. "Did you already measure him for crutches?"

"Yes, we did that with him laying flat. Now that you're here, though, you can help get him out of that bed." She turned to Deke. "Once we get past this hurtle, you'll be going all over the place—driving *other* people up the wall."

Deke arched a disbelieving, unappreciative brow at her and Angel had to turn away to hide her amusement. She scooted in next to him while Janine brought forward a set of crutches that had been leaning on the wall.

"Crutches have to fit just right," Janine was saying as Angel slid an arm around behind Deke. He looped his other arm over her shoulder. "The top of the crutch should be about two inches below your armpit," Janine went on. Angel waited for the signal to help Deke stand.

Deke turned and nuzzled at the curve of Angel's shoulder and throat. "Mmm, you smell nice, *Bébé*," he murmured low, his hot breath caressing her ear, making her shiver, her knees weak, causing heat to pool low in her belly.

"Stop that," Angel hissed, squirming a little, embarrassed to hear her voice crack.

Deke's rich chuckle played along her nerves like warm butter and it was all she could do not to groan aloud.

Janine didn't seem to notice her patient's lack of focused concentration toward her as she went on. "The hand rests should be positioned so that your elbows are slightly bent and your weight can be supported on your hands and wrists." She reached for a third, slightly smaller crutch and demonstrated.

Deke paid absolutely no attention to anyone but the woman in his arms, leaning closer, tongue flicking out as he helped himself to a little taste of Angel's maple skin. "Butter cream and brown sugar, yeah," he breathed. "Why come you got *freesons* all over, *Béb*? You cold?"

"Oh, lawd, Dekon, what are you doing?" Angel gulped, her whisper a high-pitched squeak. Of course she had *freesons*--goose-bumps, with his tongue painting a blazing fire of sensation beginning just under her jaw, heading toward her ear, and encompassing every nerve ending in her body. He knew she was weak to him, he intended to keep it that way.

Oblivious, Janine continued her spiel, "Never rest your weight on your underarms. It can damage the nerves there. Balance is basic to walking properly with crutches." She grabbed a second crutch, obviously fitted to her smaller stature, and positioned herself to demonstrate their use. "In order to maintain your balance, keep your

body in good alignment with your head held high, shoulders back and stomach and buttocks in. Using crutches takes practice.” Once, twice, she brought herself from the door to the window and back, not realizing that her audience was otherwise occupied.

“*Mais*, I’m getting to know you,” Deke answered warmly, his voice low, decadent seduction, stroking over her, wrapping around her, warm breath drawing her in. He did all he could to make a little world, just the two of them, no physical therapist, nobody but them.

When Angel would have moved back, he pulled her closer, smoothing his hand up and down her arm as if to warm her. The heat of his touch, the slightly calloused, strong and sensual sweep of his fingers had her heart beating like a hummingbird’s wing. “We been through a lot here, to know so little about one another. I know your scent in my sleep, been wanting to taste you for some time now.”

“Deke...” she protested pointlessly, his words cutting through her already weakened determination.

“Right here, *Ange*,” he murmured, sliding his hand up between her shoulder blades and up to cup her head.

He’d kissed her once before, what seemed like a lifetime ago. That event had—no doubt about it—had rocked his world. Now he wanted to make sure her world was tilting in that very same direction.

Vaguely aware that the physical therapist had stopped expounding on the virtues of crutches to talk to someone at the door, Deke lowered his face to Angel’s, caressing her lips with his own, just feeling. With a groan, he gathered her closer, tracing the seam of her mouth with the tip of his tongue.

Angel gasped, surprised, overwhelmed, and Deke took shameless advantage of it. His tongue led hers in a delicate tango, the satin heat of her mouth drawing him in.

“Hey!”

The physical therapist had apparently turned her attention back to them, Deke realized dimly.

Reluctantly, he lifted his head, satisfied by the dazed look on Angel’s face. “Yeah?” he addressed the woman standing in front of him, a dark frown on her face as she supported herself very correctly on a pair of aluminum crutches.

“You’re supposed to be paying attention,” Janine snapped. “Are you ready to stand up and try out your new crutches?”



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"I'd just as soon wait a little spell," Deke confessed, gathering the sheet onto his lap. Angel groaned low with embarrassment, a hand covering her eyes. Even with her slightly darker skin, he could still tell quite clearly that she was blushing.

"Uncle Deke!" Ashlynn rushed in, followed by her intended, Gabriel Theroit.

"I'll be right back," Angel murmured, slipping out of Deke's hold. She barely slowed down to squeeze Ashlynn's hand and then Gabe's, ducking out of the room as if hounds were at her heels.

"What'd you do to Angel, Uncle Deke?" Ashlynn looked from the empty doorway to Deke.

"He kissed her!" Janine growled.

"*Mais*, that usually runs 'em off," Gabe chuckled, moving to the bed to shake Deke's hand.

"Very funny," Deke grumbled, holding out an arm for Ashlynn's hug.

"If you are *ever* going to get out of here...maybe to kiss Angel in private," Janine snarked, "you are *going* to have to get out of that bed!"

Kissing Angel in private held a great deal of appeal for Deke. In fact, anything with Angel in private interested him to no end.

"Help me get down, Gabe," he demanded, nodding toward the crutch leaning against his bedside table.

Gabe arched a brow in question at Janine. "Yes! Thank you, Lord, for sending a sign!"

Deke rolled his eyes at her exaggeration, while Ashlynn giggled. Shrugging his broad shoulders, Gabe reached for the crutch.

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*Deke had fallen backward, fallen down. He wasn't supposed to be putting his full weight on his legs yet.*

*What were those noises? Fireworks in October? Shouting, splashing, swearing, the sound of pottery breaking.*

*Angel flew down from the upper room and around the house to come out through her favorite little courtyard. Where was Deke? Where?*

*What was that noise? A helicopter? A car horn?*

The telephone!

"Hello?" Angel wasn't really asleep, not really awake either.

"Angel?"

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“Ash? What time is it, *shai*?” she looked around for her clock but somehow it had found its way to the floor.

“It’s six-thirty, Angel. Sorry, but I had to call!”

Ashlynn didn’t sound upset. In fact, she sounded exuberant. “No, it’s oaky, uh, what’s up? Why’d you *have* to call at...six-thirty?” the last two words ended on a shrill note.

“I just heard from Storm!” Ashlynn gushed.

“And not on the phone, neither,” interjected Gabe in the background, sleepily disgruntled. Though to Angel, he sounded indulgent more than anything else.

Angel chuckled. “How is *mon petit Tempête*?”

She’d always called him by the Cajun word for storm. It had made him angry when he was a child. Now, though, it was their little affectionate pet name.

“He’s going to be here in two weeks! We’re going to try to plan the wedding around when Uncle Deke can walk again and Storm gets home. Isn’t that *outstanding*?” Ashlynn gushed.

She was excited, obviously. But Ash was happy. Angel could always tell when she was upset, even if fires weren’t flaring up all over the place. Ashlynn sounded more Cajun when she was agitated, otherwise she sounded more like her mother, refined and genteel.

“Absolutely,” Angel yawned, pushing the remnants of her dream away. “It’s gonna be the best, *shai*, the best.”

She would by far rather focus on the positives of Ashlynn’s upcoming wedding than the negatives of her frightening dream. It was no hardship to chat with her best friend at length about flowers, cake, whatever. Angel settled in for a long chat.

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

### Chapter Four

"You can't go home by yourself, and that's all I got to say about it," Dr. Santiny stated resolutely.

"I've been in here the better part of a month! In fact, longer than a month!" Deke shouted. "What you mean, I cain't go home?"

"I didn't say you couldn't leave," the doctor replied patiently. "I just said you couldn't go by yourself. You have to have someone with you."

"Hell, we got plenty of room," Remy spoke up, looking at the assembled group.

Rayne laid a dainty hand on his forearm. "*Grand-mère* may not be able to handle the extra stimulation," she advised him quietly.

Remy opened his mouth to speak and closed it with a snap. Angel could see Ashlynn's grip tighten on Gabe's wrist.

"*Madame, I'm not ready,*" Angel protested mentally to Rayne.

"*And when will you be ready, my child?*" the reply was soft, sweet. "*Ready for love...ready for life, when?*"

"Would I be acceptable to stay with Dekon? Um, I mean have Dekon stay with me..." Angel spoke up nervously, eyes trained on Dr. Santiny.

She could feel the surprise ripple around the room, almost a living thing. Though Ashlynn and Gabe, and even Doc Santiny, knew well about her careful way in dealing with men, Deke's astonishment was more vivid. She'd been very careful around him since he'd regained lucidity. Even more so since that debilitating kiss.

"You still out at your Tante Marie and Oncle Peeyot's old place? Not too marshy there, is it?" Doc scrutinized her carefully.

Angel looked over at Deke, who gave her a hard look. He had to know she was uneasy. She nodded. Yes, she *was* uneasy. But Deke Doucette was the Cajun man she'd been waiting for all her life.

He was hers. She'd just have to get over herself.

“It’s only marshy on the back side,” she clarified. “There’s lots of room. We’ll confine ourselves to the second floor and porch for the first week or two.” She was babbling, she knew it. Taking a deep breath, she closed her mouth and smiled.

“I’m satisfied with that, then,” Doc Santiny gave his blessing to the arrangement.

It didn’t escape Angel’s notice that Deke’s response was longer in coming. He looked at her speculatively for endless seconds. She held his gaze and waited. They barely knew each other. Maybe now was a good time to change that. She hoped he could live with her “idiosyncrasies”. Only one way to find out.

Deke held Angel’s gaze as he nodded slowly. Hell yeah, he wanted to be with her. But it *did* seem out of character for her to volunteer to bring him into her home where it would just be the two of them. He’d been chasing her around as best he could for a man who couldn’t stand on his own two legs without crutches.

“And how is your lovely grandmother?” the old doctor turned to Rayne.

“I’m quite certain she would enjoy a visit from you, Doctor. You know she’s sweet on you,” Rayne teased.

“Now, Rayne Deveau!” A slight growl caused Dr. Santiny to clear his throat. “Ah, I mean Madame Doucette,” he clarified, mopping lightly at his brow. “You know Esmé would be scandalized to hear you say such a thing!”

“I doubt it,” Remy laughed deep in his throat. “That woman is damn near unflappable,” he said, belying Rayne’s earlier statement.

“Stay around and let’s talk about this, *Ange*,” he murmured as the room emptied, Doc Santiny inviting himself to tea with Remy and Rayne, and more importantly, Esmé.

The old doctor had had a crush on the older woman since he was a youth entering middle school. She was a dozen years older than he, but Rayne teased that maybe his youth would allow him to catch her.

“Okay,” Angel agreed, moving aside to talk to Ashlynn near the door.

“I won’t have you playing games with my *cousine*,” Gabe growled at Deke in a low voice, keeping an eye on the two women across the room.

“*Fils de putain!*” Deke swore as quietly as he could. “My eye, you won’t have me playin’ games! What you call you taking over my niece that way?”

“Ashlynn and I are *sont fiancés*,” Gabe reminded him of their engagement in a furious whisper, obviously not wanting to startle the two women at the door of the small room.

“*Mais*, how did that come about, *podna?*” Deke asked him smugly, still cringing inside just a little at the idea of the events preceding his niece’s engagement. Gabe

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

released his breath slowly. "You remember what you told me when we had that fight over Ashlynn?"

"*Qui?*" Gabe demanded. *What?* "Angel is not a Federal Treasury agent..."

"*Non*, but she *is* a grown woman. Twenty-seven years old. Old enough to make up her own mind." There was a lot more he could say, wanted to say, but he let it go.

Gabe nodded. "Fine, but just so you know—there's more to her than you think."

"You ever met a woman what there wasn't?" Deke snickered.

Gabe joined him in laughter, parting with a handshake before he left with Ashlynn.

The door closed with a hiss and a squeak, leaving Deke alone with Angel. The two regarded one another silently for a moment. Finally, Deke spoke.

"Why you offered to have me stay with you? Why you did that?" Deke asked without preamble.

"Uh..." Angel moved to the chair next to Deke's bed. She fidgeted nervously as she reached for an answer. "I wanted to make sure you were okay," she mumbled.

"Not good enough," he shot back. "Why?" he asked again.

"I care about you," she admitted, her voice a husky rasp.

"Nope," he said definitively, crossing his arms.

Angel cleared her throat. He knew this wasn't easy for her. It wasn't easy for him, either.

She sighed gustily, looking away. "I want to be with you," she admitted.

"That's fine, that," he extended a hand to her. After a moment, she took it. "One day, we come across each other, have a helluva kiss, then the next day, I'm shot and there we are, huh?"

"Yeah," Angel agreed, swallowing audibly.

"If we're goanna see what we got here, we need to do it on the same footing, yeah?" She nodded. "You wanna go home, think this through?" he offered.

She shook her head from side to side. "This is right, I know. It's just...there'll be some getting used to, is all." She offered him a weak smile. Giving his hand a little squeeze, she stood. "I guess I'd better go."

"Maybe you could kiss me goodnight?" he wheedled, figuring he'd take every bit of what he could get. "I mean, since we'll be livin' together and all."

Her face flushed as she leaned down to lay a soft kiss on his forehead. Deke was having none of that. He reached up, cupping the back of her neck, he pulled her to him.

*J.J. Massa*

When her lips touched his, he murmured, “I’m a grown man, *Ange*, get used to dat.”

He pulled her closer, his hand sliding between the buttons of her blouse, reaching under the elastic and spandex to cup her tightening breast. His lips covered hers, giving and taking in a brief, hungry kiss. Slowly, his fingertips stroking her peeked nipple briefly, he pulled out of the kiss, pressing his forehead to hers to catch his breath.

“Goodnight, *mon ange*,” he murmured huskily, letting his hand drop.

Angel blinked at him for a moment. “Uh, goodnight,” she whispered, backing away until she came to the door and slipped out.

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### Chapter Five

Angel paced through the large house, stopping in front of windows, in doorways, staring sightlessly as she struggled with her unease. After the third circuit of the large house, she forced herself into the kitchen to put a kettle of water on to boil.

Rifling through her utensils, she found a silver tea ball and filled it with dried Meadowsweet and Chamomile. Snapping the little ball closed, she hooked the chain through the handle of her favorite tea mug and waited for the water to boil.

It didn't take long for the shrill whistle of the steam escaping through the hole in the spout to jar her from her stupor. She poured a splash of boiling water over the ball to allow the tea to bloom, dumping out the dregs.

That done, Angel filled the mug with boiling water and took it to her favorite place in the old house. Or out of the house, depending on one's point of view. Like the tea, this part of her home soothed her.

It was a courtyard of sorts, perhaps a grotto, with majestic `s hanging with Spanish moss, interspersed with banana trees, crepe myrtles, elephant ears, walled in mostly by low barriers that angled toward each other, never quite meeting.

The weather was balmy, even in October, and the green growth and gentle breezes brought her comfort. Would Deke like it here? Didn't he have his own home?

He and his brother had agreed to the sale of their family's old home, as she recalled. Ashlynn and Storm had grown up in her mother's family's home with her parents, Remy and Rayne, and her *Grande Mamere*, Madame Deveau.

She gave herself a hard mental shake. She was once again avoiding the real issue.

"Deke," affirmed Rayne Deveau.

Angel turned in her deep, cushiony garden chair, disbelieving. "Are you really here?" She couldn't be sure. So many times she heard that beautiful voice talking to her. Seldom did she see the woman that went with it.

"In the flesh," smiled Rayne holding out a small mug. "Think you can share some of that with me? You took it all."

“Of course, Madame,” she stuttered, tipping a portion of her tea into the empty mug.

“Rayne, please,” the older woman corrected, “We’re going to be sisters soon.”

“I don’t--we don’t know.” Angel felt her face flame. She couldn’t look that far ahead—wouldn’t. “It’s odd, what with you being Ashlynn’s mama and all,” she said instead.

“You were always around, but you ducked away. Very respectful, very self-sufficient.” Rayne gave her a warm smile. “I suppose that was because of yours and Gabriel’s parents dying when they did.”

Angel shrugged. Her parents and Gabe’s were siblings who’d married siblings. Their death when Angel was in her teens had certainly taught her to look after herself. “Tante Marie liked me best when I was paying attention quietly. So I did.”

“She had a lot of skill,” Rayne commented, taking a sip of her tea. “She was a hard woman, though.”

“She was,” Angel nodded. “She didn’t...” she stopped, about to admit that her angry great-aunt hadn’t liked this sweet woman taking tea with her.

“It’s okay,” Rayne smiled. “I wasn’t crazy about her, either.”

Neither said a word for five full minutes, until Angel finally gave in. “You want to talk about me and Deke,” she mumbled into her tea mug.

Rayne gave her a gentle smile. “Yes, I think you should, honey. I can’t blame you for feeling uncertain, maybe a little afraid. The Doucette men have testosterone in abundance. They are very strong-willed.”

Angel grinned in spite of herself. “That’s one way to put it.”

“Are you nervous about anything in particular? Or just everything?” Rayne asked.

“Um, that’s pretty broad,” Angel sighed. “But yeah, both. I’m nervous about what Deke expects from me. I really have avoided serious relationships with men.” She looked into Rayne’s eyes. “I was saving myself for that special man. I always knew it’d be a Cajun man.”

Rayne patted her hand. “Of course you did, honey. And Deke, in spite of his bullheaded ways, is pretty special.”

“That’s part of what I’m worried about, though,” Angel sat up straighter. “He’s bullheaded and he’d going to try to push me around some.”

“Forewarned *is* fore-armed, Angel,” Rayne said quietly. “He *is* going to try to bully you. A certain amount of that is acceptable. You *do* however, get to decide when you will and won’t let him get away with it,” she winked.



## ANGEL'S FORECAST

Angel giggled into her mug of tea. The idea that she could pick and choose when Deke could win and when he would lose an argument...that was a very attractive concept. She would consider that for awhile.

"What about my--my spells and forecasting things? How do you think he'll be about that? I don't *always* know what's going to happen with people, but sometimes I do. And I do use a lot of herbs and charms in my daily life." If anyone had experience with this, it would be Rayne Doucette.

"Sweetheart, I completely understand those fears. You should have seen Remy when we first got together. Right off the bat, he didn't want to be *The One*. The fact that I had "powers" just made things worse." Rayne shuddered, piquing Angel's curiosity.

"What happened?" She *had* to know.

Rayne took a deep breath, biting her lip. "He called me a freak," she said in a rush, taking a gulp of her tea.

"Oh, wow!" Angel gasped.

"I've never told anyone that," Rayne confessed, adding, "But Deke tried to step in. He was *always* really accepting of my special talents."

"So it's really not going to be that hard for him, then?" Angel reiterated, somewhat relieved.

"No, Angel," Rayne leveled an intent gaze on her. "It's going to be hard for you. You have to adjust to his ways, too. It's a two-way street." Angel was confused, and sure that it showed on her face. "You've both lived alone for a long time. You both have friends, lives, full-time careers. You're a caregiver, and he's a law enforcement officer. Those are all things that have to be taken into consideration."

"Yeah," Angel breathed, acknowledging the wisdom of Rayne's statement. "I'm going to think about that awhile."

"You do that," Rayne stood, leaning down to give the younger woman a brief hug. "I'd better get back before my *Grand-mère* ends up marrying that doctor...or something less socially acceptable," she winked. "I left a suitcase full of Deke's clothes over by the foyer stairs," she told Angel on her way out the door.

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*There were men in the garden! Where was Deke? Angel was frantic, hiding in a little alcove just off the kitchen. She couldn't just huddle in a corner like a frightened child. Her Dekon needed her. She needed him.*

*He'd just gotten healed enough to move around. If they hurt him again...*

*J.J. Massa*

*She felt the anger boil up inside her as she stepped around the tall bookshelf. Even the man she came face to face with didn't scare her.*

*That was her biggest problem, really. She was never afraid of the right things. He grabbed her by the hair and...*

Tears were running down Angel's face as she tried to sit up. She couldn't tell if they were the result of her dream or the fact that she'd somehow gotten her hair tangled in the handle of her night table. Usually, she put it up at night. This time, too much had been on her mind, she guessed.

Either way, she was grateful. She didn't want to know what happened next.

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

### Chapter Six

Deke couldn't believe how wearing it was, just getting dressed. Forget about riding down to the car in a wheelchair and then getting in. His brother had come and picked him up, though Angel had been there to sign him out.

She needed to know the discharge instructions, nurse or not, but there was no way that Deke would be able to ride home in her low-slung corvette. He wouldn't be able to drive his own SUV for several more weeks yet. He wouldn't even be able to support more than the merest amount of weight on his right leg for weeks yet.

While those items both annoyed him a great deal, this being weak and tired thing was driving him nuts. He wanted to be with Angel. Get to know her. Mostly, for the very short term, get to know what Angel was hiding.

He'd gone to sleep the night before, thinking about the feelings he had about her now, as well as what he'd felt the first time he'd "met" her. He thought of that in quotes because, at the time, no formal introductions had been made.

How had he missed making her acquaintance all these years that she'd been Ashlynn's best friend? Another good question. There was just so much they did not know about each other. Was it a bad idea for him to go and stay with her now? Or would this be the best way for the two of them to get past this awkward stage in their relationship.

He nearly chuckled aloud at that. Relationship. No way around it, though, they were in a relationship. Would he have sought her out if he hadn't been shot? Yeah...he knew he would. She'd been on his mind ever since that first amazing kiss. Even he, simpleton that he was, knew there was something special there.

Last night's kiss was even *more* amazing. The passion that erupted every time he touched her--amazing. The feelings she stirred in him every time he laid eyes on her were overwhelming. She took his breath away. They were meant for each other, of that he had no doubt.

Now, all he had to do was make sure Angel Baptiste agreed.

"I know you ain' asleep over there," Remy rumbled from the driver's seat. They'd stopped for a light, heading toward the edge of the parish. It would be hard for Deke to be

so far from the action; the old Theroit place straddled both parishes. It was right on the bayou.

“No, jus’ thinkin’,” he murmured, rolling his head toward his brother. “Cain’ believe how spent I’m feelin’ even so.”

“You goanna be okay?” Remy asked, his deep voice concerned.

Deke rolled his head toward Remy, opening his eyes a crack. “I am, never fret,” he promised. “I hate feeling like an old woman, though.”

Remy snickered. “Don’ let *Mamere* Esmé hear you say dat!”

“I only *wish* I felt as spry as that old woman do,” Deke chortled his agreement. “You got any idea how old she is now?”

“Not a clue,” Remy shook his head. “An’ I think we should stop talking ‘bout her afore she visits some kind o’ spell or ‘nother on us.”

“Amen to that,” Deke granted, leaning back against the headrest again.

“So you goanna be okay out there with Angel?” Remy queried, studiously watching the road.

“What, you think she’s goanna cook me up and eat me or something?” Deke looked over at his brother, not lifting his head.

“I jus’ wanna make sure...” Remy broke off, slowing the SUV down somewhat. He changed lanes and picked up what he was saying. “...make sure that you’re accepting. Rayne says she has a...shine about her.”

“Well, hell, I coulda told you that. Why you slowing down?” he sat up again, looking around.

“Nothing to worry about,” Remy pulled over, turning to face his brother. At Deke’s raised brow, he added, “...much.”

“*Qui?*” Deke looked at his brother and then at the direction in which he was staring. Remy had pulled out a pad and paper and was scribbling furiously on it.

“Seemed like we were being followed,” he murmured, lifting his radio. “Antibe, run this tag,” he waited a moment.

“Go ahead,” came Antibe’s crackly response.

“Lima, Delta, *deux, trois, sept*, Charlie,” Remy called out the tag number, mixing numbers in his native language with the military alphabet code of each letter. “Cain’t tell the Parish, looked like state tags.” He waited again, Deke watching carefully.

“What’s the make and model on that vehicle, Sheriff?” Antibe asked, faint sounds of keystrokes sounded in between the static.

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

"Blue Dodge Ram," Remy answered, "I'm not sure what year. Coulda been new. Shit, they all look the same anymore."

"S'truth," Antibe and Deke answered at the same time.

"Stolen rental car tags, Sheriff," Antibe said after a pause. Without the static, his voice sounded like it was coming from the bottom of a barrel. "Registered to a—wait a sec..." Neither man spoke for a few minutes. "Lewis R. Carrier—a silver Ford Taurus, turns out. You want I should put out a pick-me-up for that tag?"

"Yeah!" Deke and Remy both exclaimed as one.

"Probably find it abandoned here in a few miles," Deke murmured.

"For true," Remy sighed, annoyed. "He knows I made him." He flicked his left turn signal, easing back into traffic. "Put it out anyway, Antibe," he growled. "I'll check in after I get Deke settled."

"Hey! Good to hear your voice, Deputy Dawg!" Antibe answered back excitedly. "I'm just glad you're almost human again."

"You saying he ever was human to begin with?" Remy snapped playfully. He was trying to lighten things up, Deke could see that. But he could also see that his brother was still deeply troubled.

Antibe laughed and signed off, leaving Deke and Remy essentially alone again. "So? You didn't get a look at the guy?" Deke paused, "It *was* a guy, yeah?"

"Naw, didn't get a look," Remy grumbled.

"So you gonna tell me what is it you fearing?" he asked after a silence. Remy glanced at him and away, almost guiltily. "*Merde*, Remy! I'm fifty-one years old! Playing the big brother is..." he released a lungful of air, slowly, calming himself. Getting upset would only wear him out that much quicker. "If I need to know something," he said in a more even tone, "I expect you to talk to me."

Remy swore under his breath. "I wanted a day or two longer, to be sure." He pulled the car over to the side of the road again.

Deke knew that Angel would be waiting for them, wondering what was taking so long. He'd deal with that when he got there. Maybe he'd distract her. He was sure he could come up with something. After all, he was injured and she was a nurse...not to mention the attraction they felt for each other. One thing at a time, though.

"I wanted a pony when I was ten," Deke answered blandly.

"How about I buy you that pony and we just drive on?" Remy offered facetiously, a half-grin on his rugged, still handsome face.

J.J. Massa

“It happens I ain’t ten anymore,” Deke returned the half-grin and waited, arms crossed.

“You were *un mal dans mon tcheue* even then,” Remy mock-growled. *A pain in his ass, huh?* Deke raised a brow, smiling a little, but making it clear that he expected his brother to come clean.

Remy sighed gustily. “*Mais*, seems one or two of them what shot you skipped bail.”

Deke frowned. “I didn’t die, what’s the problem? It was pretty confusing there for awhile. Bullets flying ever-where. There’s enough reasonable doubt to get most of ‘em off in ten or less.”

“That Yankee, his name was Melvin Sloan, anyhow, he *did* die. Ashlynn went through Federal Enforcement Internal Affairs investigation. They decided that they don’t care if she admits she killed him or not. Seems they’re charging all the illegal participants in that nursery operation with drug trafficking, murder, attempted murder, attempted murder of multiple law enforcement officials, attempted murder of a Fed...just on and on.” Remy ran a hand through his hair.

“So Ashlynn’s in danger, yeah? What are you doing about it...” he stopped. Remy was shaking his head from side to side. What was he missing here?

“They know they’re done...if they’re ever caught, that’s the end.”

“Yeah?” Deke asked, confused.

“It was a family operation.” Deke rolled his eyes at that, and Remy huffed impatiently. “Not mafia or anything, blood family. Mr. Sloan had four sons and they were all there that night. They think *you* killed their old man. They don’t believe Ashlynn did it. They want revenge.”

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

### Chapter Seven

Angel was alarmed at how pale Deke appeared when he finally arrived. She'd known at the hospital that something was coming their way, but had no idea what. If only her "forecasts" gave her more information...

Remy was supposed to be following her. How hard could it be to follow a bright red corvette, anyway? She knew without a doubt that hers was the only one in the area.

"Bring him in here," she ordered, fighting to remain calm and unruffled, even as Remy helped his brother down from the truck.

"I can do it," Deke growled when Remy only handed him one crutch, supporting most of his weight when his feet touched the ground.

"Please, Deke," Angel begged, not holding back any of the worry in her voice. "Let him help, just this once?" She wasn't above a little emotional manipulation when he looked like someone had drained all the color from his face. It was part of her nature and her training to know when an order would work better than a sweet word. This time, she played to his concern for her.

Remy took most of Deke's weight, helping him up the porch stairs at the back of the house. The front led directly into the lower rooms—rooms Angel didn't use much. In certain parts of Louisiana, especially near the ever-encroaching bayou, it was only wise to keep valuables well above the water table. The older homes were built so that the main rooms were on the second floor, more often than not.

"Mayhap we should jus' go straight into your bedroom, hoss?" Remy suggested, letting Angel get in front him to lead the way.

"Yeah, all right," Deke agreed, testament to the pain he was in since he didn't argue at all.

"Right here," Angel turned, leading Remy into a large, well lit room. The dark wood floors were polished to a high gloss, the walls a gold color with crème moldings. She hoped he found it soothing and restful, when he finally had a chance to look around.

Remy all but carried Deke to the king-sized, mahogany-framed bed that dominated the large room. An elegant night table was situated within arm's reach. Remy

turned to it, pushed the lamp back, laid an ugly, six cylinder pistol down on the delicate doily covering it. Angel frowned at him, but he ignored her completely.

“Don’ worry just now,” he was saying to Deke. “Just rest up, yeah? We’ll have patrols out from both parishes. You’re gun’s here,” he tapped the little table and Deke nodded.

“’m just tired,” Deke mumbled. “I haven’t gotten out to play in a while.”

“Might be, but we need you back in fightin’ trim,” Remy rumbled.

The concern Remy wasn’t trying to hide was just as alarming to her as was Deke’s pallor. “Are you hurting, Dekon?” she’d almost said *shai*—it was a habit with her. But he likened it to being called child and she didn’t want to get him upset again.

“Yeah, I guess I am, *Ange*,” he managed, his voice thick and slurred.

She hurried from the room and returned in seconds with a glass of water and two of his pain tablets.

“Jus don’ worry about it,” Remy was telling him when she came through the door. “We’ll keep an eye on things. You’re pretty safe out here.”

“It ain’t me I’m worried about,” Deke choked out. “It...” he spotted Angel and shut his mouth.

Wrapping an arm around him, Remy eased him up and took the water glass while Deke took the tablets from Angel. Remy angled his head toward the door in the age-old signal to leave. Angel didn’t know what was going on, but she knew something was.

Deciding that she’d get further by acceding to Remy’s wishes, or at least appearing to, she stepped outside the door. He wasn’t even keeping his voice down, so he *had* to know she was listening, right?

“You goanna have to talk to her, Deke,” Remy mumbled to his brother. “She’s no more a child that Ashlynn is...than you are, come to that.”

Angel peeked around the corner to Remy easing Deke’s shoes and pants off. She would have done it, was used to doing it—as a nurse. As a potential lover...she shivered. One step at a time, she reminded herself, one step at a time.

Remy finally came out of the bedroom, appearing unsurprised to see Angel standing just outside of the door.

“He’s asleep,” Remy confirmed.

She’d thought he probably would be. His pasty, pinched features had suggested he needed it. The pain killers she’d supplied had confirmed it.



## ANGEL'S FORECAST

“So what took you two so long getting here?” she asked mildly. She was actually pretty angry—at this man. Still, it was best to keep it together. She’d get more information that way.

“We, uh,” he looked away guiltily. “I had to pull over, call in a violation,” he finally supplied.

While Angel realized that was probably true, she knew it wasn’t the *whole* truth. “You aren’t gonna tell me, are you?” she asked, shaking her head.

He had the courtesy to blush a little. “That *is* what happened, jus...there’s a bit for you and Deke to talk about, yeah?”

“He didn’t hurt himself or anything?” she asked suspiciously.

Remy appeared affronted, though Angel didn’t let that bother her in the least. “No, ‘course not! The ride took longer than it should’ve that’s all.”

She recognized a brick wall when she came to one, so she nodded.

That was all the permission he needed. “Call if’n you need anything,” With that, Remy took his leave.

Angel made her way back up the stairs as soon as The Sheriff’s SUV truck pulled away. Quietly entering the bedroom, she checked on Deke, laying one hand on his upper abdomen, the other on his forehead. His brother had stripped him down to his boxers, and Angel did her best to adopt a clinical attitude.

Most of her patients were women, given her specialty as a Labor and Delivery nurse. Before that, though, she had had her share of male patients of all ages. Never had she touched anyone so overtly masculine before. And never had anyone had the effect upon her that this man did—even flat on his back and immobile. He was more than just attractive...virile, that was the word. Deke Doucette was incredibly virile.

The removal of his right kidney, combined with the removal of a small section of his bowel, had made his recovery from the gunshot all the more difficult. Needless to say, the damage to his pelvis and an infection on top of all that didn’t help. But he’d spent just over a month in the hospital, beating all the odds and was well enough to be released.

It wasn’t unusual for the first day home to seem strenuous for any patient. She suspected that something had happened to make Deke’s little road trip even more strenuous.

She cast a beady eye on the ugly pistol littering her pretty night table. With every intention of at least putting the thing in a drawer, she reached for it. A large, calloused hand grabbed her wrist, stopping her.

“Leave it,” Deke mumbled, tugging at her arm. “C’mere.”

*J.J. Massa*

She turned toward him. “I *am* here. You’re supposed to be sleeping.”

“Lay down with me, *Ange*,” his voice was a husky murmur, sliding right up her spine. “Let me hold you, hmm?”

Any willpower Angel had melted away, just like the strength in her legs as she all but slid into the bed next to him. He turned onto his left side slowly, pulling her against him, cuddling her.

“Just for a minute or two,” she excused herself, nestling into him, her face against his throat.

“Thank you, *Bébé*,” he sighed into her hair, and then he was asleep.

\*\*\*\*

Angel sat up with a start. How long had she been sleeping there, wrapped around Deke like she had a right to be. Well, truly, it had been the other way around. He was wrapped around her, or had been until something had prodded her awake.

Something warm and hard, blunt...her face flamed. Something she didn’t want to turn and look at just yet. She’d seen men’s private parts before, but this one—this one she expected to get intimate with at some time in the near future.

Deke reached for her again, but she slid a pillow into his arms as she eased away. She wouldn’t think about intimacies. Not yet.

She hadn’t dreamed, though. Or if she had, it had been a pleasant, welcoming dream.

Time to start supper. She quietly took out a pair of Deke’s sweatpants and a t-shirt that had been in the suitcase Rayne had left the night before. Draping them across the end of the bed, she closed the door quietly on the way out.

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

### Chapter Eight

Smiling to himself, Deke watched, unbeknownst to her, as Angel cooked. He had no doubt the gumbo would be excellent, but he'd never confess, or possibly tattle, that she'd used butter-flavored shortening in place of natural cow's butter for her roux. He decided she was looking after their health.

Next had come the flour, added efficiently he was sure, just a bit more of that than the butter. She'd been stirring pretty constantly since he'd come in, had added boiling water and was now adding the onions, chopped pepper, okra...

She turned slightly and he saw tiny shrimp along with some other white, cubed meat land in the pot. A volley of spices followed that, he could smell the ground peppers, white, black, maybe she'd slip in a hint of the cayenne he loved; even though he knew he should go easy on it.

Watching her move had been a sensual treat, those luscious curves flowing as she moved between one counter to the stove to the refrigerator, swapping hands to keep stirring non-stop. The lid clattered down over the pot as she bent her knees, leaning back and squatting slightly to judge the height of the gas flame under her pot.

She might've known he was there, or not—he couldn't tell. Just to make sure he didn't startle her, he bumped a crutch against the doorframe.

"When dinner is?" he asked, inhaling deeply. "Smells mighty fine."

She looked at him for extended seconds. "Maybe an hour or so," she said finally. "Long enough for you to talk to me."

He didn't know how long he'd been asleep before, but shades of violet now bled into a flaming orange pink where the trees met the sky. What was left of the afternoon sun wouldn't last long.

Deke sighed. He'd known that was coming, even before he'd come fully awake to realize that she'd gone. She'd want to know what had taken them so long to get here from the hospital. And if she had, as Rayne like to call it, a shine about her, she would have to have the entire story. He wouldn't lie to her, ever, but he wished he had the option of leaving certain things out. Oh, well.

“Okay, *Ange*,” he smiled wryly, “Where you want to sit down? Not in here ‘else I’ll eat everything in sight.”

She chuckled, shaking her head. He caught her hand as she moved past him and pulled her in for a quick and gentle kiss. An arm snaked around his waist, stopping when her fingers touched the pistol shoved in the waistband of his pants.

“Uh,” she blinked up at him when he pulled back. He raised a brow, waiting as he gathered his crutches underneath him properly. “Since you’re already down here,” she leveled a beady look at him, “You and your gun...Let’s go to the porch.”

“I’m following you, *Béb*,” he assured her, forcing his attention to stay away from the enticing view of her swaying posterior in favor of navigating carefully over polished floors and throw rugs, down a step and out into the garden.

It seemed to be a garden oasis, surrounded by all manner of greenery, walled in by it almost, but with a calming view of the bayou only a few dozen yards away.

“This is beautiful,” he breathed, lowering himself into a generous, padded wicker chair.

Her smile was more pleasing than the little garden hideaway, he decided, and he realized suddenly, just how important it had been to her that he approve of this timeless little nook.

Her pleasure was short-lived in her expression as she seated herself facing him with an arched brow and an air of expectation. “First, what happened on the way home, then tell me what you think it means.” She paused for several seconds. “And then tell me why you need that pistol.”

Deke took a deep breath. No beating around the bush for his little angel. “We were followed on the way here,” he told her simply. When she didn’t say anything, he went on. “Remy pulled over and called in the make, model, and tags. Came away with nothing, though.”

“Hmm,” she looked at him for a moment. “Let me go get your meds—not the pain stuff, until bedtime,” He nodded, “You get ready to tell me the rest of it...”

She was gone before he could add anything, or even ask her to bring him a glass of tea. What he’d *really* like was a beer, but he knew she wouldn’t go for that.

“No, Dekon,” Angel said quietly from behind him, “No beer today.”

Deke jumped in surprise. He hadn’t heard her approach and he hadn’t thought he’d spoken aloud. She placed a cold glass of tea in front of him and sat down in the chair across from him.

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

"Thank you, *cheri*," he murmured, accepting a small assortment of pills from her outstretched hand.

"You didn't say it aloud, I just got this very strong feeling that you *really* wanted a beer," she explained. "I'm not—I can't read your mind exactly...just sometimes I know what you're thinking a little. Madame, I mean Rayne, is the only one I understand like that."

"Uh, *huh*," Deke looked at her for long seconds. "*Mais*, I guess it's a good thing you're the sexiest woman I've ever seen," he winked at her. "Otherwise, you'd be slapping me all the time, *Ange*."

"I might just be slapping you anyhow," Angel growled at him, eyes narrowed, pink staining her dusky cheeks. "You were going to tell me *why* Sheriff Doucette thought you were being followed today?"

"Hmmm?" he shook himself, realizing that he'd been admiring the way anger made her honey gold eyes spark. Maybe he'd just mention that later. "Ah, yeah, followed." He gathered his thoughts. "It seems that the guys that shot me think I killed their father or something. What with all the charges leveled against 'em, they've got nothing to lose, so they skipped bail and Remy thinks they could be in the area."

Angel bit her lip. That did not bode well considering the frightening dreams she'd been having. No, she wasn't going to jump to conclusions. Deke would have time to heal. He was perfectly fine on crutches and would have the time he needed to recuperate.

Besides, not all of her dreams came true. It might not be a forecast, just a dream. But it seemed so real...

Deke was looking at her expectantly, like he was waiting for a response. "Um, what? I didn't hear you," she gave herself a mental swift kick. "So, Remy suspects that the guys could be in the area and that's why he thinks it was them following the police SUV?"

With an odd look, he repeated what she apparently hadn't heard. "We cain't be sure, either way, but both parishes, Gabe's and ours, are going to beef up patrols around here."

Angel nodded slowly. "More patrols, good," she mumbled, taking a drink of her tea. Setting the sweating glass down carefully on the wrought iron table, she pushed back her chair. "You enjoy the garden while I go stir the gumbo, hmm?"

Not waiting for an answer, she stood, avoiding his reaching arm as she hurried into the kitchen. Barely slowing down once she got there, Angel opened the large pantry door, unlocking a special cabinet, and pulled out a special little leather bag.

Mumbling the words to a safety incantation under her breath, Angel turned without looking, walking almost directly into Deke.

“Whoa there,” he caught her before she could knock him down, or get very past him. “Last I seen, the gumbo’s over there in that pot. You wanna tell me what’s going on here?”

She tried to pull away, but with no success. “Deke, let go of me, I have something I need to do,” she pleaded, trying to avoid his eyes.

“You need to tell me what you got in mind, that’s what you need to do,” he growled, not letting go. “Then, *I’ll* go stir the gumbo while you do it.”

She took a deep breath. Rayne said Deke was accepting. She’d tell. Some.

“I, um, I have to sprinkle this dust and stuff at the four corners of the property. It’s not that big...wont’ take that long.” She offered him a weak smile.

“And you’re gonna do this because of why?” he asked mildly, his grip relaxing just a bit.

She looked down and back up at him. She might as well tell him. He would either understand or he wouldn’t.

“A safety spell,” she mumbled.

“Come again?” he asked. She was reasonably sure he’d heard her, but she’d say it again anyway.

“I need to do a safety spell for us. It’s good for a few days or so. It only works once, and then I’ll have to do another one. But this one is the strongest.”

His palms slipped off her shoulders to cup her hands. Carrying one to his mouth, he kissed the back of it.

“We’ll eat when you get back. Jus’ don’ be too long,” he turned away. “It’s getting dark out. I’ll worry,” he smiled over his shoulder, turning toward the main part of the kitchen.

The rhythmic thumping of his crutches on the hardwood floor jarred her out of her stunned stupor. She’d consider this development after she finished her little task.

Without a backward glance, she headed out the front door, toward the northernmost corner of what had been her elderly great aunt and uncle’s property.

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

### Chapter Nine

Deke sat at the kitchen table, watching through the window as Angel made her way through the garden and out of sight. He could hear the door open and then, there she was, the tiny leather bag in hand.

She aimed a shy smile his way before replacing the pouch in its cupboard. Returning to the kitchen, she immediately pulled down two bowls, filling them with gumbo. In an attempt to be considerate, he'd laid his gun on a nearby chair tucked under the table. It would be easy to reach but out of sight.

He inhaled deeply, enjoying the rich, spicy aroma wafting up from his bowl as she gathered cutlery and glasses, along with a pitcher of tea.

"I left my glass out there...yours, too, come to that," he confessed, teasing, "Had my hands full, you know."

"I know," she smiled back, slipping into the seat across from him, handing him his utensils and pouring a glass of tea.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, Deke savoring every morsel. He'd gotten more than a little tired of bland hospital food and nobody had been willing to bring him so much as a bottle of Tabasco® sauce.

"This is good, good, *Ange*," he groaned, swallowing the last bite. "You got any more in there?" he asked hopefully.

"I think I can find some," she chuckled, taking his bowl. When she returned, she placed a half-filled bowl of gumbo along with a steaming corn muffin. "I had these in the oven, but I turned it off a while ago," she explained.

With a smile, he dipped his cornbread into the gumbo, considering how best to start the conversation he wanted them to have. Finally, he decided to start slow.

"So, how long that spell s'posed to last?" he asked, adding, "An' what's it do, exactly?"

Angel looked at him in surprise, as if she couldn't quite believe he'd ask—that he'd take her seriously. They would broach that subject in a few minutes. For now, he arched a brow at her, awaiting an answer.

“Ah, it should last a week maybe, give or take a day,” she took a quick swallow of tea. He’d caught her with a mouth full. “It’s supposed to repel anyone who means you harm. If they go to step over the property boundaries, they’ll just be facing in the wrong direction. They’ll never quite make it.”

“Hmmm,” he considered. “Rayne did that before. Her *mamere*...” he stopped, an alarming thought bringing him up short. “What’s in that stuff?”

Angel looked at him, head cocked, brow furrowed. She was beautiful, adorable, everything he’d ever wanted in a woman. He had every intention of making her his the first moment he got the chance. For now, though, he needed an answer.

“There are all sorts of things in there...everything from witch-hazel to ground rat’s toenails, why?” she asked, confused.

“Jus’ promise me there’s nobody in there what used to be a person,” he shuddered, remembering old Mr. Verdin.

Angel’s eyes widened in alarm. “*Jamais d’la vie!* I would never do such a thing! Why would you say that to me?”

“Remind me to tell you about it later...much later,” Deke murmured, pushing his chair back. “There’s other stuff you and me need to cuss and discuss.”

Angel took the two bowls, placing them in the sink and rinsing them. Deke waited until she was finished and then levered himself to his feet, carefully sliding his weapon in the front of his pants this time.

“Come talk with me?” he stood, having situated his crutches properly so that most of his weight rested on his hands and arms. He angled his head toward the room’s doorway and then headed out to the front sitting-room. First things first, he slipped his pistol out of his pants and then behind a table lamp.

With a satisfied sigh, he lowered himself carefully onto the small loveseat, patting the cushion next to him. Nervously, Angel sat down, curling herself into the other corner. Deke wasn’t worried—it was a loveseat. The other corner wasn’t that far away.

“What did you want to talk about, Deke?” she asked, uncertainty in every syllable.

“That kiss,” he told her, midnight blue eyes boring into her.

“Which kiss?” her voice broke and she cleared her suddenly-dry throat. “Um, which kiss?” she repeated in a more normal tone.

“All of ‘em,” he winked, naughty boy and naughty man, all rolled into one devastating package.



## ANGEL'S FORECAST

She tapped him lightly, huffing a little chuckle. "Stop," she laughed. "Okay, what *exactly* about those kisses?" she asked, feeling a little more relaxed.

"*Mais*," he began, "I've done my share of kissin' in my lifetime. Not as much as Remy, I'll grant you, but plenty all the same."

"I'm not sure I want to hear this," she objected. She couldn't keep the hard note from leaking out and edged away a little. The arm of the loveseat bore into her back.

Deke reached over and pulled her back to him. "*Ange*, I've never had not even one kiss in my whole life as good as the kisses you and I had. And that's including when I was sweet on Rayne and got shocked." She shook her head from side to side in confusion. "They called her "Electric Rayne"," he explained. "Her *mamere* had a spell on her. She shocked every man who touched her but Remy."

"Ahh," Angel breathed. She *had* heard something about that, years before. She was also familiar with that spell. Her aunt had tried to cast the spell on a cat that kept getting pregnant. The best she was able to do was get shocked herself, every time she touched the cat.

"It seems to me, *Bébé*, two people who affect one another the way we do, *mais*, we ought to give that serious consideration." Angel nodded, hopeful and terrified at the same time. "I'm no spring chicken, I'm sure that hasn't passed your notice. Thing is, I want us to be together, you and me." Angel looked at him, startled. "Could be I'm jumpin' the gun here, but, like I said, I'm not as young as I used to be. Maybe that fears you some, that?"

"No, Deke, no, I..." Angel realized belatedly that, in her surprise, she'd left Deke wondering, uncomfortable, and maybe hurt and embarrassed that he'd made a mistake. That thought was unbearable to her. She scooted closer to him, putting her arms around his broad shoulders, burying her head in his chest. "I love you, Deke, I know I do. It scares me, because it's supposed to be different, somehow."

Deke pulled her into his arms and across his lap, cuddling her close. "How's it supposed to be, then? We're doing it wrong, yeah?"

Angel laughed against him, pressing a kiss to his Adam's apple. "I mean, I thought it was supposed to take longer, go slower. I didn't realize I'd find the rest of my life in just one kiss." She sniffed noisily, tasting salt-tears in her throat. "Just when I knew you were the one, you went and got shot, then the infection," she sniffed again, remembered fear making her unable to stem the tide of tears now. "All I ever wanted. You...and maybe a toy Pomeranian puppy named Sheba."

## Chapter Ten

“*Mais*, even if I died, you could still get the dog, *Béb*,” Deke soothed, or tried to, anyway. Here he was, sure they were making such great progress and Angel was heartbroken and sobbing in his arms.

“Dekon Cassion Doucette!” she cried, “Don’t you say such awful things!”

“Shh, *Ange*, shh,” he murmured, “I’m sorry. It’s goanna all be all right, I promise it is.” He really didn’t know what else to say. “You’re goanna marry me, yeah?” he stroked her long dark hair and kissing the tears away from her face. “It would make me happy, happy, *mon Ange*. It might have slipped my mind to mention it, but I’m crazy in love with you, *Bébé*.”

“Of course I will,” she agreed, tears still streaming as she tipped her face up to his.

Her lips were full, pink and inviting, and he tasted first the top, then the full bottom lip, teasing it, stroking with his tongue then nipping, tasting, dipping inside. Her mouth was sweet, warm, everything. His tongue stroked over hers, his hand slid down, finding its way inside her clothes, fingers flicking open buttons as he indulged in succulent, drugging kisses.

“I didn’t have time to get a ring,” he murmured, tasting his way down her throat, pushing away fabric, fumbling with elastic.

“Mmm,” she moaned, acknowledgement if nothing else.

He licked a path down a caramel curved breast, stopping at its crest to lather and taste each tiny bump surrounding the nipple. Nipping gently, he sucked the hard, chocolate peak into his mouth, teasing it, savoring it until Angel cried out.

“Ahhh, Deke,” she groaned, squirming on his lap.

She’d worn a pair of loose, drawstring pants; they were pretty, but lightweight, and most important to him, easy to get into. He kissed his way across to her other breast, nipping and sucking, supporting her as she leaned back with an arm behind her shoulders.

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

His other hand slid over her dark satin skin, down her slightly rounded belly and under the elastic of her panties. She yelped in surprise, her legs parting slightly as his fingers slid down, between her soft folds, sliding in her warm juice.

“So beautiful, *mon Ange*,” he murmured, “so precious.”

He caressed the silky smooth skin, rubbing at her hard nub with his thumb while he pushed one finger forward, breeching her clinging passage.

“Deke,” she moaned, “That feels...that feels...Deke!”

He rubbed harder now, kissing her full lips then dropping further to nip a penny colored nipple, feeling her tighten as his finger plunged in and out. She clutched at him, cream pouring over his hand as her body clenching as pleasure and surprise chased across her face.

He couldn't help it, the sight of Angel's gratification—head thrown back, eyes shut tight, her expression frozen in ecstasy, had him imagining a future. One fleeting image of her underneath him with that look on her face and Deke thrust up, coming, and coming, flowing, sticky and warm in his boxers.

Angel collapsed against Deke, too spent to be embarrassed about where his hand was. After an interminable gap of panting and kissing lightly, stroking and cuddling, Deke shifted.

“That was beautiful, *mon Ange*,” he rumbled, voice deep and hoarse. “But we're both pretty sticky now, yeah?” His hand had made its way back to her waist after tugging her shirt and bra to rights.

She couldn't help it, giggling into his shoulder. “I think you're a little stickier than I am, but you're making me that way.”

“See what you do to me?” he murmured, kissing behind her ear. “You wanna let me get a quick shower?” He rubbed his stubbly face against her hair. “I wish I could take one with you, *Bébé*. Only, for me, to see you is to want you. And I'm just not up to round two.”

Angel scooted off of his lap, tugging at the wet spot on her hip with a teasing smirk. She retrieved his crutches and handed them to him, helping him up. “It's okay, Deke, I'm not up to round two either.” She looked away as he reached for the gun, tucking it into the back of his pants again.

The steps were easy enough to navigate, leading up six stairs to a wide landing and then turning ninety degrees to lead up six more. She had put Deke in her own room, which she had had updated and improved as a graduation present to herself, before she'd returned to study and test for her specialty.

The bathroom off her suite was large, with a deep, wide tub, but also with a walk-in shower which had a platform bench at the back. She liked to sit and shave her legs.

The controls were easy to reach from the bench and she showed them to him. He could lean forward and lift the nozzle and wash himself completely. It would be a simple matter to sit down, remove his clothing and toss it over the glass wall, and then finish the job.

She left a towel and clean boxers close at hand for him. He could leave his crutches within easy reach to get out. Anyway, his pelvic bone injury had had over five weeks now to heal. A little bit of weight wouldn't cause any further damage.

Before she could walk away, Deke reached out and took her wrist. "You goanna come back and climb in bed with me, yeah?"

"Deke," she felt a little uneasy, in spite of the intimacy they'd already shared. "I've been saving *that* for--for when I get married." She felt her cheeks burn. "I know a--a twenty-seven year old virgin is hard to believe in this day and age, but..."

Deke pulled her against him, balancing on his crutches. "*Mon Ange*," he began, intensity burning in his deep blue eyes. "I been married to you in my heart since the first time I ever touched you. You jus' firmed it up over the last month or so. We don't never have to do a thing you don' want. I just want to hold you in my arms while we go to sleep, and wake up to see your face first thing."

"Oh, Deke," she sighed, rubbing her face against his upper chest, arms slipping around his waist. He was so much taller than she was. "You are such a romantic. How'd I ever get so lucky?"

"*Mais*, I'll be reminding you of that in about twenty years, when I'm *really, really* old and you're still a baby." He released her wrist to steady himself on his crutches.

"I have no doubt that you'll be every bit as lively then as you are right now," she smiled. "Okay, I'll see you in bed in about half an hour."

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*A feeling of utter calm filled her. She had never before felt so welcome, such a sense of belonging. She was part of something bigger, and so was Deke. She had nothing to be afraid of...*

Angel turned to Deke, for the second time in twenty-four hours, sleeping in his arms. The feeling of well-being persisted, even if her dream had faded away.

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

### Chapter Eleven

Angel did her best not to move. She didn't intend to wake Deke. The problem was, he was draped over the top of her and *something* was poking the inside of her left thigh.

She'd worn her comfortable, overlarge sleep shirt to bed the night before, figuring that he might as well know what she was like—especially if he planned to spend the rest of his life with her.

That thought alone gave her a delicious thrill. "What you thinkin' about, *Ange*?" Deke asked, his hot breath caressing her ear and causing a full body shiver.

She wouldn't deny it, she was as aroused as he was, only not as visibly so. Well... maybe she was visibly aroused. His hand slipped down between her legs and teased through her panties. She could feel how damp she was, much more so now that he was helping.

"You," she said huskily, knowing she was just about to break her vow of celibacy. If she didn't marry Deke Doucette, she wouldn't be marrying anyone, and that was that.

"Yeah?" he tugged at her panties and she helped pull them off.

Both were lying on their sides, he moved his right leg off of her hip when he helped her undress. It was her turn to touch him, and she pushed him over onto his back, kneeling to tug his boxers off.

Accommodating, he lifted his hips and let her pull the cotton undergarment down and off. Angel sat back on her heels and looked, taking in his tanned complexion, not as dark as hers, but enough to hint at Creole ancestry.

Fine black hairs covered his legs from the top of his feet to the thick tangle of black curls at his genitals. The hair was thin and soft, accenting his attractive coloring and his heavy muscle tone, still evident in spite of weeks of inactivity.

Her fingers trailed the reddish-pink scar that trailed down his left side, denoting his recent injury and reminding her how close she'd come to losing him. She leaned down to kiss it gently, not thinking about the effect of her long, wavy hair, until it draped across his jutting cock, causing him to moan aloud.

“*Ange, Ange,*” he groaned, head thrashing on the pillow, hands gripping the sheets.

She grinned, thrilled with her feminine power as she kissed her way up his abdomen, letting her hair trail across his sacs, his burning shaft endlessly.

In a bold move, Angel rose to her knees and straddled Deke’s thighs, not caring that it opened her up to his view. She leaned forward, planting both hands on his shoulders, lowering herself for a succulent kiss.

“You goanna kill me, *Bébé,*” he murmured, his full lips moving under hers, his tongue seeking her warmth, stroking against hers.

“Maybe,” she agreed, pulling back, kissing her way down his chiseled face, stopping to nip at the juncture of throat and neck.

Her journey continued as she trailed her lips across his prominent clavicle, and then kissing and nipping her way down to a flat nipple, lathing it back and forth with her tongue. She leaned back to bite it lightly, delighting in the strangled explanation he just barely managed to contain.

Angel didn’t stop, though, kissing every one of his ribs until her erotic journey brought her to his flexing hips.

Finally, she sat back on her heels, considering the proof of his manhood. It was thick and long. She measured it with her spread hand, from pinkie to thumb and guessed it to be about eight inches, maybe a little more.

“Ohhh, gawd,” Deke groaned. “*Ange...*”

She cut him off by wrapping her hand around his throbbing cock. An involuntary thrust of his hips told her she was on the right track. One squeeze and a pump and he sat partially up, taking her by the shoulders.

“You goanna finish me like that, *Ange,*” he warned her. “That’s fine with me if that’s what you want.”

“It’s not,” she informed him decisively.

“No?” he arched a brow, looking both hungry and knowing, but still leaving the choice up to her.

“No,” she sounded breathy now, excited. “I want you inside me. But I don’t want to hurt your injury.” At his look of askance, she smiled a little. “I’m not as tall as you, but I’m a size fourteen at least.”

“Uh,” Deke’s face tinted a little pink. “If that means you’re soft and curvy, like I love, I don’t care if you’re a size eighty-seven.”

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

Angel grinned. No doubt about it, she'd hit the jackpot. She lay down, full-length on top of him. "What's the best way to go about this without me sitting on you or you putting lots of weight on your pelvis?"

Deke cleared his throat, apparently trying to think. "How about you come down on top of me, then we both roll to the side?" He nipped at her lip, sinking his tongue deep into her mouth. "You *do* know it's goanna hurt some, yeah?" he asked quietly.

With a quick kiss, she pushed herself back to her knees. "I think I read that somewhere," she winked. "I *am* a nurse, Deke," she chuckled.

She positioned herself above his hips, pulled the head of his cock to her gushing center, and brought herself down onto him.

Angel yelped involuntarily in pain, tears springing to her eyes.

"*Bébé, Bébé,*" Deke crooned, wrapping his arms around her.

He rolled her to her back and let his legs fall on either side of hers. Resting mostly on his forearms, just a little on his right knee, Deke began to thrust.

He kissed her face, her chin, her neck, sliding in and out of her, gliding into her slick center and out again. Angel couldn't help but wrap her legs around his, bucking up in rhythm to his thrusts. The pain hadn't lasted and now, a feeling was welling up, deep, maybe from her toes, but all centered right where they were joined.

Joined. That's what they were, joined. The love, the amazing glide, the slick sweat, the feeling of owning, being owned, all of it wrapped Angel up in an amazing cocoon that wrapped her up and set her free, all at the same time.

As if from a distance, she heard her own scream, Deke's shout, releasing her into a million tiny pieces, all mixed up together with him. They were two, but one, at the same time.

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Deke sipped his coffee as he looked out over the beautiful garden that Angel loved so much. They'd finished eating breakfast a little while ago and Deke was enjoying the silence as he relived their lovemaking.

Angel had come into his life like the bullet that had taken him down—incapacitating him and changing his life. Now he had one less body part and one more soul in his life.

He chuckled at that silly comparison, stopping abruptly when he heard male voices from within the house. He leaned forward, grabbing for his pistol with one hand and a crutch with the other, brought up short by his brother's voice.

“Calm down, Dekon, aint’ nobody here but us Doucettes!” Remy crowed, coming out into the little courtyard to join him. “Look what I found out *rodee*,” *running the roads*, he accused as he stepped aside to reveal his son, Storm.

Storm was a month shy of twenty-five years old and almost as tall as his father. His eyes were a shade lighter than Deke’s and his hair a shade darker. He was the typical, blue-eyed, black haired Acadian man. Only there wasn’t a typical thing about him.

Deke had heard stories about how attractive Rayne’s father was. His own mother had been madly in love with Rayin Deveau. The man had broken hearts just by walking into a room.

Storm had a lot in common with his grandfather, his special abilities strongest of their family. He could make the wind blow, not gentle breezes but strong, hurricane and tornado strength winds, bring storms when and where he wanted, levitate items, and when he was with his family, he could even make plants grow.

Deke had often wondered what caused such things in these people he loved so much. He’d come to believe that perhaps some part of their brains had been “turned on” in a way that most people’s were not.

The same thing must be true of Angel, he decided. She seemed to know just what to put in this mixture or that to create a spell. She knew things...she’d had that dream. That made him shiver.

Pasting a heartfelt smile on his face, Deke got up and pulled his nephew into a hug. He didn’t have to pull that hard. Storm was hugging him tight, with all of his youthful exuberance.

“Uncle Dekon, I damn sure been worried about you. I’m so happy, happy to see you up, see you moving, see you...” Storm stopped talking, tilted his head, held his uncle away with both hands and then turned to look at Angel. With a smirking grin, he turned to support Deke with one arm behind his back. “Welcome to the family, Sugar Angel,” he grinned.

Remy arched a brow at him and Angel blushed. “What you talkin’ ‘bout, boy?” Deke demanded, though he had a sinking suspicion he knew.

Storm laughed and hugged him a second time, turning to Angel for a hug. “We goanna have a double weddin’ round here?” he asked, beaming at the group.

“There’s just no tellin’,” Angel hugged him back, and then pushed him away. “We’ll let you know as soon as we do, and not a second sooner!”



## ANGEL'S FORECAST

### Chapter Twelve

Deke had enjoyed the day, couldn't remember when last he'd had such a pleasant time. Storm had been as witty, as gently sarcastic as ever. Remy, every bit the proud papa, volleyed his verbal thrusts and parries with relish.

Angel had come and gone, happily providing lunch, affectionately touching, even kissing Deke when the mood struck her. The way they'd been that morning, so close, closer than he'd ever been with anyone—his heart was full.

In quiet conversation with Remy, when Storm had excused himself to go flirt with Angel, his blue eyes glinting wickedly, Deke had asked about the men who'd skipped bail, who'd possibly been following them the previous day. The truck had been reported stolen, and when the rental car company took receipt of their silver Ford Taurus from Mr. Carrier, they had dutifully reported the tag theft.

None of that information surprised either brother, but it was frustrating. "We have ever'buddy in three counties looking for 'em,"

Remy had growled, "Hell, even Rayne's *mamere* is trolling for 'em, with her witchy ways."

"Nothin', huh?" Deke had asked, disappointed.

"Nope, nothin'..." Remy had responded. "We thought we had a report over in Xavier Parish, but it was a false alarm."

Deke had considered mentioning Angel's own brand of protection, but didn't. He knew his brother wouldn't have anything negative to say—how could he? Still, Deke decided that it was between the two of them, nobody else.

The woman in question had gone upstairs to lie down, whispering in his ear that the unusual activity of looking after him was taking its toll. He'd laughed and probably blushed, but he couldn't deny being a little concerned. After all, she'd been a virgin just as recently as that very morning. For all he knew, it could be harmful... He laughed at himself. Now he was just getting ridiculous.

He rose from the table where he'd spent most of the afternoon and the better part of the morning. It was in the upper seventies, very temperate, comfortable. Dragonflies

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were flitting around near the top of the garden, or the bottom, if you considered that the land slanted down to the bayou.

The birds were strangely silent, save for a burst of dove, back by a stand of cypress trees. Deke turned that way, slowly making his way for the edge of the yard, and consequently the edge of the bayou.

He thought he saw something odd reflecting off of the water, but he just couldn't be sure. Deke moved around one of the trees and his crutch slipped, sending him sprawling backward.

He mentally braced himself. He wasn't sure which would hurt worse—the impact to his healing injury or Angel's ire when she saw what he'd done in his foolishness.

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Angel yawned and stretched. She'd been sleeping so deeply. Something had teased her from her sleep—some nagging thought. Was it that dream? And where was Deke?

She moved to the window and looked out, a feeling of *déjà vu*.

Suddenly it came to her. Maybe her dream *was* a forecast, but there was a reason. Something bad was going to happen if she didn't change things right away. She'd forgotten something!

Angel turned from the window and rushed down the stairs chanting as she went. She'd left an opening for intruders. She'd cast a spell restricting anyone from putting foot on her land with the intention of harming. But the bayou was wide open. It wasn't land and anyone who wanted could aim a gun and shoot, doing as much damage as they pleased.

She rushed to her pantry, chanting and murmuring, frantic to change the spell, to prevent anyone from doing harm to them from the bayou side of the property.

Unfortunately, the way she'd set things up, she'd have to lift the spell on the front side of the yard, the driveway, even the doors. But Deke was outside, in the back. He would be safe.

She'd lifted the safety spell before she realized her mistake...Deke wasn't safe until she cast a safety spell on the bayou. She was too far away for that. The last she'd seen of him, he was actually at the very edge of the water.

Angel whirled when she heard something shatter outside. She'd removed the protective wards on her home, left Deke out there by himself, and now the bad guys were on there way in. She needed help in the worst way.

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*"Don't worry, child, you're not alone,"* came a voice in her mind. The very welcome voice of Rayne Deveau. *"We've all forgotten just one little detail when under pressure."*

Angel was frantic. What were they doing to Deke? Would he be injured, killed for her mistake?

*"Little Dekon is fine, mad as a wet hornet, worried for you, but safe enough,"* cackled an older-sounding voice. That had to be Esmé Deveau. *"Yes, child, it certainly is me,"* the old woman sounded smug. *"And you need not worry. You got him wrapped up in a bubble of protection that's truly got him mad. You cast the spell for safety from the water before you took down the safety from the land spell,"* she chortled happily. *"I love it when big, strong men get a taste of what a woman can do."*

*"You best stop that, Grand-mère,"* scolded Rayne. *"Deke needs to be..."*

"I know you're in there," said a hateful, deep voice from beyond the pantry door. "You either come out, or we'll come in and get you."

It didn't make Angel happy, but she was slightly heartened. The mental conversation had strengthened her, made her feel less alone, more apart of something larger—a family.

This new development, the hard voice of this stranger in her home, while alarming, was also reassuring to her. There had been no voice like this in her dream. She'd been hiding, had been certain Deke was injured. This time she wasn't hiding, whatever the intruder thought.

Angel left the pantry, making sure to grab a well-used container first.

## Chapter Thirteen

At first, Deke was amazed, then impressed, but now, he was hopping mad. It had been highly entertaining to watch the three men in the pirogue try to pull their craft to the shore, only to find themselves sinking in the bayou mud on the far side of it.

It had been astonishing, amazing, to see a man pull his gun, aim from a scant six feet away, pull the trigger, only to have limbs behind him whirl into the murky water, as if he'd been performing a trick.

The part that made him angry, furious, scared him to death, came when he'd tried to go back to the house and couldn't. Couldn't do more than turn in circles while he watched men rush into the house, overturn the table on the porch, and sprint inside.

Watch, that's all he could do. Just watch.

"ANGEL!" he bellowed. Nothing. "Rayne!" he tried. Someone had to hear him. "*GOOD GOD ALMIGHTY! Someone!*" he roared, so angry and frantic that he could actually see red dotting his vision.

A bolt of lightning struck the ground between himself and the fast-retreating flatboat. Deke lay where he'd landed, his back taking the impact of this second tumble, one of his crutches jarred too far out of reach. He couldn't have moved right then anyway.

Storm walked over to his uncle, hand outstretched. "I ain't Him, nor my mama, neither, but I bet I'll do this time around, huh?"

Deke opened his mouth to speak, emitting little more than a weak croak. He cleared his throat and tried again, "How'd you... Ah--I didn't know you could do that," he finally managed.

"Shh," Storm winked, helping his uncle up. "Don't tell. All the women be after me to do it over and over again. I hardly get any peace as it is," he complained smugly.

Storm turned toward the bayou and looked at the two men and the departing boat. The trees began to whip and lightning split a knobby pine so that it creaked and broke, smoke spiraling from the rent trunk as the upper half splashed in front of the boat,

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

blocking its escape. Debris had effectively caged the men, one of whom threw his hands up in the air, dropping his pirogue pole.

Deke scooped up his gun which had fallen from the back of his pants when he'd slipped the first time. He was reluctant to use his crutches, though he was a bit sore. He decided he would, at least on his right side. He could shoot with his left hand if need be. He began looking around for his gun when it floated in front of his face. He grabbed it, glancing at his nephew.

Storm arched a wicked black brow at him and turned, ignoring Deke's muttered curse as he snatched the gun out of the air.

"We've got to get in there and see if Angel's all right," Deke urged. "If she is, I swear I'll turn her over my knee for doing this to me."

"You're sex life is none of my concern, Uncle Deke," Storm observed dryly, walking around the perimeter of the yard, his hand held out, as if he could feel something. "She's strong...got it going on," he murmured. "Lessee if I can undo this here thing."

Storm's muttering and the sound of shattering glass from the house didn't make Deke feel any better at all. "You're not funny, you know that?"

"Maybe not. She's got us pretty well stuck out here, but not quite," Storm mumbled. "You wanna go for a ride, Uncle Deke?" he grinned, looking so much like the naughty little boy that he *had* been for so many years that it made Deke's heart ache for a moment.

A flash of green light and an angry male voice jerked him back to the present instantly. "What the hell you talkin' 'bout, boy?" Deke rumbled, fear making him sound even more harsh and angry.

Storm grinned, wrapped both arms around Deke and yelled, "Look out Angel! There's a *storm* coming your way!"

Heavy winds whipped around them and Deke felt a low electric current buzz through him, making his hair stand on end, making his skin itch, making the plate in his pelvis vibrate mildly. Very mildly, he hoped.

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"*Laisse-moi tranquille!*" Angel yelled at her large, muscle-bound attacker, lobbing a second, spell-packed bomb at the offensive man. "*Leave me alone!*" she clarified, just in case there was any doubt about what she was saying.

This one was a little stronger than the last. It knocked him off of his feet, turning the air in the room to a hazy bluish-green. She was quite satisfied to see the three men

huddling in a corner of the room, looking at her like she'd grown a second head. If they were afraid of her...

The thought was cut off abruptly when strong arms grabbed her from behind, rough hands hurting her, no doubt leaving bruises.

"You may be some kind of voodoo witch," growled a deep, heavily accented voice in her ear, "I don't fuckin' care. I got nuttin' to lose."

Angel felt an adrenaline-packed surge of fear shoot through her, closing her mouth with a snap. She was afraid to move, the large, painful fingers of her attacker's right hand moved up to her throat, squeezing slightly.

"Uh," Angel wheezed, "What do you want?" she coughed.

"I want the guy, that's all. Not the one that left, the one that stayed. You tell me where he is—we're all good here, *capice?*"

"What...um," she stalled, "What means that?"

"Don't try that shit wit me, woman!" he threatened low, squeezing her throat, running his fingers through his dark pompadour. That must be a nervous habit. He obviously hadn't slept for days either, as evidenced by his five-o'clock-shadow. "You know where he is, now you call him, you hear me?" She might be able to pick him out of a line-up, but if she didn't do something quick, she'd never make it to said line-up. For that matter, neither would he...

"*Madame! Rayne!*" Angel called out in her mind. Even if she wanted to release Deke, she couldn't right now—not in her current situation.

"*Hold on,*" Rayne's comforting voice reassured her.

Suddenly, Rayne heard the sound of rolling thunder, followed but the earth-shaking smack of lightning hitting the ground. Storm!

"I can't call him if you're strangling me," Angel rasped, overdoing it only a little. His hand at her throat was painful, hurting, and if she wasn't careful, he would cause damage. "My throat hurts," she laid it on a little bit thicker.

"What's that noise?" The man sounded nervous now. He glanced toward the windows and toward his cowering friends as the air popped and sizzled.

"It's a *petit tempête,*" Angel explained.

"What the fuck is that?" the man sneered, his accent heavy and northeastern, like he had a mouth full of every word.

"That's just a little storm," she smiled, enjoying the way the hostile stranger's eyes widened at her words and attitude.

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

Suddenly, electricity surged in the air, the windows seeming to expand and contract, as if the room was taking a deep breath, before they imploded, showering the kitchen with glass. Angel had managed to dive behind the door to the pantry, therefore avoiding serious injury. Unfortunately, her attacker had followed suit, landing almost on top of her.

"Didn't I told you to stop callin' me dat?" Storm grumbled good-naturedly, steadying Deke on his feet before turning to consider the three cowering, would-be bad guys in the corner. "What a sorry *de'pouille* we got right here," Storm declared, taking a menacing step forward, laughing deeply when the three men shrunk deeper into their inefficient hiding place.

"You killed my cousin, you sorry son of a bitch," the remaining man accused, undaunted by Storm and Deke's entrance, he stumbled to his feet, jerking a piece of glass from his calf as he rose, pulling Angel against his chest.

"I didn't kill nobody," Deke spat. "But I woulda, if I'd been thinking about it..."

"Uh, Deke, do you mind?" Angel huffed, struggling against her captor, freezing when the glass bit into her neck a little.

Storm raised a hand over Deke's shoulder, but Deke bumped him away. "I'm jus' goanna shoot him," Deke snapped, threatening the man holding Angel. "You can just keep your thunderbolts in your pocket for now."

"Uncle Deke, it's safer if I..." Storm began to object, only to be cut off.

"There'll be less questions if I just go ahead and shoot him," Deke pointed out somewhat reasonably, raising his gun. Angel was more than a little concerned at the convoluted logic. She apparently wasn't the only person there who was.

"You guys are just...nuts," the man with his arm around Angel announced, "But I still don't give a shit. I'm not going to jail. Shoot me. I'm taking her with me."

"That's it," Angel barked. "I've had it!" She elbowed the big man in the stomach while stepping down hard on the top of his foot, bringing him to his knees. Whirling on him, she decided, "I'm just going to turn him into a rat and be done with it."

"Now, dat's what I'm talking about!" Storm crowed, rubbing his hands together. "What I gotta do? I wanna help!"

"I thought you said you couldn't do that!" Deke protested.

"Couldn't do what?" Angel asked, confused.

The angry man erupted off the floor, to launch himself at Angel. Deke's shot felled him in mid-air, throwing him backward against the painted oak door of the pantry.

He landed with a wood-cracking thud, although perhaps Deke's bullet had been what caused the oak to splinter.

The man would live. He was injured, but not nearly critically. The bullet damaged his shoulder. He'd need surgery, that was all.

She'd thought to scare him, but now Deke had shot the man. He would have killed her, though, she knew. He'd proclaimed several times that he had nothing to lose. She considered that as the man slid down the polished door to land in a moaning heap at its base.

"Deke," she murmured, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Storm, you have to help Deke get those there guys put up, and be ready for your daddy. I think I hear a siren."

Deke looked hard at Angel, expecting more of a response from her than the one he got. Of course, his Angel was a nurse, a practical woman, no matter that she *had* to be stunned and shaken by all that had taken place today.

"How're you holding up, *mon ange*?" Deke turned to her, gathering her against him, giving the whimpering man a stern glare before lowering his head to kiss Angel quickly.

"I'm all right, Deke," Angel assured him, though her voice had a breathy quality to it. He was sure that all the upheaval and excitement had taken its toll on her. "I don't think..." she took a deep breath. "I don't think this guy is going to be much trouble," she managed.

"*Mais*, I think you're right," he agreed. "I'll just call Remy and let him know we're all right."

Deke reached for the kitchen wall-phone but Storm stopped him. "Maybe you wanna use a cell phone, no?" He grinned sheepishly. "Seems like all that lightning and thunder and such has some side effects."

At just that moment, the light in the kitchen, which had been flickering brighter and then more dully, popped and went out. Deke took his crutch and limped out of the kitchen, down the hall, up the partial stairway, finally stopping in his room, finding his cell phone on the nightstand.

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"You thinkin' what I'm thinkin' Angel?" Storm murmured, urgency roughening his voice.

He was right, spoken and unspoken, the idea that a dangerous criminal would be free to influence people, never leaving their family alone—it just wasn't acceptable.



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Angel could do something about that. With Storm's strength added to her own, she could cast a spell on this dangerous man.

"*You could change him into a newt...or maybe a skunk,*" cackled the age-heavy voice of Esmé Deveau.

"Jus' think of some kind of harmless little critter," Storm moved to her, pulling her away from the man crumpled on the floor.

"What are you nutjobs planning? What's going on here?" he shouted.

"What you wanna be when you grow up, old son? A tree frog? A pet lizard?" Storm taunted him. "Either way, you'd better run."

"Go ahead," Angel said softly. "Here's your chance."

He didn't need a second invitation. With no further ado, the large man scrambled to his feet and made for the window.

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Deke had dialed the first three numbers when shouts from the floor below had him stuffing the cell into his pocket as he whirled on his crutch and made for the room below.

The sound of Storm's voice yelling and ranting just made matters worse as far as Deke was concerned. If Storm was upset, things must be bad indeed.

"What's wrong?" He made his way back to the kitchen as fast as he could. "Why for you yellin'?"

Angel was on the floor, propped against Storm, who was mumbling words of reassurance to her. Deke looked over at the door and the floor where her oversized attacker had been crumpled. Nothing remained of him except a puddle of blood.

The window across from them had already been broken, now it showed a streak of blood across the sill. "He got away," Storm spat, still trying to soothe Angel.

"Did he hurt you, *Ange*?" Deke asked, using his crutch to carefully drop down in front of her.

"Um, no," she seemed breathless, agitated, Deke thought. "No, he just yelled and jumped out the window. I didn't look but...he might have hurt himself."

Storm scrambled up, Deke slowly moving behind him. There was no body, hurt or otherwise, on the ground under the second story drop. Two police cars were pulling into the yard now, followed very closely by Remy's department SUV and Rayne's compact sedan, her grandmother in the seat next to her.

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When he looked back over his shoulder, Angel was sitting in a kitchen chair, looking blankly at the wall. Storm was busy manhandling the three cowering accomplices of the man who'd gotten away.

“*Ange?*” Deke tried again, truly worried now.

“Really, I’m fine,” she reassured him. “Honest. Go ahead and help Storm.”

## ANGEL'S FORECAST

### Chapter Fourteen

“How are you really, Hon?” Rayne asked, wrapping an arm around Angel’s waist as she guided her out of the house. “You know we’ll all need to go to the police station and all. There’s lots of paperwork.” Angel nodded, still feeling queasy. “Angel?”

She looked into Rayne’s bright blue eyes, full of energy, as mesmerizing as starbursts. “Yes, ma’am,” she answered, her voice husky.

“There’s going to be a long search for that fourth man. They’ll have to go all through the bayou. I believe they’ve already got the two that were attacking Deke at the start.” Angel nodded. “I just want you prepared—for the search.”

Angel stood up straight, her face hardening. “I’m prepared,” she said severely.

“Good girl,” Rayne praised her.

They turned toward Storm and Esmé. “He’s kinda cute, *Mamere*,” Storm was saying, reaching out to touch the shivering dog the older woman was holding.

The small animal, a black and white Pomeranian, Angel noted, growled and snapped at Storm. He was unusually muscular for such a small dog, the black hair on his tiny head swept back almost like a pompadour.

“You *hush!*” Esmé scolded the high strung animal. “He’s just scared,” she crooned, stroking its tangled and matted fur.

“Where’d you find him?” Storm asked, furrowing his brow and tapping the snarling dog lightly on the nose. Angel wondered that very same thing. Where *had* she found the dog, way out here in her front yard? It couldn’t be...

“*I cain’t believe you turned him into a Pomeranian dog,*” Storm’s voice echoed in her head.

“*It was your fault, you know,*” Angel growled back mentally. “*You’re the one who said ‘pet’.*”

“*I said ‘pet lizard’,*” Storm growled.

“He was over in the trees, limping around, whining,” Esmé explained smugly.

“I’m sorry, *Madame Deveau*...” Angel spoke up. At her approach, the little dog went into a frenzy of growling and barking, his eyes nearly rolled back in his head from terror.

“Now, I said *hush*,” Esmé snapped sternly. “You’re jus’ fine, child. And he will be, too.” She stroked the quivering animal affectionately.

“What’re you going to do with it, *Grand-mère*?” Rayne asked, reaching out to touch it. When it growled at her, Esmé wrapped a thin forefinger and thumb around its snout.

“If he keeps this up, I’m gonna see how long he lasts as alligator bait,” she growled menacingly. The little dog whimpered and licked her hand nervously. “That’s better.” She stroked the animal with her free hand, accepting a handkerchief and some assistance from Storm to wrap the small upper leg. “*Mais*, I think Doc Santiny can treat this injury here, and he’s been a little lonely around his big old house.” She stroked the dog some more, a self-satisfied expression on her face. “I’m gonna call him Newt.”

“Newt? Who’s a newt?” Deke demanded, joining the group. “What you got there, *Vielle*?”

“Who you calling an old woman, Dekon Doucette?” Esmé growled, handing the tiny canine to Storm when it erupted into another volley of aggression at the site of Deke and Remy, who had come up behind him.

“My apologies, *Mamere*,” he dropped his head, appearing ashamed. Angel wasn’t buying it. She knew they were teasing. “So, the dog?” he asked, his tone becoming serious, confused.

“I think someone jus’ left it out here,” Esmé lamented, opening her arms for the small, furry creature. “Doesn’t he look a mess? He’s hurt, too. No tellin’ how long he’s been out here.”

“Doesn’t appear underfed to me,” Deke looked it over, Storm holding it up for him before handing it back to Esmé. “Why you wanna call it ‘Newt’?” he asked suspiciously.

“Oh, Dekon,” the old woman smiled, nearly causing Angel to choke. “You know what a fondness I have for newts.”

“Rayne?” Remy asked from behind Deke. He looked severe, suspicious in his own right. “Is there anything you know that I ought to?”

“Oh, no, Remy, no, of course not.” Rayne was the epitome of innocence and confusion. Angel only hoped that nobody asked her those particular questions.

“*Ange*,” Deke’s arms came around her, his voice a feather light caress on her ear.

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"Yes, Deke?" she leaned back into him, glad of his support, strength. He'd need to be checked over, but he seemed none the worse for wear. There was nothing wrong with him now that time and rest wouldn't cure.

"That dog?" he asked, kissing her neck.

She didn't have to fight that hard against tensing up. It was hard to be tense with his lips on her neck making her melt against him.

"What about the dog?" she purred, enjoying his attention, pulling his arms more tightly around her.

"Isn't that the kind of dog you said you wanted?" he murmured, nuzzling into her hair. "Expensive little bastards, ain't they?"

"I didn't really get a good look at it," she turned in his arms, focused on the conversation again and fighting to keep her voice from cracking. "I think you have to go to a breeder to get one..." she rested her head on his broad shoulder, praying with all her might that he'd find something else to talk about.

No such luck. "A dog like that, somebody might be wanting it back, no?" He pulled back, looked her in the eye. "Mayhap, they're lookin' for him right this minute, you think?"

Angel bit her lip, cast a glance over to where several young men had pushed flatboats into the water, guns drawn as they climbed in.

"I'm sure someone's looking," was all she could manage.

Deke looked at her for long minutes, inky blue eyes boring into hers. Finally, he moved a little, one arm slipped around her shoulders. "How 'bout we stay at my old place and get my stuff together while we get a crew out here to fix the damages. Sound all right to you?"

"Absolutely," Angel agreed readily. She was in favor of anything that moved her further away from this conversation and any questions Deke might come up with.

Questions she *knew* he really didn't want answers to.

## Chapter Fifteen

“Can you believe all this, Angel?” Ashlynn was in a lather of excitement.

She certainly looked beautiful in her white silk gown, softly fluted, backless with Alençon lace at the halter and trim. Her cinnamon wine colored hair had been pulled back loosely to frame her delicate face. She looked everything a bride could ask for.

Angel’s dress was low-cut satin and silk over tiny lace netting to give the illusion of long sleeves. She and Ashlynn, along with Rayne and Esmé, had gone to New Orleans and ordered the gowns to be made special for them. Remy and Gabe grumbled outrageously about the costs. Each, as male head of their households, was responsible for the bride’s expenses, according to tradition.

It was more the fun of the complaining than anything else, as far as Angel could see. They had all pitched in and nobody would be going hungry as a result of the double wedding.

Angel had been thrilled to have Ashlynn as her maid of honor and to fill the same position in Ashlynn’s wedding. The only thing that had brought everyone up short had been the question of who would give Angel away.

“Gotta be me,” Storm announced, eyes the color of new denim, snapping with mischief. “I’m the only one up to the callin’!”

None of the other three men involved wanted to look too closely into that statement so it was settled. Storm would walk Angel up the isle, while Remy would escort Ashlynn. Two men of the cloth would stand at the front and speak the vows in perfect synchronicity. There had been a great deal of rehearsal to ensure all that.

Doc Santiny had given Deke a clean bill of health with the expected caveats. He would be walking up the isle without benefit of crutches. The good doctor would be sitting right next to Esmé in the front pew, proudly witnessing events. It was obvious that he felt even closer to the older woman since she’d given him the gift of a companion, no matter how bad tempered the little creature was.

“No,” Angel finally responded to her friend. “No, I really can’t believe this. So much has gone on...and now I’m getting married. *We’re* getting married.”

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Ashlynn laughed, giddy and nervous, hugging Angel carefully. "It almost seems like *we*," pulling back a little, she waved her hand between the two of them, "are actually getting married, doesn't it?"

"We've sure been through a lot in these last weeks, haven't we, *shai*?" Angel sighed, thinking back. "Our lives have always been intertwined. Now we're family. I always knew we would be. And look at us, the loves of our lives, right under our noses!"

"You did." Ashlynn flashed her a misty smile. "You always said you had a forecast for us. I can't believe you didn't see your own marriage coming."

Angel couldn't believe it either, but she kept that revelation to herself.

"I'm so happy and proud for all of us," Rayne entered the room. "I couldn't have asked for better for either one of you girls."

It was all Angel could do to keep from bursting into tears, but she had to speak. "I'm so sorry my own mother couldn't be here for this," she sniffed, fighting for her composure. "Thank you for filling that empty place."

"Now look what you've done!" Ashlynn mock-growled tearfully. "We've all got to re-do our make-up!"

"That's what we need to invent a spell for," Rayne dabbed at streaming eyes with a tissue. "I think we'll all be in bad shape when Storm finally gets married!"

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Deke had grandly produced a limousine to meet them at the reception and whisk them off to New Orleans, less than an hour away, but one of her favorite places in the world. He'd surprised her with a suite at the exclusive Hotel Monteleone, in the center of the French Quarter. They would have a week to explore the city from top to bottom, seeing all the sights just the way Angel had dreamed of doing.

Wasting no time, he had her out of her formal reception dress and naked in bed, wrapped in his strong arms. She didn't bother keeping her hands to herself, tracing the line of his jaw with one finger, now his clavicle, then chest.

"I had to wait a long time to get you in my life, *mon Ange*," Deke murmured. "I want to always show you what a treasure I know I've found in you."

"I love you so much," she whispered. "How can I ever show you?"

"*Mon Ange*," he murmured. "You already have. Every day in that hospital...all the time we've been together. It seems like so long and so short, too."

He captured her wandering hand and brought it to his lips. The gentle touch sent tingles down her spine, and she shifted to resume her exploration of his chest, replacing her fingers with her lips and tongue.

Angel wanted to make up for a lifetime of waiting in a single night, and she didn't care that it was impossible. She was determined to try.

His skin quivered under her slow assault. She straddled him and teased his nipple with her tongue. Her breasts pressed against him and he reached to take one in his hand, his thumb mirroring the actions of her tongue.

His hands slid up her back and into her hair. He ran his fingers through it and brought a wavy lock of it to his lips.

As her lips nibbled their way back up his throat she noticed where the majority of his attention seemed to be focused and smiled as an idea took form. She shuffled backwards to lower her head to his chest and deliberately tickled his skin with her hair.

Quivering skin and a strangled cry of pleasure told her that she was affecting him just the way she wanted to. She moved lower, intent upon testing her new husband upon every inch of his tanned and muscular flesh.

Taking great delight in the way his breath quickened and his skin shivered, she dragged her hair back and forth across first his chest and then his abdomen. When she reached his groin she took a lock between her fingers and trailed it with agonizing slowness up his twitching length. He groaned loudly.

She wanted to take him in her mouth, but knew he'd be expecting that. Instead, she dragged her hair back up his abdomen and chest before her mouth descended hungrily upon his nipple.

She loved the way it felt when she pressed her tongue against it, and she loved the way it made him gasp and squirm when she drew wet circles around it. Lifting her head, she blew a stream of air over his damp skin and listened as he gave another strangled gasp.

"Ange, you're going to give me a heart attack." He chuckled and ran his hand down her back.

She laughed against his chest. Her mouth and fingers continued their methodical teasing, lingering over the places that seemed to draw the strongest reaction.

His caressing fingers were distracting her from her goal, and as he had done earlier, she moved herself out of his reach.

She knelt beside him and watched his face as her fingers trailed up and down his thighs, advancing and retreating with unhurried movements.

His eyes were closed and his mouth hung open slightly as he struggled for air. Bending forward, she replaced her fingers with her hair, sweeping it across his thighs,



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and then with a suddenness that left him groaning, she took his rigid length between her lips.

She slid her lips down his shaft, tasting his salty satin flesh. After waiting for him all of these years, she would now hold back nothing. The musky taste of his sex pleased her more than she expected. So animal; so exciting. She drew back, creating suction, and circled her tongue rapidly.

He cried out and she repeated the action, settling into a rhythm and taking great satisfaction in giving him this pleasure.

Nothing existed outside this experience as she savored every detail. His uncontrolled sounds of passion; his soft skin moving with her actions; the quick pulse of a blood vessel against her lower lip; the scent of him filling her nostrils.

He was so hard and yet so soft, the sensation was amazing, Angel loved it. She tickled the underside with her tongue, thrilled at his response. One of her hands had been absently stroking his thigh, and now it crept between his legs.

*"Ange,"* he moaned. *"Please..."*

*"Should I stop?"* she asked innocently, her mouth still surrounding him. Her words vibrated through him and he shuddered.

She released him to trail a series of gentle, nibbling kisses up and down his shaft as she considered her options. Many of her fantasies involved following this particular act through to completion, yet the need to feel him deep inside her body was overwhelming. He'd held her, cuddled her, slept with her, but they'd remained relatively chaste since that first time.

Deke's hand was in her hair, and she turned her face to look up at him. Their eyes met. Not breaking eye contact, she slowly licked her lips, then lapped at his burning cock once again, circling her tongue rapidly before taking him deeply into her mouth.

He groaned loudly, his eyes rolling back in his head. The sight of his obvious enjoyment inspired a new rush of dampness between her thighs and her decision was made.

Rising swiftly to straddle him, she held herself above him and wrapped her hand around his length, trying to summon enough self control to torment him for a moment. Slowly, she sank down to take him fully, groaning at the intensity of her pleasure.

*"Ange, Bébé..."*

Leaning forward a bit, she smiled down at him and ran a teasing finger over his chest. She watched his face, waiting for him to open his eyes again, and when he did, she began to slowly rotate her hips.

He moaned her name again, his breath ragged. He reached again for one of her breasts and she pressed into his touch. She deliberately clenched her inner muscles, tightening around him, and felt him throb in response. She did it again, and leaned forward to swallow his moan in a deep kiss.

This time she was in control. She rose slowly, until she held only the tip of his erection within her, and then slowly took him in once again. Her hand reached back to fondle his balls.

She rose and fell slowly over him, her thighs trembling with the unaccustomed exertion. They were both moaning almost continuously now, and he began to meet her thrusts as her pace quickened.

Suddenly they were both moving frantically together, calling each other's names with whatever breath they managed to take. She flung her head back as her entire body convulsed, and she felt the warmth within her as he followed her into oblivion.

They collapsed together, unable to move, barely able to draw breath. For many minutes they lay still, allowing their bodies to recover.

"You are a talented woman, *Bébé*." He stroked the hair away from her face. "That was amazing. You are amazing."

"You inspire me." She roused herself enough to kiss the hot skin beneath her cheek. "I can't put it into words, how you affect me."

He chuckled softly. "You don't need to. I understand, *Ange*, and I love you, too."

Would those words always amaze her? She stretched to kiss him once again.

"Thank you, Deke," Angel murmured, unsure how to tell him all the many things that was flitting through her mind.

"*Mais*, you're always welcome, and I'm thanking you, too, *mon Ange*." He was silent for a moment. "*Ange*?" he shifted her around so that he could see her face.

"Yes, Dekon?" she answered, fully alert by the serious tone.

"A lot of stuff happened, right in a row. You *sure* you're all right?" When she would have answered, he went on. "Those men coming into the house, breaking everything up, attacking you, that man escaping into the swamp...all that and my health to fret about. I can't help but be worried..." he let the sentence trail off.

Angel sighed. She didn't blame him for his concern. "I won't lie, Dekon," she looked him in the eyes, wanting to convince him. "All of that was frightening, life changing. It was terrible. But you're healing, most of those men are locked up, and we've taken steps to secure our part of the bayou. Besides, they never found that guy, and they looked really hard."

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"I jus' want you to be safe and happy, *Béb*, that's all." Deke sighed, settling back against the pillows. "I jus' want us to have a good life together."

"Me, too, Dekon. Me, too."

Snuggling back against him, she felt herself begin to doze.

"When we get home, *Ange*," she felt and heard him rumble, "We'll get your Pomeranian puppy dog named Sheba. We don't want Newt gettin' lonely, now do we?"

Before she could even consider an answer, he was asleep.

Angel knew it would be awhile for her.

*J.J. Massa*

## About the Author

Jersey Shore resident, J.J. Massa sits with her writing partner and yellow lab, Cosmo, at her side at all the times for plot twists and character advice. There are some visiting cats, aquatic turtles, and an assortment of hermit crabs just to keep things interesting. There's never a dull moment in the Massa household. Maybe that's why there's never a dull moment in J.J. Massa's books...

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