

MUSIC
AND
MALICE
IN
*Hurricane
Town*

ALEX BELL


stripes

CHAPTER TWO

Jude found herself sprawled on the dry, crumbly earth beneath one of the drooping ancient trees that filled the graveyard. Baton Noir preferred to bury its dead above ground and the space was filled with stone crypts and marble tombs. The air beneath the shade of the branches felt cooler and easier to breathe. She found herself sucking it in in big gulps.

“That’s it,” Sharkey said and Jude realized he was kneeling beside her. “You just take nice deep breaths.”

He helped her sit up and the tree trunk felt reassuringly solid behind her back.

“What happened?” Jude asked. “Where’s everyone else?”

“You keeled over, that’s what,” Sharkey replied. “As for everyone else, they’re off putting madam in her crypt before she can climb out of her coffin and start hexing everyone. Here, take this.”

He passed her his flask, which was full of sweet iced tea. Jude sipped it gratefully, feeling the cool, sugary liquid glide down her throat

“Did that poppet really start screaming?” Jude asked, lowering the flask. “Or did I dream it?”

“It happened, all right,” Sharkey replied. “Creepiest damned thing I ever saw.”

“What does it mean?” Jude asked.

Sharkey waved the question away. “Beats me,” he said. “And who cares anyhow? I’m more interested in you at the moment. Feelin’ any better?”

Jude nodded. She *was* feeling better, actually. The shade and the sweet tea and the rest had taken the edge off, even if she still felt like she was recovering from the flu.

“Got you a present yesterday,” Sharkey said, drawing a small pouch from his pocket and handing it to her.

“That better not be what I think it is,” Jude said, eyeing it with distaste.

Sharkey didn’t say anything so she opened the strings at the neck of the pouch and shook out the small object inside. It was a delicate silver bracelet with a single charm in the shape of a snowflake.

“It’s a cool-headed charm,” Sharkey said, an obstinate edge to his voice. “Meant for hotheads like

you who can't control their anger."

Jude rolled her eyes. "I know what it is." She thrust the bracelet back towards her friend. "I don't wear cajou charms. You know that."

In fact, she was the only person in the Done and Dusted Brass Band who didn't own a single musical charm. From time to time she'd hear one of the others muttering that it was all an act and that she must keep her charms hidden, sewed into the lining of her jacket, filling her pockets or tucked into her panties. But Jude didn't care what anyone else thought. *She* knew that her musical ability came from her and her alone, and that was enough.

"You're your own worst enemy, you know," Sharkey said.

"Yeah."

"I'm not an idiot," he said. "I know this little charm probably ain't enough by itself. But it can't hurt, can it?"

Jude said nothing. The simmering anger she'd carried around for the last eight years had recently got worse and worse, almost without her even noticing. All her grievances bubbled up to the surface and she wasn't able to control them. She picked fights she couldn't win. She got hurt and she bled and she didn't care.

Sharkey peered into her face. "I could just murder that Leeroy Lamar."

"Don't do that," Jude said wearily. "I was angry long before he came along. He's not responsible."

And he's not all bad, some small, treacherous part of her wanted to say. He made me feel special once.

That was the worst thing about it all, really. The fact that sometimes she still had confused feelings of affection for Leeroy mixed in with the dull ache of humiliation. It was still hard, even now, to accept that she could have got him so wrong.

"Didn't help none, though, did he?" Sharkey grunted. "What with being a good-for-nothin' asswipe."

That boy'll break your heart if you let him, Sharkey had warned Jude when she'd first started seeing Leeroy. And he'd been right.

"I wish you'd let me buy a conjure ball to roll across his yard," Sharkey went on.

"No," Jude said with a small smile. "No conjure balls."

Sharkey returned her smile. Then he put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed.

"Something has to change, beautiful one," he said. "You're getting dragged down to a no-good place. You gotta stop all this fighting and raging at the world."

"I know," Jude replied. "I want to change. It's just

that it's harder ... much harder than I ever expected it to be." She saw herself through Sharkey's eyes and it made her feel all used up and spat out. All of a sudden it was difficult to meet his gaze but Sharkey moved his hand to her chin and wouldn't let her look away.

"No need for shame, darlin'," he said softly. "Not with me. I can be every bit as much of a stubborn son-of-a-bitch as you can. And I ain't letting you go down like this, you hear me? I ain't."

"I am trying," Jude said, her voice barely more than a whisper. "Sofia has been teaching me some exercises—"

"And that's great," Sharkey replied. "But it ain't enough. You know it ain't. Jude Lomax, you need all the help you can get, so you're goddamn gonna let me help you any way I can."

He pressed the snowflake charm back into her trembling palm. "Look at me," he said, his dark brown eyes gazing into hers. "I'm on my knees begging you to wear it. Do it for me, even if you don't wanna do it for yourself right now."

Jude found herself taking the charm. Actually taking it. Something she never ever thought she'd do. But then, lots of things hadn't gone to plan.

She put the bracelet in her pocket. "I'll think about it," she said.



Alex Bell is the best-selling author of *Frozen Charlotte*, *Charlotte Says* and *The Haunting in Stripes*' YA horror series, RED EYE. Alex lives in Hampshire and also writes middle-grade fantasy books, including *The Polar Bear Explorers' Club*. Her favourite things include Siamese cats, Old Crow Medicine Show music, vegetarian tapas and visiting New Orleans.

www.alex-bell.co.uk

@Alex_Bell86