

SIREN PUBLISHING

Wendi Darlin

Devil's ADVOCATE

Hell's Belles Book 1



DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

Hell's Belles Book 1

Wendi Darlin

EROTIC ROMANCE



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com

ABOUT THE E-BOOK YOU HAVE PURCHASED:

Your non-refundable purchase of this e-book allows you to only ONE LEGAL copy for your own personal reading on your own personal computer or device. **You do not have resell or distribution rights without the prior written permission of both the publisher and the copyright owner of this book.** This book cannot be copied in any format, sold, or otherwise transferred from your computer to another through upload to a file sharing peer to peer program, for free or for a fee, or as a prize in any contest. Such action is illegal and in violation of the U.S. Copyright Law. Distribution of this e-book, in whole or in part, online, offline, in print or in any way or any other method currently known or yet to be invented, is forbidden. If you do not want this book anymore, you must delete it from your computer.

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000."

If you find a Siren-BookStrand e-book being sold or shared illegally, please let us know at **legal@sirenbookstrand.com**

A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK
IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE
Copyright © 2009 by Wendi Darlin
E-book ISBN: 1-60601-452-8

First E-book Publication: April 2009

Cover design by Tamra Westberry
All cover art and logo copyright © 2009 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED: This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

PUBLISHER
Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com

DEDICATION

I have to thank my friend, the fabulous author and honorary Hell's Belle, Lara Santiago.

This book is for all the Hell's Belles and the devils they love.

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

Hell's Belles Book 1

WENDI DARLIN

Copyright © 2009

Prologue

University of Southern Mississippi, 1999

Haylie lifted her hand and peered over Blake's shoulder at the ring he'd slipped on her finger. The mattress shifted beneath her as he kissed his way down her throat and cupped her breast in his hand. Everything about the way he touched her, the way he loved her, made her feel like the luckiest woman in the world. Her eyes blurred with tears.

"I love you," she whispered.

She felt his smile against her skin. "That's a good trait for a future wife to have."

She laughed and pulled him closer, wrapping her legs around his waist.

"Isn't there somewhere you needed to be?"

She shook her head. "I want to be right here."

She had planned to attend a seminar for victim empowerment being held on campus, but not without serious reservations. In her four years pursuing a degree in social services, she had avoided as many victim-focused activities as possible.

Volunteering to work tonight's event had taken every grain of courage she had. But being loved by Blake empowered her more than anything she could learn in a room full of people with histories as sordid as hers. Her past was better left buried. She didn't know how talking about it or putting it out in the open for everyone to see could ease any of the pain or humiliation she'd carried for years. Not even Blake knew the truth about her, and she didn't know if she could ever tell him.

"I wasn't going to let you leave anyway." He kissed his way lower. His chest still slick from their lovemaking, slid against her belly.

A pound on the door of his apartment interrupted the path of heat he was carving down her body. From the weight of the knock, it was either an oaf or his frat brother, Meat.

Blake kissed her again before rolling over to pull on his boxers and answer the door.

Meat bounded in like a bull in a china shop. "Where is she?"

Haylie heard his shoulders bump and brush the wall as he stumbled down the hall.

"There's my girl," Meat yelled with a grin from the bedroom doorway and romped toward the bed.

Haylie snatched the sheet around herself and rolled away as he came down on three-quarters of the mattress. He reeked of beer and his glassy eyes leered at her playfully. Blake tackled him, but Meat swatted him away and grabbed at her. Fear struck her core. Flashes of her past stopped her heart and cold sweat sprung from her pores.

She tugged at the sheet, but it didn't budge beneath Meat's weight. Screaming, she covered herself with a pillow and jumped off the bed as Meat's big paw reached for her arm.

"Come back, baby," Meat pleaded. "I don't bite hard."

Blake joined Haylie in the corner, wrapped his arms around her and kissed her bare shoulder. "He's not going to hurt you, honey."

Her throat closed too tight for words. Her blood ran cold and a tremor worked its way up her arms. The harder she fought to keep the memories at bay, the faster they filled her mind.

Blake didn't seem to notice. "Get your big ass out of my bed," he said to Meat.

Meat made himself comfortable, wallowing like a hog in mud. "Not 'til my girl comes over here and gives me a kiss. I won her fair and square."

"Won me?" Haylie's voice barely squeaked out. "You won me?"

"Your boyfriend can't shoot darts worth a shit." Meat rolled around on the bed like he was settling in for the night.

She freed herself from Blake's grasp. "You bet me?" Her entire body trembled.

"It was a joke. Baby..." His forehead creased as he studied her. "You don't think I was serious?"

She lost focus. The edges in the room softened and her vision blurred. Her father's face leered at her from every corner of her mind. The past had planted itself right in the middle of her finally perfect world. She couldn't do this again. Her body wasn't anybody's to give away. She ripped the engagement ring from her finger so fast it scraped skin from her knuckle. The ring hit the wall, but she ran out of the room before it landed on the floor.

She turned the ignition of her car, the pillow still clutched to her chest, before she gave any thought to having run out of his apartment naked. It didn't matter. She wasn't going back in there or anywhere near Blake Sheridan ever again.

Chapter 1

Banana Bob's Beach Bar, 2009

Haylie, Ashlyn, Kara, and Amanda held their shot glasses in the air and toasted in unison.

*"Here's to the Belles
Who dance in Hell
And keep the devils rockin'
Here's to the lies
The beasts will tell
To get our boots a knockin'!"*

The fabulous foursome clinked glasses, licked a line of salt off the curve between their thumbs and index fingers and tossed back the golden Cuervo.

Haylie Monroe sucked her lime wedge and pitched it into a bowl in the center of the table, then held her thick hair off the back of her neck and closed her eyes as the dirty liquor coated her tongue and slid down her throat.

"Why does it always have to be tequila?" she asked, her face still creased in distaste.

"Te kill ya!" her three best friends chimed.

Haylie shimmied in her chair as the last of the tequila burned her stomach and trickled to the tips of her toes.

"Stop shaking those things, you're making me look bad." Ashlyn shot a pointed gaze at Haylie's breasts.

Unlike her built for the runway friends, Haylie's petite frame had more curves than a back country road. And as if height equated to

tolerance, alcohol had a habit of hitting her as fast and hard as a souped-up muscle car while the others could guzzle more than an 8-cylinder at Talladega.

“As if you’d ever let yourself look bad.” Haylie stood. “I’m going to the ladies room.”

“I’ll come with you.”

Haylie and Ashlyn left the other two sitting at the table and walked through the sand toward the two-story gray plank building that housed the restrooms and a rooftop bar.

Before they’d made it halfway, Haylie came to a stunned stop. Her high-heeled sandals sank in the sand and her heart hammered in her chest. She’d spent a decade avoiding the devil himself, Blake Sheridan, and there he stood directly in front of her as gorgeous as ever.

“Haylie!” A spark flashed in the devil’s ice blue eyes an instant before he threw his arms around her and pulled her body against his. Apparently, not much had changed in the ten years since she’d run away from him. Familiar fire lingered in his touch, and pressed against him, her body yawned with hunger that almost brought a tear to her eye. Haylie dug the heels of her sandals deeper into the sand and pushed against his chest until she had her own space to breathe again.

Long pent-up emotions whipped through her. She couldn’t deny he looked better than ever. His clothes hung exactly where they were supposed to— khaki shorts and a button-down in fabrics that flowed oh so deviously over the muscular frame beneath. Only his hair dared to defy the clean professional lines he combed it in and followed instead the whim of the wind.

She resisted the urge to tame the thick, crisscrossed locks with a rake of her fingers. She resisted a lot of urges. If she had half a brain she would turn and run away from him again, but either the tequila was stronger than usual tonight or her gray matter had taken a vacation. She knew better than anyone what Blake Sheridan could be

capable of, and there was no way in hell or on earth she would give him another chance to hurt her.

Palm fronds swayed in the breeze and a chorus of raucous laughter erupted from a group of men standing around a table on the upper deck of the bar. About twenty feet away, Kara and Amanda were propped on one-legged barstools anchored around a table in the sand. They pretended not to pay attention to her, but they weren't missing a thing.

"Do you want me to leave you two alone?" Ashlyn asked, after giving Blake the once over.

Haylie swallowed hard. "I'll catch up with you."

Ashlyn glanced back at the other Belles before continuing to the restroom.

Haylie breathed the subtle scent of Blake's cologne mixed with the salty breeze off the gulf. The warm air sizzled between them, and the shock of his hand as it grazed her arm ripped through her like lightning. Familiar doubt crept into her mind. How could she have been so wrong about him? How could she still want to forgive him, even now?

"If you're leaving, let me give you a ride." His confidence and the whisper of a smile nearly did her in.

She refused to so much as blink or brush away the hair the gulf breeze had whipped into the corner of her eye. "Is that your standard pick-up line, or a special one just for me?"

His cocky smile widened and he grabbed her hand. He would take anything as a yes.

She held her ground, digging her heels deeper in the sand. "If I followed you out of here, what would we be doing a half hour from now?"

"We'd be finding all kinds of ways to forgive one another." Humor danced in his eyes. "Or we could spend a little time catching up with our clothes on."

Her heart sped up and heat spread through her. Everything about him still got her humming from head to toe, and even though she knew better, she wanted him to take her back to that place she couldn't forget. Just for a minute. She stepped close, wrapped her arms around his neck and brushed her lips against his ear. "And if we had our clothes off. Tell me exactly how you'd be changing my mind about you." She barely breathed the words, but the way his hands tightened on her waist told her she'd come across loud and clear. "Don't leave out a single detail. I really want to know what you think it would take."

His heated breath connected with her skin, but he didn't speak. She closed her eyes and melted into his arms again. She had craved this since the day she left him. No matter what he'd done to her heart, her body longed for how he'd always made her feel.

"What do you want me to say?" A hint of laughter rode his voice, but something more ragged clung to his words.

She let her tongue slip just far enough through her lips to graze his earlobe and snuffed a smile as he responded with a low groan that tripped her nerves and shot straight to her womb. Somewhere deep in her soul, she wanted him to convince her she'd been wrong all these years. Even if she knew he couldn't.

"Start out with something simple," she said. "Imagine you got me to wherever you were just ready to go. We closed the door or slipped between the dunes or... whatever..." His chest moved beneath her hand. His heart pumped hard against her palm. "What happens next? Where are you going to touch me? What part of me will you taste first?"

His hands slid down to grip her hips so hard there'd probably be a bruise. He didn't know his own strength. As rough as he was gentle, the opposing sensations could do a number on her that left her limp as a noodle and begging for more. His lips and tongue came down soft and warm on her neck and sent wet heat scampering between her thighs. Holy hell. Not exactly the move she'd been prepared for.

“God, Haylie, I want you. Let me take you home.” Kisses heated his words and stole her breath.

Her body caved completely, begging for everything he could give her. She clung to him, sinking deeper with every brush of his tongue against her skin, but common sense finally kicked in. It didn't matter how Blake could make her feel. If she didn't stop this now, she'd never forgive herself tomorrow.

She owed herself more than that. She wouldn't give in to him tonight, or ever again.

“How's your dart game these days?” she asked, pulling away. “Think you'd be good enough to hold onto me this time?” Anger and hurt boiled beneath her words.

“You still can't give me more credit than that?” His fingers dug into her hip like she might run away from him again before he could convince her to stay.

“I gave you too much credit to begin with.”

“You didn't give me enough.”

A familiar tune played in her purse and she reached for her phone. Blake kept his hand firmly in place. A twinkle leapt from his narrowed eyes. She had led him into the game, now he was up for whatever challenge she threw at him.

“Hi, Grady,” she said. “What's wrong?” She stepped out of the devil's clutch. “I'll be there in a minute.”

Blake reached for her again, hooking his finger in the waistband her miniskirt. The tug of the denim around her hips and the draw of an even stronger force between them couldn't hold a candle to what had called her home. She snapped the phone closed and stepped away from him again. “I've got to run.”

Ashlyn sashayed by on her way back from powdering her nose.

“Grady called,” Haylie said. “I'll meet up with y'all later if I can.”

She left Blake without so much as a goodbye wave. The easy buzz that had made her reckless enough to play with him had worn off. Her heart now hummed to a different tune. Grady needed her.

* * * *

“You don’t have a chance in hell of getting lucky with the rest of us,” Kara told Blake as he pulled out his wallet to cover a round of drinks. “We don’t double dip. Belles Law.”

“Who’s Grady?” he said.

Ashlyn stirred her cocktail and wrestled with how much her loyalty to Haylie would allow her to divulge. “I’d love to tell you he’s the reason you’re not going to lure her back to your bed. But we Belles don’t run interference either.”

“So he’s not her boyfriend?”

“She’s sort of a mentor for him,” Ashlyn explained. “She runs a program for young adults who came of age in foster care. Helps them transition into lives of independence. School, housing, jobs, whatever else she can do. Grady’s case is personal for her.”

“She’s a mother hen,” Kara said. “The kid’s trouble, but you can’t tell her anything.”

“At least she’s got a heart.” Ashlyn cocked a perfectly sculpted brow at her friend.

“Yeah.” Kara set her plastic cup on the table and tossed her blonde hair over her shoulder. “Between the two of you every stray animal and juvenile delinquent in south Alabama will have shelter with chocolates on their pillows at night.”

“Enough you two. Blake doesn’t deserve to see me hose you down,” Amanda said.

“Don’t stop on my account.” He flashed them a grin, reached into his back pocket and offered a business card to Ashlyn. “Give this to Haylie for me.” He raised his glass and tipped it to hers. “And remember no interference. It’s against the law.”

His Cole Haan’s sank into the sugary white sand as he walked away.

“Kept himself in shape, didn’t he?” Amanda noted. “What do you think really happened between them?”

Ashlyn took inventory of his back side. “You know she won’t talk about it. But you could practically feel the sparks flying between them when he walked up to her. Whatever they had is still alive and well. Think she’ll call him?”

“She better get busy with somebody,” Kara said, “before the cobwebs in her coochie knit themselves into a sweater.”

“I have to give her this, don’t I?” Ashlyn held up his card, her nose wrinkled in distaste. “He really broke her heart.”

“Belles law,” Amanda muttered.

“Screw the law.” Kara set her drink down on the table. “Think of it as aspirin. I’m telling you the woman needs to get laid, and she blows off every man that gets near her. Maybe it’ll take a devil she can’t refuse to get her back into the action. And I don’t think Blake’s as bad as she wants to believe he is.”

* * * *

Blake shouldered his way through the throng of partiers making their way into Banana Bob’s. The crowd wore a motley mix of Harley-Davidson leather, Tommy Bahama florals, Rolex, and belly chains. The ages hit every mark from barely legal to last leggers, salty dogs and sweet young things. Banana Bob’s was famous for being everybody’s bar. The last great American roadhouse crammed between two states, the surf, and the sky. Still, he hadn’t been in years, but then he didn’t get out much, at least not this kind of getting out.

He spent most evenings buried in case files or working up a sweat on the racquetball court, unless he ventured out to a social function or met up with his buddies at the Nineteenth Hole. He dated the way he played golf, kept his numbers low and aimed to sink his ball in as few

shots as possible. Too many women or too much time with any one woman was more than he cared to juggle.

“Hey!”

It took a minute to recognize the broad shouldered, t-shirt clad man who clasped Blake’s upper arm with a death grip and a grin. The bald head and Foo Manchu were post-prison, and during most of their time together the tattoos up both arms had been strategically covered to dissuade prejudice from the jury.

“Larry Melvin. Out already? Must’ve had a damn fine attorney.” Blake didn’t care much for the crooked scoundrel, but he left his personal feelings out of his profession.

“Wasn’t good enough to get me community service, but I reckon I’ll have to move to Hollywood to find one of them bastards!” Melvin elbowed a similar looking man standing at his side and they both cracked up. “Don’t leave yet,” Melvin offered, “I’ll buy you a drink.”

“Next time,” Blake said, slapping Melvin’s shoulder and giving his companion a nod. Melvin had never been one to travel alone, with good reason. His driver usually doubled as a bodyguard and who knew what else. This one could have been a body double. They looked like twins, right down to the facial hair.

Melvin’s clone stuck out a hand. A Popeye-style anchor tattoo ran the width and length of his forearm. “Hank Hawkins,” the man said as Blake shook his hand. “Never know when I might need to give you a call.”

Blake reached into his back pocket and pulled out a business card. “Try not to use it,” he said.

Melvin laughed and elbowed his friend. “Plug the number in your speed dial, buddy.” Then to Blake. “I owe you that drink, and I won’t forget it.”

Two years for illegal distribution of pornography, contributing to the delinquency of a minor and providing a place for local prostitutes to turn a buck. Subtract time served and good behavior, he spent less than a year in the slammer. Not too bad. Would’ve been worse if the

other charges had stuck, but the rookie arresting officer didn't know what he'd stumbled on.

It didn't take a genius to figure out Melvin's beachfront mega pad wasn't paid for by twenty dollar tricks, but that was a matter for the police to deal with. Melvin might be a real slime bucket, but there were worse out there. At least everyone who played Melvin's dirty hand did so willingly. To his credit the seventeen-year-old hooker in his stable had a falsified driver's license issued by the DMV that said she was twenty-two, and she'd been arrested on the street numerous times before she became associated with Melvin.

Blake didn't defend real monsters. Aside from the occasional drunken brawlers, violent criminals could find another source of legal representation. The world had way too much tolerance for violence and callousness. He didn't have to add his talents to the mix.

Of course he hadn't exactly come off as Mr. Sensitivity with Haylie tonight. What man in his right mind tells a woman he hasn't seen in a decade he wants to take her to bed within five minutes of laying eyes on her? If he didn't feel like such an ass, he'd laugh at his unquestionable lack of suave and his infinite rudeness. There'd been a time when he could have said that to her, just to tease her out of her demure façade because he knew the sensual woman that bubbled beneath the surface. Back then she would have laughed and rolled her eyes.

But that was a long time ago. He couldn't expect the same crude words to have the same effect on a woman who'd undoubtedly changed as much as he had. They weren't buck wild and barely legal anymore.

He thumbed the keyless entry of his BMW. The locks on his car jumped to attention and his headlights beamed onto the bumper of the red Hummer parked in front of him. Larry Melvin's. The man practically thumbed his nose at authorities, but the best they could slap him with would never keep him off the streets for long.

Blake slid behind the wheel and into the smooth leather seat. Sleek and black inside and out, his car was an understated symbol of success, a reliable machine with enough muscle to satisfy his raging testosterone, and a babe magnet. Ladies liked Beamers. And again, efficiency counted when it came to women. He had plenty of time to waste, but why go to the trouble? So he could invest himself in a woman and watch her run away like her hair had caught fire? So he could find her again ten years later, in a bar on the beach and tell her he wanted to fuck her?

He turned the ignition and the car purred to life. Dumb ass.

Maybe she'd come back. She had told Ashlyn she'd try to meet up with the Belles again later. He backed out of the parking lot and turned onto Mandido Beach Drive, knowing he'd be back at Banana Bob's before last call. He couldn't come up with a non-offensive way to tell her he missed her, but he'd make a great stalker.

* * * *

A wide rim of white shone above Grady's dark irises, like he was holding his lids a little too high. Haylie struggled with whether to bring up his drug use. What was the big deal? A lot of college kids smoked a joint once in a while. His grades kicked ass. These were his experimental years, but she had no doubt he'd find his way and become the man she knew he could be. She wanted him to have a "normal" life with every opportunity afforded to young people who didn't grow up in the State's child welfare system. Besides, the worst trouble he'd ever caused her was a couple of lost house keys and a brief interruption of her social time with the Belles.

Grady kicked his feet up on her coffee table and slugged down a can of Pepsi like he hadn't had a drink in a week. His long legs belonged to the body of a young man, not the gangly kid she'd met five years ago.

"Growing a fro?" she asked.

He ran his hand over his usually clean-cut curls that had grown out enough to stick off his head in odd angles. "I don't know."

"Classes going ok?"

He shrugged. "I think I'm getting a B in English Lit."

"You? A B? What happened?"

"I didn't get my last analytical essay in on time." He crushed the empty Pepsi can in his hand and dropped it on the table next to his feet.

Haylie chewed her bottom lip. This was where her confidence always failed her. She didn't want to come down hard on him, or tell him again he needed to be an example for other foster wards, or that he had to prove societal expectations wrong. He was allowed to be typical. But if he was typical, if he had parents at home who cared about him, wouldn't they come down on him? Wouldn't he have someone to answer to?

"What's going on, Grady?"

He shook his head. "It was one paper. B's are decent grades."

"Yeah, they're decent, but you've always done more than decent." She pulled in a heavy breath. "I know college is supposed to be fun. Just don't lose sight of your goals. Ok?"

"That's what I've got you for." His smile shone bright against his mocha skin and the twinkle she'd come to know in his eyes returned.

Haylie breathed a sigh of relief. He would be ok. It was just a B. One B, and from the looks and smell of it, a little weed. This was Grady, not some thug, or some kid who didn't care about doing the right thing. "So you up for a couple of speaking engagements?"

He threw his head back and groaned. "Paybacks are a bitch."

"It's just one luncheon and a cocktail auction. Besides you never know, you may impress someone in the audience enough to get an internship, or even a job right out of school."

"So you want me to kiss their asses, take their money, and hope I'm slick enough at doing both that one of them will want to pay me to do it some more."

“Something like that.” She grinned. “You in?”

“I’m in. And thanks for letting me crash here.”

“No problem. You’ll have a dorm to yourself this summer and another roommate to drive crazy in the fall.” She picked the can up off the table and carried it to the trash. “I can’t imagine why nobody wants to live with you,” she said, scooping an empty potato chip bag off the counter. “You’re so neat and tidy.” She fished a twenty out of her purse. “Need gas money?”

He shrugged and cocked a half-smile.

“You wouldn’t be in college if you weren’t broke.” She slid her house key off her key ring and handed it to him along with the money. “Get another copy made, and don’t lose this one.” She paused at the door. “If you go out tonight, slip the key under the mat so I can get back in.”

“No prob. Mind if I grab another Pepsi?”

“Make yourself at home.” She closed the door but opened it again to stick her head back in the room. “No girls sleeping over. I’m not as cool as I pretend to be.”

“You bringing a man back?”

“Hell no.” The door clicked in place. Blake wouldn’t be a problem tonight. Grady would make a great CB. She laughed. When was the last time she’d used that term? Cock blocker. She hadn’t had to worry about one of those for a while. She hadn’t had to worry about anything that had to do with sex for longer than she cared to remember.

There were more important things in life than getting laid. And she wouldn’t get dragged into bed for the first time in over two years by Blake Sheridan.

If she had a hard time sticking to her guns, at least Grady would give her an ironclad reason not to bring a devil back to her place. Not Blake or anyone else. Not Blake. Not anyone else was easy.

Chapter 2

Haylie tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and sucked in a deep breath of warm salty air as she walked up to her door. Being this close to the beach, made up for the cramped floor plan of her seventies era condo. For the price she paid for her little dump by the Gulf of Mexico she could have lived in a McMansion in any part of Hope's Crossing or Velma and wouldn't have to commute ninety minutes to work in Mobile.

The peeling mushroom-brown paint on the door assaulted her knuckles as she attempted to twist the doorknob. The whole thing looked like the scratching post of a she-cat gone wild. Deed restrictions didn't allow her to paint or update the exterior, and that wouldn't change until the current Homeowner's Association board members drifted off to that great condominium in the sky and the younger owners had enough of a vote to turn the place into something more aesthetically acceptable.

At least she had decorated the interior to her taste, as serene as a spa in natural fibers and a soothing palette of neutral tones. Most of her artwork had been created by nature, washed up on the shore, and transported inside by her own hands. Gnarled branches of driftwood whittled with wormholes and shells left on the beach after a storm decorated the mantel, the bookcase, and the tabletops in her two bedroom home. Best of all, outside her sliding glass doors a footpath led to the water. She had her own little shit brown piece of paradise. Life was good.

The living room and kitchen lights glowed in the windows, but the doorknob didn't budge. She hammered the sandblasted brass knocker

and waited for Grady to let her in. After he'd had time to ride a turtle to the door, she knocked again and lifted the mat to see if he'd left the key for her.

No key. No answer.

"Grady! It's me. Open up." She pounded her fist against the biting paint. It was nearly one a.m. She yelled for Grady again, louder this time. Good thing Mr. Dodson next door couldn't hear a jackhammer if it attacked his headboard.

Not a sound came from her place, but Mr. Dodson's light flicked on. Great. He'd finally started sleeping with his hearing aid.

"What's all the hollering about?" Heavy bags hung beneath the old man's eyes and blue veins ran beneath his thin skin.

"I'm sorry. I'm locked out."

"This why you wanted me to wear these dad gum things to bed? So you could wake me up shouting like the place was burning to the ground?"

"I'm sorry," Haylie said again. "I'm glad you're wearing them. If there was a fire, you'd hear me."

"Next time I hear you at this hour there better be flames licking my backside." The old man slammed his door and she heard him shuffle back across his linoleum floor.

Haylie walked around to the back and checked her sliders. Locked. Grady had left the blinds open and the television on. An open pizza box covered the coffee table, but where Grady's feet would've been hanging off the end of the sofa, two empty Corona bottles lay on the floor. Great. By saying "make yourself at home" she had contributed to the delinquency of a minor. Or an eighteen-year-old. Either way, he was too young to drink legally, and she had inadvertently provided the booze.

She doubled back to check the parking lot for his car. The old gray Honda Accord was nowhere to be seen.

“Damn it, Grady,” she muttered and punched his number into her cell phone. Her call went straight to voicemail. He had the phone off. What teenager ever turned his phone off?

She'd had one too many drinks to drive anywhere, and her car was still parked at Banana Bob's. She had walked home along the beach letting the waves wash over her feet and pull the sand from beneath her heels. Ashlyn and Amanda had taken cabs home, and when she left Kara had been busy making the moves on some real estate agent from Pensacola. At least Blake hadn't shown up again.

She started walking back toward the bar, taking the more time-efficient, less scenic route along Mandido Beach Drive and dialed Kara's cell. Voicemail.

“Kara, if you get this message before you start home call me. I'm locked out. I might need to stay at your place tonight.” She folded her phone and dropped it back in her purse.

The shells that paved the shoulder of Mandido Beach Drive stabbed through her sandals. A black Mercedes SUV swerved from the opposite lane, but wove back to the side of the road it belonged on. Through the window she could see the outline of a child safety seat.

People should have to pass a test to become parents, but then the population would take a nosedive, and people like herself wouldn't exist. A familiar repulsion slid from the back of her throat to settle like a slab of lard in her stomach. Her father had become a free man again, free to make her life a living hell, just like he'd sworn he'd do. The bars of the Alabama state prison system would no longer offer her protection from him and neither would anything or anyone else. A shiver slid down her spine and she picked up her pace, suddenly more aware of the dark stretches between streetlamps and the shadowed corners of the buildings she passed.

Nearly breathless, she arrived at Banana Bob's fifteen minutes before last call. Only a handful of cars remained in the lot and the foot traffic all headed away from the building. She scanned the people

leaving the bar for a familiar face, and a set of ice blue eyes caught hers.

“You see Kara in there?” she asked.

Blake shook his head. “She left about ten minutes ago with some real estate agent.”

“Great.” Haylie shook the sand and shell shards from her sandals. High heels weren’t exactly made for roadside hiking. “I didn’t see you earlier, have you been here all night?”

“No, I just came back looking for somebody.”

“Somebody in particular or just somebody to take home for the evening?”

He laughed. “I didn’t come to skim the bottom for stragglers. Did Ashlyn give you my card?”

She fished it out of her pocket and handed it to him. The corner printed with his phone number looked like it had been run through a washing machine. The digits were blurred beyond recognition. “Somebody must’ve set a drink on it.”

“Thought you Belles didn’t run interference.”

Her lips curled into a smirk. “Accidents happen.”

“How long have you been back?”

“You saw me walk up. Maybe two minutes.” She focused on the line that chiseled his cheek, safer than looking him in the eye, but still dangerous. Not enough hours had passed to erase the smooth heat of his face against her jaw, which led straight to the memory of his sizzling mouth traveling her neck. His tongue, wet ... And just like that, her body fired like a rocket. Damn him.

“I mean back home,” he said. “How long have you been living here?”

“Since I finished graduate school. Eight years, I guess.” Avoiding him for that long hadn’t been any small miracle, especially given their chosen professions. A handful of small communities covered the coast of Alabama southeast of Mobile. The towns were close enough

in proximity to keep in touch with anyone you wanted to, and spread out enough to avoid those you didn't. Most of the time.

For years, before she started the foundation, she had worked as a social worker and been a guardian ad litem. She had dreaded every trip to the courthouse, terrified she would bump into him in the hall or worse, that he would be defending one of the reasons children needed her in the first place. If she wanted to keep Blake out of her life, she needed to avoid him at all costs. She never doubted that.

"You've been here that long, and you never looked me up?" he said.

"I see your face too often to miss you."

His brow creased in question.

"The billboard on Highway 59. It's on my way to work." She crossed her arms over her chest. It was so much easier to project anger, or even disinterest, on a 14-foot sheet of vinyl than the six foot hunk of man standing in front of her.

"You must love that."

"Not especially, but it gives me something to aim my cold coffee at."

His laugh was infectious and she couldn't help but smile.

"Want to grab a cup of hot coffee?" he asked.

He had asked if she wanted join him. Not assumed. He didn't even look certain she'd accept. Maybe he'd changed. Or maybe he was just afraid she'd throw her hot coffee at him too.

The options weren't in her favor. Call a cab that she didn't have enough cash left to pay for without finding an ATM first. Walk back home and sit outside her condo all night. Or go in begging at the front desk of one of the beachfront high-rises for an overpriced room. Coffee sounded like the least of the evils.

"Nothing's open but the IHOP," she said.

"What about your place?"

She blew her breath through her nose and dug her fingernails into her arms. "I'm locked out."

“What would you have done if I hadn’t been here?” His eyes danced with victory. He thought he had her, but he had another thought coming.

“I hadn’t gotten that far yet,” she said. “But lucky me. Here you are offering to keep me up with caffeine all night so I don’t have to worry about where I’m going to lay my head.”

He grinned. “There’s always my place.”

“I’m more in the mood for blueberry pancakes.” A familiar tune played in her purse. She snatched her phone out of her bag. “You forgot to leave the key under the mat,” she said without preamble.

“I just ran out for a minute.” Laughter trailed Grady’s words. “The door’s unlocked now.” He laughed again, a lazy laugh that made her wonder how much he’d smoked in the few hours since she’d last seen him. It wouldn’t do any good to tear into him or lecture him now.

Chewing on her bottom lip, she said goodbye and dropped the phone back into her purse. She shook another stubborn shell fragment out of her shoe while she considered the two mile walk back to her condo. Obviously she couldn’t ask Grady to come get her. He shouldn’t be driving anywhere.

“You mind giving me a ride home?” she asked Blake.

“Sure. Right after pancakes and coffee.”

She sighed. She wanted to go home to... To what? To pretend she didn’t want to tear into Grady, or to get visual proof of his newfound penchant for partying so she could worry herself sick over it.

“Come on,” he said. “Looks like you could use some pancakes.”

“Extra syrup and whipped cream,” she said.

“You sure we can’t do this at my place?” A grin shot across his face, his arm slid around her waist and liquid fire surged through her every vein.

* * * *

“Why is it there’s always one waitress at every IHOP with warts on her face?” Blake whispered as their server carried a steaming coffee pot away from their table.

“Those are beauty marks.” Haylie poured half the dispenser of maple syrup over her blueberry pancakes. “Witches have warts and moles. Women have beauty marks. Cindy Crawford made a fortune off hers.”

“Our waitress has warts.” The self-assured way he rested his arm across the table kept her on edge. He could touch her if he had a mind to, and she wanted him to more than she wanted to admit.

Haylie shrugged. “Maybe she’s kissed a lot of frogs.”

“Did you just concede an argument to me?” His fingers grazed her forearm. Her wrist jumped just enough to send the fork clattering onto the rim of her plate.

“I’ve never liked to argue with you.” She picked up her fork as if throwing silverware around during a meal didn’t warrant a single thought.

His smirk made it clear he could see right through her, but damned if she’d admit what being around him did to her. Her body needed to get a handle on itself. The big girl upstairs was in charge now, and the little hussy downtown wasn’t getting any action tonight, or any other night when Blake was around. She crossed her legs, closing down the red light district between her thighs.

“So why haven’t you ever called?”

“Why would I?” She had to uncross her legs. The hussy didn’t like being squeezed half to death.

“Because you see my smiling face every time you throw your coffee at it, and my phone number’s as big as a house across the bottom of the sign.”

“Am I supposed to dial every billboard number I see?”

“Truce.” He speared his fork into her pancakes. “I’m glad I ran into you tonight. I still think about us.”

Haylie's throat closed so tight, she almost choked. She needed to make it clear, here and now, that they weren't starting things up again. Her life moved along just fine without him in it. Even their careers pitted them against one another.

She dragged her eyes away as his lips settled around the fork and those lucky pancakes landed on that supremely talented tongue. She had to strike now, and strike hard or she'd be slathering syrup over herself and begging him to lap it off. "So how do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"How do you appease your conscience when you help a guilty person walk off scot-free? I mean you do realize their victims have to serve a life sentence, right?" Just saying the words was like spitting on a friend in hell. The hussy between her legs wasn't out of the fire, but there were hotter flames to put out now.

"Whoa ..." He held a strip of bacon in mid-air. "Where did that come from?"

"Your billboard. That's what you do, isn't it? Defend criminals." Oh, now that was like spit-balling ice cubes. Girlfriend downstairs was getting a breather, and the brainiac in the penthouse was feeling pretty smug.

"Not everyone accused of a crime is a criminal."

"So you only represent the innocent ones?" She sat back, arrogant in her ability to turn things around so quickly. The hussy had just walked into a spa and sat down in a sauna.

He narrowed his eyes at her. His lips tightened then settled into a smirk. "Everyone has a right to a fair trial and legal representation."

"Men who molest little girls deserve a man with your education and quick mind to navigate legal loopholes for them? A technicality should be enough of a reason to allow them to wander the streets until they hurt another child?"

He set his cup down on the table hard enough to rattle the silverware. "Hold on just a damn minute! I'm not out to fill the streets with violent criminals or sexual predators."

Oh, now that stung. She'd hit him where it hurt. Out of the sauna and onto the beach. "So why don't you represent the victims?"

Picking a fight might be a ploy to cool the sexual heat between them, but deep down she wanted to know what motivated him to root for the wrong team. She wanted to know that somewhere inside him was the Blake she had fallen in love with.

"I represent a lot of victims. Victims of injustice, bad judgment, and mental illness. Most people who commit a crime deserve a second chance."

"I don't agree with that." Ah, like an aloe bath. They were fundamentally different, nothing between them could ever amount to anything. So why did her heart sink a little deeper in her chest?

Blake sat back against the cushioned booth and studied her. "How many of your friends have climbed behind the wheel after one too many?"

Grady. She fiddled with her plate, but didn't answer. He slowly turned the fork between his fingers, and just the movement of his wrist heated her blood. She wished she could take it all back, and rewind her whole night. She shouldn't be sitting here with him now. Even if she won this argument, he'd still come out ahead. Love him or hate him, every moment they spent together became another memory she wouldn't be able to shake.

"If one of your friends got caught," he continued, "would you want to see them sent to jail? Or would you want to have enough sense scared into them that they have the wits to call a cab next time? What about us, when we were younger? How many bad judgment calls did we make? How many times did we break a little law in the name of a good time?"

"Point taken, but where do you draw the line? Who would you refuse to represent?"

"Violent criminals and sexual predators." He grinned like he'd just scored, or knew damn well he might.

Haylie sat back in the booth and crossed her arms over her chest. Ok, so Satan had some integrity, but that didn't change things between them. Being with Blake was like sunburn. Even after aloe cooled it down, the pain would slip back up on you and sting worse than it did before.

Through the window, sea spray blurred the red taillights of a car headed toward Mandido Beach. "I see a lot of victims. People...children...whose lives are screwed up forever. And too many times I've seen the monsters that hurt these kids get off with a slap on the hand." She took a deep breath. "When the State takes a child out of an unsafe home, who do you think suffers most?"

"The child."

"Not just the child. The adult that child becomes because as soon as these children turn eighteen the State wipes its hands of them. They're supposed to support themselves, find their place in a world where they've never quite fit in. In most cases, these 'adults' don't have a single person they can count on. No one to answer to. No one to pat them on the back when they need it. No one to lend them gas money to get to work or school. No one. Period." She leaned forward and gripped the edge of the table with her fingertips. "And what did these 'adults' do to deserve this? They were born into the wrong house, to the wrong people. People who probably never spent a week in jail for what they did."

She caught her breath and eased her grip on the table. Heat had risen to the top of her ears and sweat pricked beneath her arms. She had spent years speaking for children in court, explaining a system that would inevitably let them down. Grady had been one of those children, her first case as a child advocate. He had been thirteen when she met him. Fourteen when he had the courage to stand up by her side and tell the judge he was safer in foster care than in a home with his mother. At sixteen he battled the system again when his mother petitioned for custody. He bounced from foster home to foster home, riding his bicycle seven miles each way his senior year of high school

to keep from transferring schools again. A month before he turned eighteen, he graduated at the top of his class and entered college. Now, less than a year later, he was crashing at her house high as a kite and drunk on beer from her fridge. With a B in English. The first B he'd ever made.

"Grady's one of those *adults*?" Blake asked.

She nodded and released a hot breath from her lungs. "He doesn't deserve the cards he got dealt. None of them do."

"Would it help you to know I specialize in DUI, bar fights and general stupidity?" He cut a piece of pancake and dipped it in a swirl of whipped cream before offering it to her. "I don't like criminals any more than you do," he said, coaxing her to take the bite.

Yes, it helped to know that. It helped a lot. She tried to act irritated, but then licked the sweetness from her lips, the way she would have teased him years ago when they were lovers, letting her tongue carve a slow route over her top lip before dipping down to the bottom.

"I do like that though," he said with a glimmer in his eye. "You sure I can't drag you through Hell again, just for old time's sake?"

She laughed. At least he knew he was a devil.

* * * *

Blake pulled into a parking spot in front of Haylie's condo and reached for his door handle.

"You don't need to walk me in," she said, fighting back the sudden bout of butterflies that sprang up in her stomach. She knew better than to argue the point. This devil had manners, and he wasn't about to drop her at the curb.

He pushed his door open then came around to open hers. The breeze off the gulf played in his hair and the salt air blended with his cologne the same way it had at Banana Bob's. The intoxicating scent and the fire that danced in his eyes reminded her exactly how

irresistible and persuasive he could be. She straightened her back and stepped past him. She was only feet from the safety of Grady, her CB.

This time the doorknob turned with ease. Inside, Grady's arm hung off the sofa. His chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm. He had picked up most of the mess she'd seen through the sliders. His shoes lay toppled beneath the coffee table and an MTV reality show blared from the television.

Blake surveyed the scene over her shoulder. "This is Grady?"

"The one and only." The sweet heady scent of marijuana mingled with an aromatherapy candle that burned on the coffee table.

"Think he'll share?" He smoothed his hand along her shoulder when she stiffened at his suggestion. "I'm kidding," he said with a soft laugh. "How long's it been since we could end a night like that?"

"Passed out on the couch?"

His fingers traced the curve of her elbow. "We usually made it to the bedroom." His low, suggestive voice took her instantly back to nights they'd spent together, his body hovering near hers with nothing between them but heat and need. A flurry of burning desire took flight in her stomach.

She jerked away as if a tongue of flame had actually seared her. "Thanks for giving me a ride home. And for the coffee." She held the door open and looked past him into the dark night.

He unloaded a heavy breath. "Don't thank me. And for what it's worth, I'm sorry for what happened between us. I don't know if I ever convinced you of that."

"You didn't," she said. "But it doesn't matter now. I've got more important things to worry about." She looked back at the lanky figure collapsed over the length of her couch.

"He's a kid."

"He's an adult according to the State, and if he gets caught doing any of this he's an adult according to the courts. He's not old enough to drink, but he's old enough to go to jail for drinking and driving." Grady's socks hung inches below his toes. His jeans had twisted

around his legs and he had balled his shirt under his head like a pillow. Dense curls of dark hair sprouted in the pits of his arms and he was taller than Blake by at least a head. In so many ways he had become a man, but he was only a freshman in college. His childhood had all but been robbed. Didn't he deserve this last chance to have a little normalcy in his life?

"He can't afford to screw up," she said. "There's no one to bail him out."

"What about you?"

Her shoulders fell and her stomach clenched. "He's got me, but I don't know how much he wants me butting into his life."

"You love him. He'd be a fool to piss that away." And with that he retreated into the darkness. "Goodnight, Haylie."

She closed the door and pressed her forehead to the wood. She squeezed her eyes shut to take some of the pressure off her heart, like stubbing a toe to forget about a headache. Diversion didn't help, being around Blake cut her to the bone. She couldn't see him again. She would have to put her foot down. Hard and fast. And avoid him at all costs. No coffee. No conversation. One slip, one vulnerable moment and she'd fall right back into the devil's clutches, and she knew better than to let that happen.

Chapter 3

Ashlyn adjusted the pale green jog shorts that precisely matched the band of green on the sides of her sports bra. One of her heels rested almost waist high on the wooden walkway that led to the beach. She had the other foot planted in the sand below.

“You went for coffee. He drove you home and left without losing a stitch of clothes?” Her perfectly toned muscles danced beneath golden skin and her gray eyes were none too convinced as she bent in a stretch.

“I told you, Grady was passed out on the couch. And even if he wasn’t ...” Haylie stretched her hamstrings and tried to tell herself again that nothing would have happened. But the remembered heat of his touch still twisted her belly and filled her with desire that made her ache. Hopefully the morning run would tamp down her sexual appetite. She raised her arms over her head and twisted at the waist.

Several yards away, four dark furry legs and a tail stood out against a patch of sea oats. The dog watched them, its head tucked low. Its owner would probably be close behind, hopefully with a leash in hand.

“Uh huh.” Ashlyn switched legs and continued to stretch. “When have you ever said goodnight to Blake Sheridan with your clothes on?”

“A million years ago you’d have a point. I wouldn’t sleep with him now if he was the last man standing.” She had little hope the false bravado in her voice would get past her best friend.

Ashlyn raised a brow. “You trying to convince me or yourself?”

She raised her arms over her head again and stifled a yawn. Monday morning had come early, especially after two sleepless nights with a man from her past haunting her every thought. "Even if I hadn't run into Blake, I'm not getting distracted by anyone until after this first fundraiser is over."

"You look pretty distracted to me. He's really got your head spinning, hasn't he?" In one smooth motion Ashlyn swung her foot to the ground and trotted off toward the dunes chirping a dog call. "Here, boy! It's ok, fella. Where's your collar?"

Relieved to be off the hook, Haylie kept an eye on her friend. If animals were Ashlyn's passion, animals in need were her purpose. The scraggly Labrador mix eyed her approach. His lip peeled back exposing a row of long white teeth and a growl rumbled through his thin body.

"He's going to bite you!" Even as Haylie tried to warn her, Ashlyn fished a thin leash from the pocket of her shorts. Always prepared. She should have been a Boy Scout. They would have let her in, even without the prerequisite appendage. Her to die for beauty and daddy's influence had always gotten Ashlyn anything she wanted.

Ashlyn ignored her and slowly approached the stray, hand extended. The dog's growl rumbled over the whisper of sea oats and the gently lapping waves. Haylie held her breath.

Ashlyn reached within a few inches of the dog's snout, offering her hand to be sniffed. The animal lunged. Haylie sprang forward in her friend's defense, but too late. Blood flowed from Ashlyn's fingers, and the renegade romped off over the dunes, his gait uneven in the deep sand.

"Oh, he's so scared," Ashlyn moaned as blood dripped into the white sand at her feet.

"Forget about him, look at you." Haylie held her hand and examined the open wounds. "We've got to get you to the hospital. You probably need stitches, and what if that beast has rabies?"

“He’s just scared,” Ashlyn said, “I could see it in his eyes. It’s the same look you get every time you say Blake’s name.” She rotated her wrist and checked out the bleeding punctures along two of her fingers. “I guess I should get this looked at.”

* * * *

Haylie wrapped a dishcloth over Ashlyn’s hand and retrieved her car keys from a hook by the door. Grady lifted his head off the sofa and blinked the grog from his eyes. “I’m taking Ashlyn to the hospital. She got bitten by a dog.”

In one swift move, Grady swung his feet to the floor and hurried to Ashlyn’s side. “Is it bad?”

The tenderness in his voice sent a maternal wave of warmth through Haylie’s chest. All the abuse he’d been through hadn’t hardened him, or given him a violent streak like she’d seen with so many of the kids from similar circumstances. He could stand up for himself when he needed to, but his heart was as big as his appetite.

“I’ll be fine,” Ashlyn assured him. “Haylie’s making a big deal out of nothing.”

“She’s good at that.” Grady softened his verbal jab with a smile and a wink.

“Save your charms for somebody they’ll work on, Mister.” Haylie couldn’t help but smile. He could charm the socks off her and he knew it. She reached around him to lift Ashlyn’s arm. “Hold your hand up higher than your heart and come on before you bleed all over my floor.”

“What’d the dog look like?” Grady asked.

“A mangy black Lab.” Haylie grabbed Ashlyn by her good arm and led her toward the front door. “Call animal control. He was headed down the beach toward the Florida line.”

Grady peeled his socks off and pushed open the sliding glass door. “I’ll see if I can find him.”

Ashlyn freed herself from Haylie's grasp and tossed him the leash. "He's starving," she said. "Take some food."

"Leave the monster alone before you get your arm taken off!" Haylie warned him.

"You worry too much, Homma." Homma was Grady-speak for Hot Momma, a term he'd coined when he first told her she was the best mama he'd ever had. And not just because she was so easy to look at. He didn't throw the word around often, but when he said it, it warmed her to the core. He doubled back to the kitchen then trotted out the door with a package of hotdogs in one hand and the leash in the other. "Some dude named Blake called," he yelled over his shoulder.

* * * *

Ashlyn winced as the doctor injected a rabies shot into her deltoid. Her bandaged hand rested across her thigh. No stitches, just a precautionary dose of antibiotics and an abbreviated round of rabies immunizations since her position as director of the local animal shelter kept her up to date on her shots.

"You're all set," the doctor said. "We'll need to take a look at that bite in forty-eight hours and if you don't get records on the animal, you'll need to come back three days from now for another inoculation."

Haylie put down the tattered six month old magazine she'd been reading and followed Ashlyn out. The emergency room doors slid open, and a warm breeze swept away the hospital chill. She keyed her cell phone on and dropped it back into her purse.

"When are you going to call him back?" Ashlyn asked.

"When hell freezes over. Maybe. If I ever run out of ice." Haylie didn't have to ask who. She hadn't been able to shake Blake from her mind, and for him to call so early in the morning spiked her curiosity more than a little.

“Uh huh.” Ashlyn smoothed her caramel hair, still tied back in a ponytail and walked toward Haylie’s car parked near the back of the lot. “Have you invited him to the luncheon?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because he’d be a great mentor for the kids you’re trying to help, and he could possibly offer internships or summer jobs for any of them interested in law.”

Haylie bit her bottom lip. AL.F.A.A. or Alabama Fostering Adult Advocacy, the non-profit organization she founded, could definitely use the support of as many area professionals as she could find. She had planned the luncheon and a black-tie cocktail auction for that very purpose.

The luncheon was aimed at garnering support from the movers and shakers in Mandido Beach, Hope’s Crossing and Velma, and the cocktail auction targeted the Mobile elite. Blake would fit in with either crowd, but being indebted to him didn’t sound appealing. She had purposely left his name off the invitation list, but those invitations had gone out before she ran into him.

“Maybe he’s changed,” Ashlyn said. “And you looked a little cozy at Banana Bob’s Saturday night before you ran off to Grady’s rescue.”

“He hasn’t changed. If you’d heard our conversation just before I left, you’d know how right I am.” Heaviness seeped into her chest. He hadn’t changed. And no matter how much she might still be attracted to him, she couldn’t let herself forget why she wasn’t married to him now.

“Did he try to take you to bed after coffee?” Ashlyn pulled open the passenger door of Haylie’s car.

“He threw the offer on the table, but he didn’t push it.”

“I think you should call him.”

Haylie slid into the driver seat. “I think the rabies has affected your brain.”

“I don’t have rabies.”

“And I’m not calling Blake Sheridan. Ever. For anything.” Now, if she could just get the man off her mind for thirty consecutive seconds, life would be good again.

* * * *

Haylie drummed her fingers along the bottom of her keyboard and looked over the RSVP list for the AL.F.A.A. luncheon. Only half as many people as she hoped to have in attendance had committed, and the event was less than two weeks away. She needed a plan. She could rush invitations out to handful of people she hadn’t originally invited, but not enough to significantly sway the numbers.

She drafted an email to the presidents of the Rotary Club and the Junior League, then addressed an official invitation to each one and dropped it in her outgoing mail bin.

She had hoped to keep the occasion more individualized, to give the invitees a sense of personal importance, but not everything could work out the way it was intended.

She stared at the lemon yellow concrete block walls of her tiny office in the former Mobile YMCA building and mentally went down her to do list. She needed to sit down with Grady and go over the high points of his presentation. She needed to confirm that everything was on schedule with the florist and the head chef at the restaurant.

Stacked in boxes next to her wilted philodendron donation envelopes waited to be stuffed with the generosity of local business people. She dumped the last half of her water bottle into the plant and pounded her brain for any forgotten detail. Her own presentation could use a little polish, but she could speak passionately about AL.F.A.A. in her sleep.

She needed to get enough people to care about the organization and enough money to make it work. After all the standard operating costs, she couldn’t even afford a part-time assistant this year, and she wouldn’t get paid at all. She only had two more years to bring

AL.F.A.A. around to a position in which it could both fund the programs she planned to offer and pay her a minimal salary. After that, she'd have to go back to work doing something not nearly as important or rewarding. Until then she had enough money socked away to get by, provided she didn't run into any unexpected catastrophic expenses.

A stampede of feet and playground cadence traveled down the hall outside her office. The Boys and Girls Club had opened the doors of the gym. The high-pitched squeak of tennis shoes slid across the basketball court and a chorus of voices echoed off the raftered ceilings.

Grady would be outside refereeing the U-10 soccer matches, if he hadn't lost his arm to that rabid dog he went after for Ashlyn. He'd do anything for Ashlyn. His crush on her had bloomed when he was fourteen and though he wouldn't admit it for the world, he'd never completely shaken his enamor of her. Not many men ever did. None of them had shackled her down for long though.

Be it curse or fortune, Belles seemed to be perpetually single or in short-term relationships. And they liked it that way. Haylie tucked her hair behind her ears and leaned back in her chair. She did like being alone. It had its moments anyway. Being single was better than dealing with the nasty breakups that always followed relationships like the one between her and Blake all those years ago. She unburdened her heavy chest with a sigh. Yes, being single was definitely better.

A knock sounded at the door just before it began to creep open. John Lawrence, the sports coordinator, stuck his head in the room. "Just checking to see if Grady was in here with you. The kids are waiting for him."

Haylie snatched the phone and punched in Grady's number. He had never missed a volunteer day with the kids, and if he knew he was going to be late he would call. She never should have let him go after that dog. Her heart pounded as she waited for him to answer.

Something was wrong. She could feel it. His voicemail prompt solidified her fears.

“Grady!” she all but yelled into the phone. “Call me as soon as you get this!” She grabbed her keys and a stack of file folders off her desk and started for the door.

“Is everything ok?” John asked.

“I don’t know. It’s just not like him...and there was this dog...”

The phone rang and she snatched it off her desk. “Grady?”

“No...not Grady.” The smooth Alabama drawl spread through her like a slow burn.

“I’m sorry. I can’t talk,” She slapped the phone down with a trembling hand. Blake would have to wait. Ten years of almost not thinking about him every day, and now the man knew where she lived and had tracked down both her home and office numbers. He would drag her straight back to hell if she let him.

* * * *

The gulf breeze whipped through the open sliders and into Haylie’s condo. Evidence of Grady’s presence littered the place: potato chip bags, empty soda cans, and a package of hotdogs left open on the kitchen counter. At least he’d eaten after he went after the dog. He couldn’t have gotten hurt too bad.

“Grady?” A shadow moved across the patio, but Grady didn’t answer. She stepped out onto the lanai and called him again. “Grady?”

No one was on the wooden path that ran behind the condos and trailed down to the beach or on any of the neighboring lanais. The shadow had probably been a bird flying by, or maybe one of the neighbors who had already disappeared inside.

Despite the warm wind blowing in from the gulf, icy fingers crept down her spine. She shook off the nerves. Paranoia kept trying to creep in, but she refused to let it take hold. Her father’s release from

prison put her on high alert, but his probation prohibited him from coming near her.

She called Grady's phone again and left another message, then picked up his shoes and carried them to the guest room. His duffle bag lay in the corner between the treadmill and a queen-sized bed. The room had all the modern comforts, but he refused to sleep anywhere but the sofa when he stayed over. One of his foster families had complained that he wouldn't sleep in his bedroom at their house, but he didn't know Haylie knew that. It was just one of those things she didn't push him to explain.

After dropping his shoes next to his open bag, she turned to leave, but a roll of cash tucked next to a pair of wadded up jeans caught her eye. She picked up the money and thumbed through the bills. It looked like close to a thousand dollars, mostly in twenties, and to Grady that was more than a small fortune to be carrying around. She would be surprised if he had that much in his bank account.

She tucked the money back where she found it and stood to leave, but stopped dead in her tracks. Grady towered over her blocking the door.

"You snoopin'?" he asked.

"No...I..." Heat rose to her cheeks. She shouldn't be the one who felt the need to explain, but she fully understood how delicate trust could be. "I picked your shoes up off the floor and saw it there. Where did you get all that money?"

"Where do you think I got it?" His voice remained calm, but when he got upset with her he swallowed his anger and buried it deep. She'd learned that just because his feelings didn't surface, didn't mean they weren't there. His posture wasn't threatening, but the challenge was clear in his eyes.

"I don't know where you got it. I didn't think you had that kind of money saved up. Shouldn't it be in the bank?"

He shrugged and looked away.

She recognized the signs of him shutting down, shutting her out, and who knew how long it would take to get him to open up again. "The kids missed you today."

"Oh, shit. It's Monday?"

"I tried to call, but you didn't answer your phone."

"I caught Ashlyn's dog and took him over to the shelter."

Haylie quickly assessed his hands and arms but didn't see any broken skin. "He didn't bite you?"

"Nah. He liked the hotdogs too much. His leg was busted up pretty bad though."

"Do they take in vicious animals at the shelter?"

"He's in quarantine for a couple of weeks to make sure he's not rabid, but then as long as he doesn't try to bite anybody else he can be adopted to a home without kids."

Haylie shook her head, and struggled with whether or not to let the issue of the bank roll in his duffle bag drop so easily. "Did you really forget about the kids?"

"I got busy," he said without meeting her eyes. The chime of the doorbell stopped her from pushing for more. Grady loped off to answer it.

She took a deep breath and walked back to the living room. Blake's smile stopped her heart. Still wearing his suit jacket, his tie loosened at the neck, he could've stopped any woman's heart. "Sounded like you could use a drink." He held up a bottle of gin in one hand and Tom Collins mix in the other.

He remembered. Haylie's reservations floundered.

Tequila might be "te kill ya," but Tom Collins always cut the rotten taste of the Mexican medicine her membership in the Belles forced her to drink. Tom Collins tasted sweet on the devil's tongue, and made her believe in fairytales. Tom Collins had been there the night she ended her relationship with Blake so many years ago, the night he lost her in a drunken fraternity house bet.

Fairytales were a crock. Tom Collins was a liar. And Blake Sheridan was a jerk no matter how hard he tried to disguise himself. Then and now. Like the former vice-president once said, a zebra can't change his spots.

"You always leave your doors wide open?" Blake asked.

"No. Grady does."

"I locked up when I left. You're the one always airing the place out."

Haylie started to argue. She might have left the front door open when she rushed in looking for him, but the sliders had been open before she got home. She glanced back and forth at the two of them, not sure who exasperated her more at the moment.

"Come on," Blake said, reading her. "Just have a drink with me. On your turf. Your terms. And with Grady here to run interference if I get out of line."

"It was nice to bump into you the other night. I really appreciate the pancakes and the ride home, but really... What do you want from me?"

"I want you to have a drink with me."

"He's sweatin' you hard. Give the man a chance," Grady chimed in from his perch on the sofa, the remote in his hand.

"No input from the rabid dog chasing peanut gallery," Haylie warned him.

"I don't even know what a peanut gallery is."

She spun around, her arms raised in exasperation. Blake took advantage of the distraction and pushed his way past her. He made himself at home in the kitchen opening cabinets until he found a couple of glasses and a pitcher. He filled the pitcher with ice, measured in the drink mix and the gin, and stirred it all with the handle of a wooden spoon he pulled from her utensil jar next to the stove.

"I see your bartending skills haven't improved."

"It'll get the job done," he said, filling a glass and handing it to her. She stared at the drink and then back at Blake.

"It doesn't mean anything if you drink it," he said softly, "other than you're willing to sit out back and have a drink with me."

"That's all it means? You just chose this particular drink because they stocked it closest to the register at the liquor store?"

"No. Because I knew you liked it. And I don't know much about you anymore, but I figure your taste buds haven't completely changed. And..." He grinned sheepishly. "Like you said, I'm not much of a bartender, but you always tolerated the way I mixed these."

He raised his glass to hers.

"One drink," she said and led the way outside.

"Good luck, man. She's tough," Grady aimed the remote at the television as they walked past.

Side by side in Adirondack chairs with their feet propped on the patio railing, Haylie took a long sideways glance at Blake and savored the tart taste on her tongue. "You would have taken me to bed the other night if I gave you half a chance."

He laughed. "Hell, yeah. I will anytime you give me the chance."

She sucked down the better half of her drink way too fast and spoke without looking at him. "That's not going to happen, and I can't imagine you're desperate enough to have to beat down a locked door."

He leaned forward and dropped his feet to the deck. "Can we just get to know one another again? Maybe put the past behind us?"

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"And I don't suppose you care to explain why you think that." He set his glass down on the wide armrest of his chair and stared out toward the beach. "I don't think I'll ever understand why that stupid meaningless bet hurt you so much."

She blinked away the tears that sprang to her eyes, but knew she couldn't say anything now that would shed any light on it for him.

What had her father had done to her wasn't something she would bring to life again with words. Not ever.

He reached for her hand, his broad fingers sliding over her slender ones. "I'm sorry, Haylie. I'm really sorry, and I know too much time has passed for us to jump back to where we were, the way we were together...but you still do it for me, more than anybody ever has, and I just want to get to know you again. I want to see if we have a chance."

She shook her head and stood, setting her empty glass down on the rail. "There's not a snowball's chance. Please don't push me for something I can't give you."

Her hands trembled as she reached for the slider. If he tried to stop her, she'd cave. God, she couldn't afford to cave.

* * * *

Haylie sat up in bed unsure what had woken her. Grady had decided to spend the night with a friend. And despite how difficult Blake had made it for her to fall asleep, he'd mercifully left after he finished his drink.

He hadn't left her mind, though. And a shadow of doubt hovered in her heart. The more she told herself she needed to stay away from him, the more her reasoning sounded lame. He had hurt her, but she had a hard time believing the man who'd been on her lanai tonight would have ever bet her if he knew about her past. What if she could have trusted him enough to let herself keep loving him ten years ago? She shook her head. Her break up with Blake had taught her one thing. She'd never trust anyone as much as she had trusted him again. That didn't do a thing to tamp down her libido though. He made her want him like she'd never wanted anyone before.

The clock on her bedside table read 2:00 a.m. The antique mother/daughter figurine her mother had given her on her tenth birthday usually illuminated by the glow of the clock's LCD wasn't in

its usual spot next to the lamp. She hadn't noticed the figurine missing when she went to bed, but then she'd had a zillion thoughts racing through her head. And Blake Sheridan played a role in every single one of them.

She glanced around the room. Nothing else seemed out of place. The figurine was the most valuable possession she owned, but an untrained eye wouldn't have known that. A thief wouldn't have bothered with it. Where in the hell had it gone?

Her mind drifted back to the open sliding glass doors when she had come home looking for Grady. She tried to shake off the fear that eased into her chest, but her muscles tightened instinctively. Had someone been in her house? Was someone there now? Something had woken her. She strained her ears, but heard only the humming of the refrigerator and the soft rush of waves against the shore.

She stretched one hand toward the phone as her heartbeat pounded in her ears and fear struck her nerves. She didn't really expect her father to come for her in the middle of the night, but he was capable of anything. She sat up against the headboard and froze, waiting for the slightest sound. A long minute passed. She eased her hand away from the phone and judged the distance to her window. Could she get away if she had to? The unmistakable chime of the doorbell rang through the house nearly sending her through her skin.

She swung her feet to the floor and hurried down the hall, hoping Grady had decided to come home and had lost his key again. She pressed her eye to the peephole. Fear slithered away, and the butterflies in her stomach took flight.

In the shadows of her entryway Blake took her breath away. His hair had a tousled, casual flare that it hadn't had earlier. His t-shirt and asset defining jeans fit him like a dream.

She swung the door open. "What are you doing here?" Her heart pounded in recognition of the flash in his eye. All fire and heat and want and need, like he had every intention of devouring her from head to toe then going back for another helping.

* * * *

“I couldn’t sleep.” Blake stepped forward, hoping he hadn’t made a mistake in coming. “I can’t get you off my mind.”

“Oh God,” slipped through her lips on a whisper. Her skin flushed in a way that tightened his throat. Damn, she was beautiful, and he’d seen that look on her face before. Sending him away wasn’t what she had in mind.

He closed the door and reached for her before she could change her mind. Her breasts stretched the thin camisole she wore and her nipples strained against the fabric. His cock swelled against the denim of his jeans, and his blood pumped like a drum in his ears. She didn’t resist as he pulled her close and tilted her face to his.

The touch of her lips to his sent enough blood south to leave him light headed. He deepened the kiss, reaching for a taste of her and pulling her body closer. She answered every stroke of his tongue and her baby-soft lips responded with a hunger as powerful as his own. Her kiss washed over him like warm rain, dropping on every nerve, seeping through his skin. The urge to wrap himself around her and dive further into her than he’d ever gone rocked him to the core. Her fingers dove into his hair, and her soft moan unraveled him completely.

He caressed the silk camisole against her back, but he needed to feel the heat of her skin. He needed to hold her in his bare hands.

He pushed his fingertips beneath the elastic waistband of her pajama bottoms and slid his palms over two perfect handfuls of flesh. His heart almost stopped, then pounded with a need to sink into her that he couldn’t hold back. He’d once thought he’d wake up with her in his arms every morning, make love to her every night. He had pictured her in his life forever, and now to have her back in his arms sent a rush through him like he’d never felt before. She clung to his

neck, pressing her breasts against his chest, and making him crazy with need for her.

Trailing kisses to her neck, he lifted her slightly. Her perfume grew warmer in hollow of her throat, and he breathed her in, letting her sink deeper into his every thought, wiping his mind of everything but the taste, the smell and the feel of her in his arms. Her familiar scent filled his heart, like coming home after being gone too long and instantly feeling like he was right where he belonged.

He held her as close as he could. "Point me to your room," he said against her skin.

"Down the hall, last door on the right." Her fingers raked his hair, and she pushed gently, tilting his mouth back to hers. "Promise me I won't regret this." Her eyes searched his pleading for the only answer he could give her.

"You won't. I swear it." He moved one hand up her back, beneath her sleep cami and carried her across the room. Her skin burned beneath his touch as he drew his fingers across her ribs. She gasped when he cradled her soft breast in his palm. In the hall, he lowered her feet to the floor and pulled the camisole over her head. She helped him out of his shirt and pressed her body to his again.

The muscles in his arms shook with restraint and a low groan rattled through his chest. Feeling her against him, skin to skin ripped hunger and need through him like a freight train.

He toed his shoes off and shucked his jeans before picking her up in his arms again and carrying her to her room.

Her breath came fast. Her fingers speared the hair at the back of his head as she pulled gently, tilting his mouth to hers again.

He stood her down beside the bed and pushed her pants down over her hips. Her soft belly pressed into his hard cock, and in the soft darkness he knew she was still his. He swallowed the lump wedged in his throat. If he didn't hold back, he'd jump her like an animal. She deserved more than that, but he wasn't sure how slow he could take it. Passion bit at him, but he eased her onto the bed. His hands fisted on

the mattress. He slowly uncurled one to stroke a long strand of hair away from her face and trace her bottom lip with his fingertip while he fought for control.

“Are you just going to look at me?” Breath clung to her words and her eyes glistened in the darkened room.

“I’ve got bigger plans than that.” The words ground out of him, every minute he spent outside of her was an effort. He spread her thighs with his knee and lowered himself onto the bed above her. He hadn’t forgotten how it felt to sink into her, and anticipation rattled his nerves.

He lowered his head and drew his tongue slowly over one sweet nipple and then the other. Her nipples drew tight and her back arched, pushing her breasts toward him. He looked up to see the passion in her eyes, but she murmured his name and pulled his head closer to her chest. Her skin burned hot beneath his tongue and hands.

Breath poured from her lungs and she squirmed beneath him as he sucked and licked, savoring the flavor of her skin. His cock jumped against her thigh begging to feel her wrapped tight around him. Blake couldn’t hold back any longer. He had to have her.

As if she read his thoughts, her hand dipped to his back, and her fingernails bit into him, pulling his body closer, demanding more.

His mouth followed the soft mound of her breast to the valley between that pulsed with the beat of her heart. She trembled as he pressed his lips against the rhythm and kissed a line down her abdomen. Moving his attention to the fevered skin on the inside of her thigh, he focused first on one leg then the other. She shifted, inviting him to taste the very essence of her desire and giving him the only permission he needed to tear down the wall between them.

“Please,” she whispered.

He spread her nether lips with his tongue, and a moan wrenched free from deep in her throat. His cock throbbed and strained under its own weight. The scent of her bore deep into him. He gripped her thighs, probably too hard, but he needed her so bad he couldn’t hold

back. He sucked her little swollen bud into his mouth and teased it with short quick strokes.

Her cries filled the room and she moved beneath him, begging for more. He slipped one finger and then another in her tight little hole, getting her ready. His dick swelled again in anticipation. He pumped and stroked inside her while he licked and sucked her clit.

He didn't think he could hold out any longer. His whole body shook, but he fought the urge to climb on top of her and bury himself deep inside. She tensed. Her voice rose, and then she convulsed, calling his name and circling his head with her thighs. Her soft, trembling flesh covered his shoulders and her juices poured over his fingers. Damn she still came hard.

He couldn't hold back anymore. He moved over her, dipping down to plant a kiss on her mouth before bracing his arms above her shoulders.

"Condom," Haylie said, as the tremors subsided and her ache for him reached blinding proportions. She wrapped her legs around his waist and slid her wet pussy against his cock. "I want you inside me. Tell me you have a condom."

"In my pants, wherever they are." He looked back toward the clothes that littered the hall. Instead of leaving the bed, he kissed her again. Her essence and a sweet, spicy blend that was uniquely his flavored his tongue. She'd once craved his kisses as much as her next breath. The familiar taste only increased her hunger. With every slide of his tongue against hers emotions she didn't want to bring into the mix barreled through her.

She pulled back enough to look him in the eye. "Just sex," she said, her lips on his. "That's all." Even as she said words meant to hold him at a distance, her heart pounded, her pulse raced and her body screamed for everything he could give her. She felt more whole than she'd felt in years, but that wasn't right. That couldn't be right. "Sex," she said again, as if a label could negate the emotions that tore through her. As if a single word could excuse her lapse of judgment.

“Whatever you want.” His tongue found hers again. His intoxicating kiss took hold of her completely. She caught herself falling back, heart racing, pulse surging, ten years rewound as if they’d never passed at all. And she was right where she belonged, in the arms of the man her heart had never let go of, even while her brain prosecuted him mercilessly.

She knocked aside the promises she’d made to herself to never give her body to him again. Nothing mattered beyond the fire that had sparked in her belly and raged through every horny inch of her five-foot-four frame. Enough electricity to power a small nation charged the air between them, and every movement of her fingers on his skin sparked an answering need in her womb.

His bare chest pressed hot and heavy against hers, flattening her breasts between them. A faint, warm, musky cologne radiated from the heat of his skin. She pulled him closer abandoning his mouth to explore his neck, his chest, his strong round shoulders. Her fingers captured the smooth muscles of his back. She wanted all of him at once. His hands roamed, unhurried as he reacquainted himself with every curve of her body. His lips trailed her neck, his hot breath leaving goose bumps in its wake.

“I’ve missed this,” he said. “You have know idea how much I’ve missed you.”

She took his mouth in another kiss before he could say anything that would break the spell of the moment. She wanted him. She needed him. The two years since she’d allowed anyone into her bed felt like centuries, and there was no way she could turn back now. She had to keep him from ruining it, from taking her somewhere she wouldn’t go.

“Now.” Pure desperation laced her words. “Please, I need you now.”

His fingers traveled over her hip, caressing her skin in a gentle touch that left her craving more. She wanted him rough. She wanted him fast and hard, and now. Right now. She reached down and

gripped his ass, then brought her other hand around to run her palm along his broad shaft. His head fell forward with a heavy breath, and his rock hard cock stretched beneath her touch, jumping with expectation.

“Find that condom,” she said, closing her fingers around him and gliding down his length. She quivered with anticipation from the weight and width of him in her hand. “Hurry,” she breathed.

“I like hearing you want me,” he said, maneuvering his hand between them, finding her slick heat again. His mouth dipped into the hollow of her throat and worked slowly lower. She gripped the stiff tendons of his neck.

Pleasure spiraled from her nipple through her breast, her chest, so deep into her she felt like a tunnel had opened up to take all of him in. Within seconds she was singing his name and before she'd regained her breath from the orgasm, he lifted her off the bed. The power in the effortless way he maneuvered her touched a chord so deep the reverberations almost set off the beginnings of another climax. She wrapped her arms around him, holding on, trusting his strength more than she trusted her own as he carried her down the hall.

Between her room and the guestroom, he laid her down on the carpet and groped the floor. The soft denim of his jeans brushed her leg.

She barely heard the plastic package ripping over the heavy breaths that staggered out of her chest. But seconds later, he spread her thighs with his knee and his thick cock rocked against her as his mouth came down with a hunger that matched hers. She tilted her hips and welcomed him. His big cock stretched her entrance, and the solid stroke he entered her with shot through her like lightning.

“Haylie, oh honey,” he groaned with his mouth buried in her hair, his body perfectly in tune with hers. Every movement sent them closer to a place they knew well, a place no one could take her the way he did. He flattened his palms against hers and as his strokes built in speed and intensity, their fingers twined. Her hands burned

from their crushing grip on one another, but the pain was lost in the pleasure that coursed through her.

He answered her cries from low in his throat. The sounds of his voice, the slick heat of his skin, and the way he filled her more than anyone ever had overloaded her senses. She lost herself completely and gave herself over to a tide of heat and unparalleled sensations, screaming for him as if he could save her before she completely slipped away.

Thrusting deep, his muscles clenched. His breath tore through him and erupted in a growl. She clung to his slick skin. With a final stroke, he collapsed at her side, breathing her name and gripping her waist as if she might run away from him again.

* * * *

The sun had barely risen and Blake stood next to her bed slipping into his clothes. His jeans hung low on his waist and he pulled his t-shirt down over a six-pack that curled Haylie's toes. He caught her eye. "I've got to be in court at nine."

She sat up and held the sheet to her throat. The unforgiving light of morning did nothing to diminish the strong lines of his body, but it worked her ego over pretty good.

"Is your client guilty?"

"That's for the jury to decide." He picked his watch up off the nightstand and tugged the sheet from her grasp with a grin.

"Did he commit the crime he's been accused of?" She covered her nakedness again gripping the sheet in both hands this time.

He answered her with a kiss, his mouth full on hers, his tongue reaching for more. She lost hold of the sheet and gave herself over to the feel and taste of him. His hand massaged her breast and heat flooded between her thighs. Just one more reason she needed to stick to her guns. In less time than it took him to fasten his watch, he could make her forget her principles and forego her rationale.

He stood up with a smile and took her hand, hauling her to her feet. In defiance she grabbed a pillow and held it in front of her as she walked him to the living room. At the kitchen counter, he reached for her again but a knock sounded at the door before he could plow over her stubborn pride with another kiss.

“Ashlyn,” she muttered.

He raised his eyebrows and laughed. “Sweetheart, did you just get busted?” He planted a quick kiss on her lips and crossed the room to swing the door open.

Haylie clutched the pillow to her chest and winced as her toes dug into the carpet.

Ashlyn was dressed for their morning run, color coordinated down to the pink tape that held her crisp white bandage in place. Her eyes widened in surprise at Blake, but she gracefully held her tongue.

He returned to plant another brief parting kiss on Haylie’s lips and hurried out the door. “I’ll call you tonight.” He grinned over his shoulder, his perfectly toned derriere shifted shamelessly beneath the denim of his jeans and his arms flew up in a brazen indication of a touchdown.

“I take it you need a minute?” Ashlyn’s gaze darted to the pillow and a smile played on her lips.

Without a word, Haylie turned on her heel and sent Ashlyn into howls of laughter as she retreated to her room, swinging her naked butt in an exaggerated strut that could teach Blake Sheridan a thing or two about celebrating in the end zone.

Chapter 4

Haylie passed between the pedestal-seated lions outside Ho Palace and entered the gaudy gold and red interior. The aroma of Chinese food and the chill of air conditioning assaulted her before the ornately carved doors had swung closed at her back.

In the dim lighting she spotted the Belles seated at a corner booth. Kara and Amanda sat at one side of the table and Ashlyn sat near the wall across from them. A round of drinks had already been ordered and a bottle of Tsingtao stood next to a frosted mug beside her place setting.

Haylie plopped down on the tufted red vinyl and picked up the beer, forgoing the mug for the first chug. Tonight she needed the alcohol as much as she had needed Blake in the wee hours of the morning.

“You hate Chinese,” Kara said, in her usual habit of refusing to pussyfoot around anything. To her credit, that’s what made her morning radio show number one in Arbitron ratings from Pensacola to Mobile. “You’re forever refusing to meet us here,” Kara continued. “So either you’re starving and desperate for company, or you’re avoiding a certain attorney who wants to spend more time with you tonight.”

Haylie shot Ashlyn a look.

“I haven’t said a word.” Ashlyn raised her fist with her index finger and pinky hooked into horns—the Belles’ equivalent to a pinky swear.

“She didn’t rat you out,” Kara confirmed. “I saw Blake at the courthouse today after I paid my speeding ticket.”

Haylie chugged the rest of her beer and set the bottle down. "Don't you think it's a little weird that after eight years of living in the same area we're all just starting to bump into him now?"

"I've run into him before," Kara admitted.

Amanda averted her eyes and began studying the gold foil wallpaper in earnest.

"You too?" Haylie waited for Amanda to peel her eyes off the gaudy wall.

"A few times," she said, reaching for her mug.

Haylie turned to Ashlyn.

Ashlyn hesitated and flipped her smooth caramel hair over her shoulder. "Here and there. We don't exactly live in a sprawling metropolis."

"So I'm the only one who hasn't 'bumped' into him before now and none of you bothered to tell me you'd seen him?"

"We didn't think you'd want us bringing him up after what happened between the two of you." Amanda's voice was tender, her expression apologetic.

Kara set her beer down. "Does anyone really know what happened?" She practically glared at Haylie. "You've given us squat for details, made us swear we'd never so much as bring his name up, and now you're sleeping with him again."

"Who told you that?" Haylie whipped around to face Ashlyn.

"Not me."

"I could tell by the grin on his face when he was talking about you today," Kara said.

Haylie signaled to the waiter to bring another round. "What did he say?" She blew a hot breath into the Freon chilled air. "Not that I care."

Kara drained her mug. "He thinks you've got your hands full with Grady. And that you're still hotter than Hades."

"He said that?"

“Not in so many words, but I swear he was undressing you in his mind the whole time we were talking.”

“What did you tell him?” Haylie braced herself. Anything could have come out of Kara’s mouth, and plenty probably had.

“I told him you needed to get laid worse than anybody I know.”

“Thanks.” Haylie took the beer the waiter set in front of her and poured it into her mug.

“Tell me I’m wrong.” Kara mimicked Haylie’s actions with her own beer.

“As of two o’clock this morning when he came pounding on my door uninvited, you’re wrong.”

“Damn,” Amanda said, “he doesn’t hold back, does he?”

“Never has.” Haylie lifted the mug to her lips and savored the pale beer on her tongue. Cold and settling. Everything Blake Sheridan was not.

“I’ll have to give some of my male characters a little more of his gumption.” Amanda twirled a long fiery curl around her finger. “The readers will love to hate them.”

“Unless they’re like Haylie.” Kara laughed. “Then they’ll hate to love them.”

“Romance readers aren’t like Haylie,” Ashlyn countered, “they actually believe in happily ever after. Or want to anyway.”

“There’s no happily ever after with men like Blake.” Haylie started as the waiter set down a plate of orange beef in front of her. “You ordered for me?”

“We know what you like better than you do.” Kara waved her chopsticks over the steam of her dumplings and gave Haylie a pointed glare.

“Anything else for you ladies?” the waiter asked.

“Keep the beer coming.” Haylie raised her mug. “I’m going to need it.”

“Hold off on the beer,” Amanda said. “We’ve got some butt kicking to do.”

* * * *

“If this isn’t paranoia gone wild I don’t know what in the hell is.” Kara surveyed the crowd of women gathered in the muted blue and gray multi-purpose room of the Mandido Beach Methodist Church.

At the front of the room a man in a ghee with a black belt cinched around his waist fielded pre-class questions from a group of women who had backed him into a corner. Free self-defense classes had a surprising draw for an area with a relatively low personal crime rate. The gulf air seemed to mellow people out, even the criminals, but crime happens everywhere. And it never hurts to be prepared. Or so, Amanda had insisted when she told the Belles, without question, they’d all be joining her for the next three Wednesday nights to be instructed in manhandling the Asian way. It was little more than research for her latest novel, but what could it hurt? Exercise was exercise, and mixing it up a little from time to time kept a girl’s assets looking their best.

“I met with Marlie again today,” Amanda reported in a hushed tone. “I want every one of us to learn to kick some serious butt in here.”

“And men thought we were dangerous before.” Kara snickered.

Amanda lowered her voice. “If you could hear the things this woman tells me, I swear it would chill you to the bone. She’s our age, educated. She didn’t come from a messed up home or any of that typical crap you’d expect. There truly are monsters out there.”

“Do you really believe she was sold into the sex slave industry, or that such a thing even exists here in the States?” Ashlyn asked. “The story that came out in the Birmingham paper discredited most of what she claimed to have happened to her.”

“I believe her,” Amanda said. “Without a doubt.”

Haylie kept silent and lowered herself to the floor. The rest of the Belles followed and arranged themselves in an exclusive circle as they grabbed their ankles to stretch.

“So how did it happen?” Ashlyn pointed her toes and stretched her fingertips toward them. “How did she get involved in the first place?”

Amanda rested her chin on her knees. “A man she met in a bar. She said he seemed nice, clean cut, gave her a business card that said he owned a computer software company that she’d heard of. Anybody would’ve trusted him.”

“Like Ted Bundy,” Kara said.

“She said she doesn’t know what he gave her, if he slipped it in her drink, or how he got it into her, but she woke up in an old Victorian on the outskirts of New Orleans. She learned fast if she didn’t do exactly what was expected of her, she’d be beaten to hell and back.”

“How long did she spend there?” Ashlyn asked.

“Year and a half,” Amanda pulled the balls of her feet enough to lift her heels off the floor. “She got pregnant. They took her for an abortion and she slipped out the back of the clinic and ran for her life.”

“There are plenty of women who prostitute without coercion.” Kara scooped her hair into a ponytail and whipped it into a knot at the base of her neck. Disbelief creased her brow. “Why would these assholes bother with kidnapping?”

“That’s the sickest part.” Amanda dropped her feet and leaned forward on her elbows. “The ones who pay to go to these places get off on the fact that the women aren’t there willingly.”

“So, it’s rape without the effort?” Ashlyn narrowed her eyes in disgust and brought her bandaged hand onto her lap.

“Some women manage to go along with what they’re told to do as a route of survival. The others get the customers who are into bondage. Either way, the rapists don’t get so much as a scratch to tip their wives off to anything.”

“Yeah, I’d like to see them expect a quiet surrender from me.” Kara flexed her sculpted quadriceps. “I don’t need a defense class to kick a jerk in the balls.”

Haylie closed her eyes and raised her arms over her head. The stretch felt good, releasing some of the tension between her shoulders. The conversation, on the other hand, was one she could live without. Amanda had nailed it. Monsters do exist, and the Alabama state prison system had recently become one monster lighter.

“You’re quiet tonight,” Ashlyn said. “Everything alright?”

She gave her friend a reassuring look. “Just a lot on my mind I guess, with the fundraisers and all.”

“Does that ‘all’ involve a hot attorney?” Amanda loved a budding romance. It didn’t matter if it was hers or someone else’s.

Haylie closed her eyes again and pretended to focus on her stretch. “No, it does not,” she answered as evenly as possible.

Kara reached over and slapped the top of Haylie’s foot. “There goes our ice water. You’d been celibate so long I was counting on you to become a nun and take mercy on the rest of us when we were burning in hell.”

“You’re in a church,” Ashlyn reminded her.

“Nothing God hasn’t heard before.”

The instructor called the class to order and the women helped one another to their feet. Haylie glanced at her friends. They knew less about her father than they knew about the reason she left Blake. She had hidden him well, but like every monster, Carl Monroe would show up when she least expected it. He would choose the time and the place to meet her again, and he would choose carefully. Just like he’d promised. She only hoped the Belles were nowhere around when he did.

Chapter 5

Pictures of animals, veterinary diagrams, and an old poster of Bob Barker begging people to spay or neuter their pets plastered the lobby walls of the Mandido Beach Animal Shelter. Ashlyn locked the doors, bolting them from the inside and led Haylie beyond the reception area to a corridor lined with kennels. The concrete floors had been freshly scrubbed and a motley array of south Alabama strays and discards barked and howled from their kennel runs.

“You need a dog,” Ashlyn said.

“Like I need a hole in the head.” Haylie peered in one run after another. Her heart filled with empathy. Some of the animals had the same pleading look in their eyes as the children she’d worked with over the years. Some were frightened. Some were resigned to their circumstance. Others were defiant, charging the wire doors and barking relentlessly as the two women passed by. None of them deserved to be without a home.

“Where’s the flea bag that bit you? Grady said you put him in quarantine.”

“Not here. Veterinary quarantine. The poor thing has a fractured leg and multiple minor injuries. He was in so much pain, it’s no wonder he came at me. But he’s on the mend. He’ll be released back to the shelter soon.”

Ashlyn would shelter Godzilla if she saw the “poor thing” wandering the streets without a collar and a home.

“So why did you come down here?” Ashlyn stepped out the back door and bolted it behind her. The gravel parking lot was empty of all but the spanking new Mercedes convertible her daddy had given her

for her birthday and a dumpster overflowing with pet food bags and various cardboard boxes.

“You want me to be honest, or come up with a really good lie?” Haylie crunched through the gravel after her friend.

“Avoiding Blake?”

“Yeah. You up for having a drink somewhere?”

“We can drink him away for a couple of hours, or you can just tell him you’re not interested and he’ll probably go away on his own.” Ashlyn reached behind the driver’s seat and pulled out a pair of Jimmy Choo stilettos that she promptly changed out of her day shoes for.

“I tried that.”

“Before or after you slept with him.” Ashlyn stood a good four inches taller than she had been just minutes before.

“I haven’t talked to him at all since he spent the night.”

“No mixed signals there. How many times has he called?”

“A few.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “Maybe several.”

Ashlyn leaned against the open door of her car and gave Haylie a level look. “Maybe you don’t need me to tell you this, but Blake Sheridan doesn’t have to beg for dates. He’s obviously still seriously interested in you, but I wouldn’t expect him to keep up the chase indefinitely. A man’s gotta get tired after ten years.”

“He hasn’t been chasing me for ten years, or even ten days.”

“He hasn’t forgotten about you, anymore than you’ve forgotten about him. Just don’t do anything you’ll regret. I have it on pretty good authority Melanie Marshfield has her sights set on him.”

“Marshfield Chevrolet...” She switched into her commercial announcer’s voice. “The South’s Chevrolet Powerhouse?”

“The one and only, and trust me, Miss Melanie is used to getting exactly what and *who* she wants.”

“No doubt.” Haylie bit her lip and stared off into the dimming sky. “She can have him.”

“Why do you deny how much you’re attracted to that man? What in the world did he do to make you hate him so much?”

“He works to let criminals roam the streets.” Even as she said it Haylie knew she wasn’t being fair.

“Or to keep innocent people from sitting behind bars.” Ashlyn climbed into her car and the convertible’s top slid into its compartment behind the backseat. “He hadn’t even finished law school when you dumped him and banished him from any Belle conversation. So give me an excuse I might actually buy.”

“He bet me.” Haylie bit her lip so hard, she tasted blood. Her heart raced, and she instantly regretted the admission.

“He bet you what?”

“He bet *me*. I was the wager. And he lost.” The burden of shame she’d carried for a decade should have lifted off her shoulders, instead it hung on her like a weighted blanket. “I loved him. I trusted him. I don’t think I can do that again.”

“Maybe we should get that drink,” Ashlyn said. “Get in, I’ll drive.”

* * * *

Haylie kicked her high heels up on the rail of her patio. The warm breeze played in her hair and the scent of the gulf cradled her. Opening up to Ashlyn had been hard. Even tonight, in confession mode, her habit of guarding everything close to her heart had prevented her from sharing the most essential details. She hadn’t admitted how serious her relationship with Blake had become before she broke it off. The Belles didn’t know he had proposed or why a stupid fraternity bet could rip her world apart.

She sipped a Tom Collins, made from the gin and mixer Blake had left at her house. The drink tasted the same as it had in his apartment near the Southern Miss campus so many years ago. On a

Monday night. The date didn't matter now. She wouldn't be recording it in her scrapbook.

She'd made pizza, the only recipe she could follow back then. Their feet had been kicked up on the old footlocker he used for a coffee table and he leaned over to pour a refill from a pitcher of Tom Collins.

"You're a lazy bartender," she joked. "You're supposed to make these by the glass."

"I'm saving my energy for after I get you drunk." He grinned, but his cocky smile wavered and a nervous twitch played at the corner of his mouth. So unlike him. "I love you," he said.

"So you've said." She eyed him playfully. "But I'm too smart to believe you."

He set the pitcher down and pulled her hand into his lap. His fingers traced hers and she could swear she felt him tremble. "I've been thinking Tom Collins is a pretty decent guy. A good man." He shifted on the sofa. "Maybe the best man." He blew a nervous breath between them and dug something out of his pocket. "But I swear this is me talking, not the booze. Tom's just giving me the nerve." He lifted her hand and slid a ring on her finger, a stunning solitaire he later told her had belonged to his grandmother. "Marry me, Haylie."

She had sat too stunned to utter a sound, her eyes as wide as Mobile Bay.

"I'm serious," he said. "Say yes."

Haylie jerked in her chair, jolted back to the present as the devil himself emerged from the shadows and into the soft glow of the patio light. His suit jacket and tie had been removed, and the top two buttons of his white shirt hung open.

"Your car was out front and you didn't answer the doorbell." The breeze picked up Blake's dark hair and blew strands of it across his forehead.

"You should've called." Her voice faltered. The memory had shaken her, but not nearly as much as his presence did.

“I’ve tried that. You don’t answer your phone either, at least not for me.”

“Do you think maybe that means something?”

“I don’t think you hate me as much as you want to.” His pale blue eyes held hers with an intensity she almost had to turn away from.

“And what makes you so sure of that?”

“I wasn’t the only one in your bed the other night, and there wasn’t much hating going on.”

“I told you that was just sex.” Her eyes flitted to the concrete pavilion behind him, the mushroom and tan colored structure that blocked what would have been her million dollar view of the gulf.

“That was more than sex even for me, sweetheart.”

Heat curled in her womb and her breath quickened. She stood and reached for the sliding glass door behind her. “I’ve got work to do.”

He grabbed the door before she could close it between them. “I want to know you. Tell me about what you do. Kara said you’re more than just an advocate for young adults who leave the foster care system. She said you’re the president of a foundation.”

“When they turn eighteen and the government throws them out on their asses, I try to make sure they have somewhere to go for basic necessities and life skills,” she said. “Now you know all about me. Goodnight, Blake.” She tugged the door, but he held firm. Her heart pounded faster. If she didn’t convince him to leave now, she’d wake up next to him again in the morning, and that was not a habit she wanted to fall into.

“I got an email about an A.L.F.A.A. luncheon next week. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“The luncheon, I know everything about. How you got the email, I have no idea. I didn’t invite you.”

“The Rotary Club invited me,” he said. “Or rather the club was invited, and I’m a member, so technically I guess you did invite me.”

She closed her eyes. “I’m trying to educate some of our local business leaders so that we can start to procure their involvement.

Grady's speaking to provide them with a personal perspective of how the foundation can benefit the community."

"Sounds worthwhile. Unfortunately," Blake said, "I won't be able to attend. I'm scheduled to be in court."

"Defending another criminal? How honorable of you." She jerked the door again, harder this time, but it barely budged.

"I represent individuals in court. I don't decide their innocence, or lack thereof, and I do find honor in what I do. But that's not the real issue between us. You're looking for excuses."

"We're different kinds of people, Blake. We're on different sides of the fence."

"What? You do good, and I don't?"

"I respect people enough not to treat them like objects I can win or lose in a game of darts," she said. "And don't try to tell me you've changed. You haven't."

He blew a heavy breath between them. "Give me an example of how we're different," he said. "Truly different."

"I don't go up to someone I haven't seen in ten years and say I want to take them to bed."

"Maybe you should." The devil leapt to his eyes, as a grin spread across his face. "You might get what you wanted more often."

She narrowed her eyes at him and tried not to let her gaze dip to the smooth skin exposed by his gaping collar. Arguing with him stirred something inside her, scrambled her emotions even more than they already were.

"Say it now," he prompted her with a devilish grin. "You do want to me in your bed, don't you?"

"No, I don't." She dropped her eyes, and there between two starched folds of white cotton, a wedge of tan, delicious man meat made her mouth water, and there was a lot more where that came from.

"Not even if I talk a little dirty to you?" He took a step toward her. "Tell you how I want to pull you on top of me and feel you all hot and

wet around me. Tell you how hard you make me, how sweet you taste in my mouth.” He reached for a strand of hair that hung along her cheek. “What if I told you I wanted to hold onto your perfect ass and sink so far into you neither of us can breathe?” He moved closer, so close his breath warmed her lips. And she could see the flecks of silver shimmer in the blue of his eyes. “We’re good together, Hay. You know how good we are.”

She swallowed the desire that rose in her throat.

“Be honest with yourself,” he said, his finger caressing her cheek. “What do you want right this second?”

“So what if I want to sleep with you, it doesn’t mean I’m going to do it.

His mouth met hers with a fever, and every ounce of control she had been determined to muster, slid out of her on a wet wave of heat.

God, he was Satan incarnate and she couldn’t get enough of him. He walked her backward across the living room, his mouth never leaving hers, and stopped outside her bedroom door to back her against the wall.

Blake could almost feel himself tumble head over heels into her, and willed her to follow him, to put the past behind them and to just ride this consuming attraction to wherever it might lead. He’d gotten plenty of ass in his life without putting a bit of his heart on the line. But Haylie owned him. She always had.

Her body wound around his. She lifted her leg, pressing her heel into his lower back. His dick strained to get inside her. His hips responded, pumping against hers, moving as close to her as their clothing would allow.

She whimpered, arching her breasts into his chest and clasping his shoulders. Her head tilted back, inviting him to taste the heated pulse of her neck as he worked the buttons of her blouse until it hung loose. He pressed his tongue to the pale pink patches of lace that covered her breasts then pinched the clasp centered between them. The cups of her bra fell away. Her breasts swayed slightly, pushing his dick harder.

Her soft flesh filled his hand, and sent a tremor rocketing through his balls that left him incapable of thinking beyond the moment, of worrying for another second that he was pushing for too much too fast. That she didn't want him as much as he wanted her.

He backed away, just enough to drag her blouse and bra over her shoulders and drop them to the floor. Her shaky breath and the step that brought her closer to him answered any reservations he might have had. She didn't want any distance between them, and knowing that lodged a knot in his throat he had to swallow back down.

Her mouth covered his as she tugged his shirt from the waistband of his pants and worked one button after the other until his bare chest was flush with the softness of hers.

Any man would fall to his knees for her, and he'd always known how lucky he'd been when she was his, when he had her heart and her body to call his own. She found the zipper hidden in the fabric on her hip and slid it down, letting her skirt fall in a puddle at her high-heeled feet. A swatch of pale pink lace was the only thing standing between him and heaven. He eased her panties down her thighs and pulled a condom from his pocket before he reached for his belt.

She plucked the foil package from him and ripped it open with trembling fingers. He wasn't sure if she shook from fear or restraint, either way his heart thumped hard. She wanted him. He stepped out of his pants and backed her to the wall.

With a stroke that nearly leveled him, she rolled the latex onto his cock. His fingers wove with hers and he raised her arms, pinning them gently above her head.

He'd spent ten years believing he'd never find this connection again. And he wasn't fool enough to think he would get her out of his system tonight, or any other night. If anything, the more he had her, the more he'd want her. She had notched a space deep inside him where no one else would ever fit.

His eyes met hers and for a split second he thought he saw a familiar connection. But too quickly, she let her lids fall shut.

He tugged her hair, pulling her head back and gently forcing her to look him in the eye again. “Do you know what you do to me?”

A rosy flush covered her chest and her nipples stroked his chest with every fall of her breath. He lowered himself to his knees and kissed her hip. His tongue swelled with hunger. He gripped her ass, and swallowed hard to get control before he pulled her down to the floor and ended this sweet torture for both of them. He traced the faint line of her hip bone with his tongue and sucked gently on the softer skin below her abdomen. She squirmed against the wall, tilting her hips, offering him more of her.

Short gasps shot from her lips and she buried her fingers in his hair.

He raised one of her thighs to his shoulder. Using her back against the wall for leverage, he buried his face in her pussy teasing her with his tongue, grazing her with his teeth. Short, high-pitched moans erupted above him. She gripped his hair harder and writhed against him.

He pulled back and looked her in the eye. “Tell me you want me or I’ll stop right now.”

She shook her head. “Don’t stop.”

“Tell me.” He brought one hand between her legs and dipped his fingertips into her wetness before entering her just enough to massage the sensitive nerves at her entrance. “Tell me you want me. You can’t pretend you don’t.” He slipped one finger deep inside. She cried out, and tightened around him, angling her hips for more. He inserted another finger and rocked his wrist, pushing deeper, withdrawing almost completely before pushing deeper still. “If you don’t say it right now, I’m going to walk out of here and never come back.”

Her body pulsed around his fingers. “I want you. Please. I want you so much.”

The pain in her eyes almost doubled him over as he helped her settle her legs on the floor. It killed her to admit the truth about him,

and he must have been some kind of ass to ever tear her apart that way.

Her ankles wobbled slightly in the high heels still strapped to her feet, but he held her steady as he stood, then took her face in his hands. "I'm sorry, honey. I'm so sorry I hurt you." He lifted her legs and settled them around his waist.

Haylie could barely breathe. The sincerity in his eyes clenched her heart and the tenderness of his kiss brought tears to her eyes. Swamped her with more emotion than she thought she'd ever feel again, she held onto his shoulders for dear life. He entered her, cautiously at first, and then with the strength and intent of an ox. She felt weightless, supported between one wall of sheetrock and another of muscle, bone, and heated flesh. He knew exactly what she needed, driving deeper as she threw her head back and gasped for air. Despite the softness she'd seen in his eyes, there was nothing gentle about the way he took her. His words were explicit, sexual, not packed with promises she didn't want to hear, just full of what she he could give her right then, in that moment.

"Oh my God," she cried as she fisted around him and her body exploded in a series of spasms. She let loose a scream that would wake the dead, and poor old Mr. Dodson, next door. Sweat trailed between her breasts, probably from Blake, although both their bodies glistened from exertion. He slowed, drove the next handful of strokes deep, and with a final push slapped both palms to the wall as his body erupted and his muscles quivered. His heart pounded beneath her hands and a smile snaked across his face.

"Remind me to drop by more often." He massaged her breast and planted kisses along the side of her face.

Haylie lowered one leg feeling for the carpet with the tip of her toe. Before she could set her foot down, he scooped an arm around her waist and carried her to bed. In the dark room, he removed her shoes, stopping to kiss each ankle before climbing into bed next to her. Beneath the sheets, he traced her ribs with his fingertips and

pressed his lips to her shoulder. The loving tenderness settled deep in her chest and almost brought more tears to her eyes. Everything about his body next to hers felt right. She rolled into his arms and buried her face in his chest. She just wanted to hold onto this moment before it faded away and reality set in.

The phone next to her bed shrilled.

“That’s not me. You’d better answer it,” he said.

She held him close for a long minute before reaching for the handset. “Hello?”

“Haylie?” Maureen Monroe’s voice strained with an edge Haylie recognized immediately.

She moved further away from Blake, taking the sheet with her. “Mom, what’s wrong?”

“Your father ...”

“I don’t want to talk about him.” A tremor settled in Haylie’s arm. “I’ll call you later.”

“Wait!” Maureen’s raised voice reached her daughter’s ears even as the phone traveled the short distance back to the nightstand. “Your father wants to see you.”

Haylie dropped the phone into the cradle before she could hear another word. Her hands trembled and she closed her eyes as Blake’s hand circled her waist. He pulled her back against his chest and wrapped her in his arms.

She stiffened against him, knowing he wouldn’t let this drop without pushing for an explanation. “You better leave,” she said. The tremor that took her originated so deep in her core, it threatened to shake her apart at the seams.

“Talk to me. Tell me what that man did to you.” His voice vibrated close to her ear. His unyielding hold on her tightened. “You can trust me, honey.”

She didn’t answer. He’d heard her mother’s shrill voice, and he knew she refused to discuss her father. Years ago, he had tried to convince her to talk to him about what made her write Carl Monroe

out of her life forever. That wasn't going to happen. Not then. Not now.

"Things don't go away because you ignore them," Blake said.

She crossed her arms over her breasts and rubbed the chill bumps from her arms. "Please just go."

Outside, a car door slammed shut in the parking lot, and the breeze off the gulf clacked the vertical blinds that hung alongside the slider.

He buried his lips in her hair. "Fine. Don't talk to me, but I'm not going anywhere. Except to lock the doors."

After he locked the house, he settled into her bed again and pulled her close. "If I really thought you wanted me to leave, I would." His broad hand cupped her neck. "Whatever your father or anyone else has ever done to hurt you, I wouldn't do it. Not intentionally. And I think you know that about me."

He kissed her goodnight, then rolled over and took more than his half of the covers with him.

She stared at the ceiling. A devil lay in her bed. Carl Monroe lurked God knows where. And she knew whose side her mother was on without having to hear it again with Blake lying next to her.

She brushed Blake's shoulder with the back of fingers and snuggled into the warmth of his body. She couldn't deny how much safer she felt tucked in next to him. Not that she would keep him around to ward off fear of her father, or for any other reason. But for tonight, maybe it wasn't so bad to have him there.

* * * *

Haylie came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel and found Blake sipping coffee at the kitchen counter, his suit jacket folded over the back of a barstool and the paper open in front of him.

"I've got to get to the office," he said. "I left some coffee for you." His stool scraped the floor as he folded the paper and stood.

“You’re not going to shower?”

He caught her bottom lip in his teeth and nibbled gently. “Thanks for the toothbrush. I’ll hit the gym at lunch, and get cleaned up then. This morning I’m going to let myself be distracted by the smell of you all over me.”

“Animal,” she said as warmth wound like a vine through her chest and sprouted roots in her belly so deep she knew she’d never dig it out.

“Just the way you like it.” He wrapped her in a bear hug and set her on the counter, positioning himself between her thighs.

She locked her ankles against the back of his thighs and stared into the most beautiful blue eyes she’d ever seen.

“If you don’t answer my calls,” he said. “I’ll think you just want me to come over.”

He had pushed his way back into her life, but whose fault was that? Going to bed with him and curling around him like kudzu the morning after only left him with one impression.

He picked his jacket off the barstool and motioned toward the paper. “There’s an article on page three about sex offenders. Your dad’s mentioned.”

Haylie froze.

“I guess you know he’s out,” he said.

“I don’t have a dad.” She adjusted her towel and jumped to the floor. “You’d better go. Traffic from out here will be hell in a few minutes.”

“Navigating my own streets? Should be fun.” He planted another quick kiss on her forehead before he left.

Haylie’s stomach muscles clenched so tight they hurt. Carl Monroe had made the paper. Everyone who didn’t already know what kind of monster had created her would know now.

* * * *

Grady reached for the last piece of pizza in the box. "Want to split it?"

"It's yours." Haylie carried her plate to the sink and tossed a half-eaten slice into the trash. The pizza landed on the morning paper smearing cheese and pepperoni grease across the headlines.

"Have you seen the figurine I keep in my room?" She braced herself for his answer. If he hadn't seen it, someone else had been in the house. If he'd taken it for drug money... She stopped before she let her thoughts wander that far. Grady wasn't a thief.

Grady dug his cell phone out of his jeans and flipped it open, halting a rap rhythm mid-beat. "Talk to me. Alright. Seven o'clock." He clapped the phone closed without a goodbye.

"Plans tonight?"

"Just gotta run out for a minute. And I don't ever go in your room. Is that figurine thing missing or something?" He shoved the wedge of pizza in his mouth and closed down on a bite that could have choked a horse.

"I'm sure it'll show up. Ashlyn said you've been helping out down at the shelter."

His phone rang again. He answered it with the same no nonsense manner, talking around the pizza in his mouth, and ended the call in a matter of seconds. He slugged back a long pull of Pepsi. "The dogs don't get played with enough."

"When do you get your final grades?"

"English, History and Biology will be posted tomorrow. I have to wait until next week for Calculus."

"Speaking of next week, have you thought about what you're going to say at the luncheon?" His behavior was off. She couldn't put her finger on anything other than the sudden secretive and unending phone calls, but something was definitely going on.

"You just want me to talk about myself, right? Shouldn't be a problem."

“When they see you. How much you’ve accomplished. How hard you’ve worked despite all the curves you’ve been thrown. They’re going to see how important this foundation is.” Haylie plopped down on the sofa and nudged his leg with her foot. “You’re like the poster child for possibilities and you could charm the pants off a cocker spaniel.”

His phone rang again. “I better run,” he said. “Thanks for the grub.”

Haylie watched him make his way toward the door. He may have an abundance of charm, but he sure wasn’t wasting any on her tonight. “You’re coming back here later?”

“Probably.” He closed the door behind him without looking back.

She cleaned up the pizza box and soda cans and had made it halfway to the kitchen with an armful of trash when her doorbell chimed. She shuffled the pizza box over to her hip and reached for the door, but an intuitive tingle zipped down her spine. She pressed her eye to the peephole and jumped away as if she’d been struck by a diamondback.

Her lungs burned, blood roared through her ears, and a Pepsi can balanced on the pizza box rolled off and clattered to the floor. His hair had gone gray and lines carved his face, but she’d recognize her father anywhere.

“I know you’re in there, Haylie. Open the door.”

She glanced over her shoulder at the sliders, open to let the breeze in.

“Leave or I’ll call the police,” she said, sliding the deadbolt on her front door into place.

“Don’t be like that, Sunshine.”

She trembled so hard the other Pepsi can slapped the floor and rolled across the tile. Slowly, she backed away from the door, put the pizza box down on the coffee table and bolted toward the sliders, to lock them.

She ran back and grabbed the phone off the kitchen counter. “If you’re not gone in three seconds, I’m dialing 911!”

“What the hell for?” He slapped his palms against the door, and she jumped back as if he’d struck her. “I ain’t ever laid a hand on you. You know that. And this bullshit act of yours is tired.”

Haylie’s fingers shook as she keyed the phone on. The terms of his probation were meant to protect her, but she’d been a fool to think for a second a judge order would keep Carl Monroe from doing anything he wanted to do.

“I just want to talk to you, Sunshine. I’m your daddy. You can’t pretend I ain’t. And you owe me!”

The tone sang out as she pressed the nine. Her finger hovered over the one and she blinked back the tears that stung her eyes.

“God damnit, Haylie. Don’t you try and throw me back in jail again. I done lost seventeen years of my life because of you.”

“Go away! Or I swear to God...”

“You were gonna do it anyhow!” he yelled. “Nobody hurt you!”

Haylie pressed the one, as tears burned a trail down her cheeks and she fought to pull air into her lungs.

“God damnit open the door!”

“Rot in jail you bastard!”

“Don’t do this to your mama! You want to tear her up again?”

He knew her too well. He knew the guilt she carried and how her mother blamed her for ripping their family apart. Haylie threw the phone to the floor and hammered her fists against the door. “I hate you! Get away from me or I swear—”

“We ain’t through.” The door jarred as he made contact with it again. “You hear me? I promised your mama this family would be together when I got out. And by God, you’re going to do your part. You hear me, Haylie? You better think hard before you fuck with me again.” The door shook, but silence followed.

She sank to the floor and buried her face in her knees until enough minutes ticked by that she dared to believe he was gone. For now.

Chapter 6

Haylie crisscrossed the dining area of the Mandido Yacht and Country Club, winding around the tables adjusting centerpieces, double-checking place cards, anything to kill the final agonizing minutes before the luncheon guests arrived. Finally at a loss for a single thing to do, she stood in the center of the room.

Beyond the plate glass windows, impressive boats bobbed at the dock. Glasses clinked in the sunken bar a level below the dining room, and the pianist played the first notes of his set. She checked her cell again. No missed calls. Not a word yet from Grady.

Several dark suits stepped through the lobby doors and made their way toward the bar. Her heart hiccupped as a man Blake's height with dark hair turned in her direction. Disappointment rose like a balloon in her chest. Blake wasn't coming. He had to be in court.

He'd only called once all week and said he was tied up with a case that would probably keep him busy until the weekend. His excuse might be feasible, but her gut told her something else had waylaid his pursuit. The story about her father in the paper would be enough to keep any man away.

She wasn't holding her breath for Blake to call. Like Ashlyn had said, plenty of women would jump at the chance to climb in his bed. He didn't need someone from a family like hers.

The maitre d' led a group of cocktail laden, well-heeled gentlemen to their seats, and Haylie made her rounds, welcoming everyone individually. As the room filled, conversation buzzed and waiters delivered appetizers and drink orders. She checked her cell again, still no call from Grady.

She slipped through the doors to the kitchen and tried calling him again. His phone went straight to voicemail. She took her place near the front of the room, next to the projector screen and kept an eye on the door, expecting him to make his entrance any second, laughing because he'd made her sweat. He hadn't been thrilled about speaking today, but he wouldn't just blow the foundation off. Of all people, he understood the need for what A.L.F.A.A. offered.

Seats filled and servers brought out entrées. If the presentation didn't begin, she would lose half her audience before she had a chance to ask them for support. With or without Grady, the show had to go on.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Haylie spoke directly into the microphone making eye contact with key individuals and plastering a smile on her face. "Thank you all for coming and for your support of A.L.F.A.A." After a brief opening, she launched the slideshow she had prepared and checked her phone. Still no word from Grady.

The final slide clicked into place, the music ended, and Haylie took the microphone again. "To date the foundation has assisted one hundred and fifty young adults start off on the right foot, and with continued support from generous people like you, we can help so many more."

"How long before you expect these people to pull themselves up by the bootstraps and get their asses in gear?" Ed Marshfield swirled the amber bourbon in his glass and sat back with a sip as he waited for Haylie's answer and the smattering of chuckles to die down.

"A.L.F.A.A. offers services for individuals age eighteen to twenty-one. However, we do extend those services for clients who choose to pursue higher education. As long as they are enrolled in school full-time, they qualify for the benefits of the foundation." She paused to give him her most flattering smile. "There are countless hardships that could so easily deter a driven and capable individual from reaching education and career goals. For instance, Mr. Marshfield, as I'm sure you are aware, automobiles are one of life's basic necessities here on

our beautiful coast. Buses don't run everywhere we need them to go. Most of us couldn't depend on public transportation if we needed to. Wouldn't you agree?"

Ed Marshfield cleared his throat and downed another sip of his drink.

"How many used cars on your lot end up at auction for pennies on the dollar because they're taking up more real estate than they're worth?" She raised her brows for effect. "The tax benefits of donating those cars would probably outweigh the price you get from the brokers, wouldn't it?"

He cleared his throat, and nodded slowly. "They might."

She glanced around the room, ready to let the auto czar off the hook and caught Blake's eye and smile. He leaned against a marble column in the back of the room, looking more gorgeous than a devil had a right to.

She shifted back to her audience as heat crept up her neck and in the crevices beneath her arms. "There are ways everyone in this room can make a difference with a donation of time, or services, or...in Mr. Gentry's case...money." She added a wink to emphasize the playfulness of her suggestion. "Lots and lots of money." She waited for the polite laughter to fade. "Two years from now, it is my goal that A.L.F.A.A. will gain most of its funding through the State, but at present the only hope is in our hands. Together we can turn struggles into triumphs, dreams into realities, and give hundreds of overburdened individuals a real chance at starting careers for themselves that will bring even more prosperity and pride to this wonderful state we call home. Thank you all for your time."

She stepped away from the microphone as applause and conversation erupted in the room. She hadn't seen Blake make his way toward her, but before she had taken more than a step he caught her by the elbow and led her down an aisle between the tables. "Nice arm twisting on Marshfield. I don't think he knows what hit him yet."

“Maybe you can put in a good word with his daughter for me.” She kept her voice low and a soft smile planted on her lips.

Blake’s eyes danced. “Do I sense a little jealousy?”

“Your sensors are screwed. I’m serious. I need all the help I can get. If daddy’s princess puts a bug in his ear, maybe he’ll actually send some of those cars over.” His sensors weren’t nearly as screwed as she claimed, but the rest of what she said was true. She did need all the help she could get and providing transportation for her clients would take a huge burden off of them.

Blake squeezed her arm gently. “There’s no telling what I’d have to do to get Melanie to agree to that.”

She stopped near the first table she reached and turned to him. “Do whatever it takes.”

A broad smile carved his face. “Are you pimping me out?”

“If you’re sleeping with her anyway, it shouldn’t put you out any.” She paused to smile at Audra Denson, just beyond Blake’s elbow.

“Green’s a good color on you,” he said with a laugh and then turned across the aisle to shake Ed Marshfield’s hand. “Ed. Good to see you. Haylie had a great idea with the cars, don’t you think?”

“I wouldn’t have thought of it. Might be easier to write a check.” Ed’s laughter grumbled low in his chest and vibrated his large frame.

“Might as well do both. You can’t let Gentry outdo you. He already tore you up on the course. I still don’t know how he got a birdie on seventeen. You sure he didn’t drop that ball off before we got there?”

Haylie answered a question for Audra, and let Blake handle Ed Marshfield. He obviously knew how to put the squeeze on even better than she did. She didn’t like knowing he golfed with Melanie Marshfield’s father, but now wasn’t the time to let her emotions get in the way of business. Especially, since Grady hadn’t shown up to serve as a shining example of potential and achievement.

“Where the hell’s Grady?” Blake whispered in her ear. She turned to see Ed Marshfield engaged in a raucous conversation with Charles Gentry and a handful of contemporaries.

She shrugged. “Something must’ve come up.”

“He didn’t show? No excuses? No phone call?”

“I’m sure he had a good reason.” She hoped he had a good reason. This rash of irresponsibility from Grady had her concerned, but she wanted to give him the benefit of doubt. “I thought you were in court today.”

“I persuaded the judge to see things my way a little more easily than I expected.” He guided her by the elbow toward the bar. “Why don’t we say goodbye to all these fine folks, and I’ll take you to lunch?”

Her heart raced at his touch, but lunch wouldn’t stop with lunch, and if she didn’t want him in her heart, she had to keep him out of her bed. “Thanks for what you did with Ed Marshfield, but I can’t.”

“Don’t thank me. I went on the A.L.F.A.A. website, and I happen to think you’re heading up a really good cause. I’m glad to do what I can, including donations of money, services and possibly an internship or entry-level job if any of your clients are interested in law.” He reached for her hand and laced his fingers with hers. “Now, you really can’t have lunch with me, or you’re blowing me off?”

His touch softened her reserve, but her eye caught a familiar figure seated at the bar. Carl Monroe grinned at her over the rim of his glass and tossed back a shot of whiskey.

Blake caught her as she stumbled, one hand firm in the curve of her back the other on her waist. “Honey? Are you ok?”

She nodded and regained her footing.

“You look like you just saw a ghost.” He jerked his head to the bar, but her father had already made his way to the door. Haylie gripped Blake’s arm for support and reassured him she was fine.

She could have her father arrested for violation of probation, but not without having security detain him, and she wouldn’t risk having

her luncheon guests witness any altercation. But of course, Carl Monroe had banked on that.

* * * *

“I got you a present!” Grady’s voice cut through the silence of Haylie’s condo as the front door swung open. He held a large brown paper sack in both hands with what looked to be a bag of pet food sticking out of the top.

“I missed you at the luncheon.” She stirred fresh clams into a gently bubbling cream sauce and tapped the wooden spoon on the side of the sauté pan.

“Oh shit. Was that today?” He set the sack down on the kitchen counter and pilfered a slice of cucumber off the top of the salad.

“You didn’t forget, Grady.” She reached for a bunch of fresh parsley and her kitchen shears. “Your mind’s a steel trap. You don’t forget anything. First soccer with the kids and now this?”

She understood his insecurities, his need to be selfish, his issues with trust. She knew one wrong word could send him flying, and there would be no guarantee he’d come back. She understood Grady because they were one and the same. But he needed to be held accountable.

His eyes darted away from hers. “Wait right there. I brought you something. You’re gonna love it.” He snagged another cucumber slice and ran out the door.

She concentrated on the herbs that fell like confetti into the clam sauce and debated how far to push him for an explanation. A tiny part of her was glad he hadn’t spent a single second in the same room as her father, but whatever had him going so hard against his grain worried her half to death.

Heavy, excited breaths preceded the flurry of legs, black fur that pulled Grady through the open doorway. Grady held the leash, but it was obvious who was leading whom. The dog romped toward the

smell of food, nails clicking on the kitchen tile and drool dripping from its flapping tongue.

Haylie jumped back, and grabbed the wooden spoon to defend herself. Stopped by the leash, the overactive beast reared on his hind legs in an attempt to get to her or the clam sauce, she wasn't sure which.

"He thinks you smell good." Grady laughed. "Down boy. Sit." The dog settled down on the floor and turned back to lick one of his rear legs where a bandage wound around the thin limb. "Stop that." Grady distracted the animal with a rub on the head. "You mess with that bandage and you'll be walking around with that dumb looking plastic cone around your neck."

The dog licked Grady's hand and thumped his tail against the floor.

"The clams!" Haylie turned off the flame below the sauce and gave the dish a stir. The dog belly-crawled over to her and sniffed at her bare toes. She watched warily then jumped as a sloppy pink tongue came down on the top of her foot.

"Where did you find this drool machine?" she asked.

"He's the one that bit Ashlyn." Grady bent to stroke the dog along its back. "As of today he's a free man. Sprung from the solitary confinement of quarantine."

"He acts like he's known you for years."

"We spent all day getting to know one another." He inclined his head toward the animal. "Pet him."

"He bites."

"No he doesn't. He was hurt and hungry and scared. Everyone at the vet's office fell in love with him."

The dog looked up at Haylie with the skin above his eyes pushed into a pleading pout.

"Look at that face." Grady laughed. "Man, he's got the moves. He had girls all over him at the park with that."

Haylie lost the will to resist and dropped to her knees. She extended her hand slowly and cringed as her fingers met with a dripping tongue bath. "He looks like he got in a fight with a lawn mower." Multiple shaved areas along the dog's body revealed injuries and sometimes stitches on the bared skin.

"He was messed up pretty bad," Grady told her. "The vet thinks somebody abused him, but he still likes people too much to have been abused by every owner he's had. Besides, all the injuries look pretty new. And it's a good thing we found him when we did. He wouldn't have made it long out on his own like that."

"When do you have to take him back?"

Grady looked at her like she'd lost her mind. "I'm not taking him back. He's yours."

She sat back on her heels and scooted away. "Oh no. I'm not taking in this dog. Or any other dog."

The dog eased forward, sliding himself along the floor, and peering up at her with his pleading eyes.

"My God! He does that on purpose," she said.

Grady laughed. "He's no dummy. The boy smells food and sees a pretty lady. What do you expect him to do? Let all that good stuff get away?"

She looked down at the animal spread like a bearskin rug on her kitchen floor and remembered all those animals at the shelter. They deserved homes as much as any other dog. "I never really wanted a dog."

"He needs you." Grady stroked his hand along the dog's back. "And you know you want him."

"Talking about me again?" All three heads in the kitchen turned to the sound of Blake's voice in the open doorway. He had a bottle of wine in his hand. "Who's this?" he said.

"Lucifer." Haylie stood up and washed her hands in the sink. "Lucy for short."

"A boy named Lucy?" Grady said. "That's animal cruelty!"

“It’s payback,” she told him, “for that look that’s going to have me giving into his every whim.”

“Another devil, huh?” Blake scratched Lucy behind the ear then turned his attention on Haylie. “You wouldn’t have lunch with me, so I thought I’d try dinner.”

“And you expected me to cook?” She glanced to the bottle of wine he’d set on the counter. He’d changed clothes after work and looked good enough to eat in the soft polo and khakis he wore. Lucy definitely wasn’t the only devil in the kitchen right now.

“Looks like you already cooked,” he said with a grin. “What are we having?”

“Crap!” She hurried back to the stove. “The linguini’s stuck together and the sauce is lumpy.”

“Warm up’s my specialty,” he said, walking around Lucy to wash his hands in the sink. “If you open the wine, I’ll take it from here.”

“Have you ever taken no for an answer?”

He pulled her close and pressed a soft kiss to her lips that rocketed to her toes and left her weak in the knees. She melted into the warmth of his body and the embrace of his arms. “I like it when you say yes so much better.” He squeezed her waist and gave her a wink. “If you want to kick me out after dinner I’ll go, but be warned I’ve got plans that include you begging me to stay.”

* * * *

Blake lay with his arm slung around her waist, his chest warm against her back, and his hand curled on the bed next to her. She grazed her fingertips over the pads of his fingers where his skin was rough enough to send chills of friction when he touched her, but smooth enough to deliver the most delicious pleasure she’d ever encountered.

Tonight, he had seemed particularly attuned to her needs, treating her as if she was the most precious thing he’d ever held in his hands.

He'd undressed her slowly, caressing her skin, searching her eyes. At first this ultra-sensitive, unhurried approach, so different from what she'd come to expect from him, threw her. But when he finally kissed her all the unfettered physicality came rushing to the surface and consumed them both. She could love him again. If she let herself.

But her biggest fear sat like an elephant between where they were and where this might lead. If he ever found out the truth about her, would he still look at her the way he had tonight? How could he? And if she opened her heart to him, how could she survive losing him again?

His lips came down on her shoulder as he cupped her breast in his hand. A low groan vibrated against her skin and sent a flood of need straight to her core. He massaged her hip, and moved slowly down her thigh, lifting himself on one elbow. Her eyes met his in the darkness and she knew without question the fire in him burned as fiercely as ever. The power of their connection still left her breathless, fueled a response in the deepest caverns of her soul.

He shifted closer. His fingers trailed her lower thigh, then he raised her leg, opening her to him. With his chest pressed to her back, he entered her. No warm up, no foreplay, just an immediate claim of what he wanted. And she wanted it too, crying out in pleasure with every thrust that sent him deeper into her.

She met him stroke for stroke and reached back to squeeze his ass as the rhythm and angle conspired to take her beyond control. She led the way, but not by much and they came together, a tangle of arms and legs clinging to one another as they went.

As she lay panting beneath him, her cheek pressed into the mattress, she wanted nothing more than to roll over into his arms and kiss him for the rest of her life. But when her breath settled, she squirmed away and buried her face in the pillow. She couldn't allow him in her bed like this and keep him out of her heart. Every time they made love she fell for him a little more. She couldn't not love him. She didn't know how.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, wrapping his leg over hers and pulling her back. Before she could summon the courage to tell him the truth or come up with a plausible lie, the phone rang. He groaned. “Have you got that thing programmed for coitus interruptus?”

Her head jerked toward the clock. “Oh my God,” she whispered, struggling to wiggle free of his weight. No call that came at two-thirty in the morning was good. Inches from the phone, she jerked her hand to a stop. If it wasn’t an emergency, it would be her father.

“You want me to get it?” he asked as the phone rang again.

She grabbed the phone before he could. “Hello?”

A digital voice announced that the call originated from the county jail. She reached to hang up relieved it had to be a wrong number, but when the recording broke for a personally spoken identification. She froze.

“Grady!”

Blake moved off her completely and held himself on his elbow. After a brief pause, Grady came on the line.

“Are you ok?”

“I got arrested.” Shame weighted his words.

“I’m on my way. I’ll be right there.” Her mind spun. It had to be a mistake, something they could settle quickly. She just had to get to him and bring him back home.

“What’s the charge?” Blake said before Haylie could end the call.

She repeated the question to Grady and waited while he summoned the courage to tell her he’d gotten pulled over for speeding and the officer brought a K9 to search the car. They found enough marijuana and suspicious paraphernalia to charge him with possession with the intent to distribute.

She relayed the charges to Blake. He ran his hand through his hair. “Tell him not to say a word until I get there.”

Haylie hung up the phone and pulled on the clothes Blake had removed from her earlier.

Blake snaked his pants leg from beneath her foot. "I guess that explains all those phone calls he got during dinner."

She didn't respond. Grady might not have been himself lately, and he may have done something stupid, but he wasn't a criminal. There had to be a mistake.

Chapter 7

On the concrete steps leading from the county jail, Haylie sat down, covered her face with her hands and dropped her head between her knees. Grady had admitted having everything the officer claimed to find in his car. Blake had talked to him, but she hadn't been allowed in to see him.

Blake knelt beside her, his hand warm on her back. He tilted her face, forcing her to look at him. "We'll take care of this."

"He shouldn't be here. He counted on me, and..." Her voice was husky with tears and pain ripped at her heart.

"And what?"

"I let him down."

"Don't you think Grady knows how much he owes you? You haven't let him down. You're the only one he can count on not to let him down."

She shook her head as tears welled in her eyes blurring the street lights and Blake's handsome face. "He doesn't owe me anything."

"He owes you a hell of a lot more than you hold him accountable for. He mooches around on your couch, runs through your pantry like a regiment of roaches, and leaves his garbage all over your house. He makes promises he doesn't keep. He gets to have you in his corner, but you don't expect anything in return. He let you down. Not the other way around."

"He's still young, still figuring things out."

"You're right. And this will be a hard lesson learned. But we'll help him through it."

"Can you recommend an attorney for his defense?"

His brow creased as if he wasn't sure he'd heard her. "I'll defend him. Pro bono."

"You don't have to do that."

"Grady's family to you. I'll help anyway I can." He took a deep breath. "What do I have to do to prove how much I care about you?"

"This has nothing to do with us."

"Maybe not. But tell me you're not fighting tooth and nail to keep from falling in love with me again. You won't let yourself get that close to me, will you?"

She couldn't look him in the eye. "No. I won't."

"Why? Because of a stupid, thoughtless, disrespectful joke that went too far ten years ago? There's more to it than that, and maybe I could understand if you'd tell me what's going on it that head of yours. You know you can trust me. So this isn't about me, is it?"

"Why are you pushing this?"

"Because you can't avoid facing your past anymore. I'm not going to let you."

Haylie stood up and brushed her hands on her jeans. The old familiar shell closed around her heart, shutting out the pain, shutting out everything and everyone who had the power to break her. "There is nothing about my past that bears repeating. I can't love you, and I've tried to tell you that since you barged back into my life."

"So you want me out of your life again?"

She stiffened and turned away.

"Honey, don't," he said. "Don't pretend you don't still care about us, about me."

She tried to hide the tremor of her chin. "I'm sleeping with you. What else do you want?"

"I want more than that."

She wiped the tears from her cheek. If Blake ever found out why his bet had hurt her so much, could she trust him to love her then? She couldn't trust anyone that much. "How are you going to get Grady out of this God awful place?"

“Damn it, Haylie! You can’t just refuse to talk about us. You can’t ignore problems and make them go away.”

“I can’t worry about us right now. There’s a kid sitting behind bars, and it’s my job to protect him.”

“He did the crime. Maybe a night in the slammer will put enough of a scare in him that he won’t do it again.”

“Overnight! Are you out of your mind? That’s too long!”

“I’ve done ten years. How long’s too long for me?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. “You’re not in jail. I never confined you to anything. I walked away because I wasn’t willing to be a victim of yours or anyone else’s.”

“Victim? You think you’re a victim?” He shook his head. “Come on, Haylie. You’re too proud to be anybody’s victim. You don’t give anyone a chance to hurt you. One hint that they might and you push them out of your life.”

“You don’t know shit!”

“Maybe I’d know more if you’d trust me enough to tell me.”

“I trusted you!” Her fists shook with pent up rage. Rage that went deeper than anything Blake had a hand in. He had no idea how hard it had been to trust him. How much she had loved him to make herself that vulnerable again.

“What happened with your father? You never trusted me enough to tell me that. You never trusted me with anything but your body.”

“And you took advantage of that!”

“Haylie, it was a joke! How many times do I have to tell you it was a sick-ass joke concocted over a keg and pissing contest? I never would have let anybody lay their hands on you. You were mine. You were going to be my wife, and I’ve never wanted anything more in my life.”

She swallowed the lump that lodged in her throat.

His voice softened. “You loved me. You might even love me now. Don’t pretend you can’t.”

“When can you get Grady out of here?”

He threw his arms up in exasperation. "The past won't go away just because you refuse to talk about it. Just say it Haylie. Tell me what that man did to you. Did he molest you?"

"I want Grady out of jail. Now!"

"You're the most stubborn person I've ever met, and I'm not waiting another ten years for you to figure out you fucked up something good." He ran his hand through his hair and blew an exhausted breath into the warm air between them. "The judge will set bail in the morning. I'll have my secretary call you."

He took the stairs two at a time and climbed into a cab waiting at the curb without looking back.

* * * *

At four a.m. the open blinds in Haylie's condo did nothing but let in more darkness. She brushed her teeth and avoided her reflection in the mirror.

She snatched Blake's toothbrush out of the toothbrush holder next to the sink and threw it into the trashcan. His car had still been in her parking lot when she got home. Wherever the cab had taken him, it wasn't back to her place.

A cold nose nudged the back of her thigh and Lucy looked up at her with a practiced plead. She spit in the sink and rinsed, while Lucy continued to nudge her.

"Alright, alright. I'll take you out. Give me a minute."

She found the leash on the doorknob of the coat closet and clipped it to Lucy's collar. Instantly, the dog began pulling like a locomotive toward the sliding glass doors.

"Hold on, I've got to get a bag." Haylie dropped the leash and searched the pantry for a plastic baggie. Lucy nudged the back of her thigh again.

“Alright already!” Lucy galloped toward the sliders dragging the leash behind him. Haylie caught him before he could jump on the glass door and led him outside.

The gulf breeze that whipped through the patio, picked up her hair and threw it around her head. Lucy tugged his way to the grass and immediately began taking care of business with his nose to the breeze, nostrils twitching.

A growl rumbled deep in his throat, and he trained his eyes to the shadows at the side of the condo.

Haylie squinted but could barely make out even the corner of the building until a break in the clouds unveiled the moon and the figure of a man stepped out of sight.

Lucy’s growl grew into a frenzied bark and Haylie fought to get him back inside. She locked the doors and closed the blinds while her heart hammered. Lucy stood guard at the sliders, a low growl continuously rolling in the back of his throat. Nothing she could do would calm him down.

She’d know her father’s wiry frame anywhere. She willed the pounding in her chest to settle. Carl Monroe played mind games better than anyone. He just wanted her to know that she couldn’t avoid him, that he would intimidate her until she did what he wanted her to do. If he had come to hurt her, he would have come after her instead of slinking away. He’d told her she couldn’t write him off, and now he meant to prove it.

A soft thud sounded against the front door, and she jumped. Lucy tore across the room, barking ferociously at the door. Haylie grabbed the phone and peered through the peephole. She couldn’t see anyone in the softening pre-dawn light and tried again to shake off the fear that coursed through her. He’d made his point and left, just like at the luncheon.

She stroked Lucy’s head. “Good boy,” she said. “Good boy.”

* * * *

Nursing her third cup of coffee at the kitchen counter, Haylie grabbed the telephone on the first ring.

"Grady's with me. I'm bringing him home." Blake's all-business tone settled like ice on her heart.

"What about bail? How much do I owe you?"

"The judge released him on his own recognizance and my assurance that he'll be a community serving angel between now and the trial."

"Thank you." Relief flooded her. "Sincerely."

Waiting for Grady's arrival, she brewed more coffee and showered. By the time the front door swung open, she had eggs almost ready to eat, bacon cooling next to the stove and biscuits browning in the oven, Grady's favorite breakfast.

Grady went straight to the guestroom without acknowledging her or Lucy, and Blake hovered at the door holding a manila envelope in his hand. His face lacked his usual cocky smile.

"You want some coffee?" Haylie asked as he bent to rub Lucy's head. "And maybe some of these eggs that it looks like I'll be eating alone?" She glanced down the hall. "Grady usually avoids that room like the plague."

"I could use some caffeine." He laid the envelope on the counter. "This was at your door."

She poured his coffee, set it on the counter, and put the cream and sugar dishes within reach. Blake seated himself on a barstool while she transferred the eggs from the skillet to a bowl and pulled the biscuits from the oven. He didn't look anymore ready to talk about what happened between them than she was. "Sure you're not hungry? I thought Grady might be, but looks like he needs some time to himself."

Blake set his coffee down. "I'll help." He came around the counter and reached for the cupboard where she kept the plates.

She glanced over in time to see Lucy's paw make contact with Blake's cup.

“Lucy, down!” The reprimand came too late. Coffee poured across the counter and onto the envelope that had been left at her door. Blake grabbed the unmarked package and up-righted the cup while she dashed toward the spill with a dishcloth.

“Hope this wasn’t important,” he said, handing Haylie the coffee soaked envelope.

“I have no idea what it is.” She mopped the cloth across it and shook the contents onto the counter, not realizing her mistake until it was too late.

She scooped up the fifty or more photographs that spilled out as nausea tightened her throat and churned waves in her stomach. The nightmare she’d lived through had been printed on 4 x 6 Kodak quality paper for all the world to see. For Blake to see. He had one of the pictures in his hand. His face twisted in concentration, then concern, then fury.

“Who left these?” His voice ground out with barely contained rage.

“My father.” She snatched the picture from him and put it face down on top of the others, then carried the entire stack to the trashcan inside the pantry and dumped them in. She hid her trembling fingers in fists. The tremors moved up her arms and rocked her whole body.

“That’s evidence,” he said, moving toward her.

She backed away shaking her head.

“Enough evidence to put somebody away for a very long time.” He stepped closer.

“Seventeen years.” Her hip hit the counter.

He reached for her. “How old were you?”

She held her hands up to keep him from getting too close. Her throat closed too tight to speak, and she turned away to keep from seeing the disgust in his eyes.

“Haylie, don’t do this. Don’t shut me out.” He moved closer.

Her hands fisted against his chest and she pushed him away. “You need to leave.”

He held her wrists and his voice softened. "We don't have to talk about it. At least not now. But you should've told me."

"Get out!" she yelled. She didn't want his pity, and she couldn't bear to see the way he was looking at her now. There was no way he could want her anymore. They had all but ended things on the jailhouse steps. These pictures didn't change that, but they destroyed the private wall she'd built around her pain. She had never felt humiliation so thoroughly. "Get out, Blake!" The tears came hard. She jerked her hands free and slid to the floor.

Grady came barreling down the hall. "What's going on?"

Blake waved him off and dug the pictures out of the trash. He shoved them in a dishcloth he grabbed off the counter, then knelt down in front of her. "These are evidence, and you need to turn them over to the police." He lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him. "You don't have to do it alone, but you can't pretend it didn't happen anymore."

Tears slipped down her face. The tenderness had disappeared from his eyes and anger tensed the muscles in his jaws.

"Not in front of Grady," she pleaded.

Blake hesitated, his eyes searched hers. "Fine. Call me when you're ready. I'll be at my office." He stood, still gripping the photos in his white-knuckled hand and turned his attention to Grady. "Take care of her."

Chapter 8

Three weeks later, Oysters Grille at the Sheraton Beach Club hummed with conversation of the brunch patrons. Kara whipped the celery around in her Bloody Mary and stared at Haylie through the dark lenses of her sunglasses.

“Ever think you’re getting too old for this?” Haylie asked. “Think you’ll ever settle down?”

“Yeah, six feet down,” Kara said. “I’ll quit having a good time when y’all start throwing dirt on top of me.”

“Looks like you’re having a blast right now.” Haylie’s laugh was drier than she’d intended it to be.

“If you were that worried about me, I’d be sleeping instead of having this ‘necessary’ meeting with you.”

“The cocktail auction is in four days. I thought we should go over the agenda.”

“I’ve been a DJ for ten years. I think I can handle talking a bunch of white collars into spending absurd amounts of cash on drinks that they can write off. It’s all for a good cause. In a room where nobody can stand to be outdone by anybody else, you’re going to raise butt loads of money.”

“I made notes for you and summarized the proposed services the foundation will offer once we have the needed funding.” Haylie passed a stack of index cards across the table.

Kara set them aside. “I can handle it, Hay.”

Haylie sat back and cupped her coffee mug with both hands. “I know,” she said softly. “The foundation’s just vulnerable right now.”

“How 'bout you? I heard you've had quite a bit of drama going on at your place these last few weeks.”

She shrugged. “Grady's awaiting trial. Meanwhile, he's doing community service work and getting a voluntary drug test every week so he can prove to the judge he's staying clean.”

“Blake will take care of it.”

Haylie didn't respond. She hadn't spoken to Blake since he'd seen the photographs in her kitchen. She hadn't called, and neither had he.

Kara pushed her sunglasses up on her head and leveled her red-rimmed eyes with Haylie's. “When are you going to cut the man a break?”

“I did cut him a break, and he took it. I haven't seen him in weeks. Three if you're counting.” She licked the dryness from her lips. “We're a non-issue. He's looking out for Grady, and I appreciate that. End of story.”

Kara exhaled sharply and shook her head. “Look. I wasn't supposed to tell you this, but do you have any idea how many times he asked me about you, where he could find you, before I told him we'd be at Banana Bob's the night he showed up?”

“You set me up?” The shock slammed into her like a tidal wave. No interference, no betrayal, no surprises, only honor and friendship that she could trust unconditionally. This was Belles code, Belles *law*. Haylie swallowed, hoping to hold down the emotions that engulfed her.

Kara shrugged. “You needed to be set up. You haven't had a serious relationship since you ended it with him. Men can be assholes. You don't have to convince me of that. But I don't know what he could've done to make you react the way you did. You never complained about him mistreating you. He wasn't out running around with other girls. Hell, I don't think he dated anybody for a year after you broke up.” She stirred her drink again. “Every time he saw one of us, he interrogated us up one side and down the other trying to find out where you were. I'm convinced that's why he's such a damned

good attorney. He got plenty of practice on us before he ever got to the courtroom.”

Haylie’s hands shook so hard she had to set the coffee on the table.

“He loves you, Haylie.”

She fiddled with the corner of her napkin. “You seem to think you know an awful lot about him.”

“He stops by the studio sometimes when he comes in the station to record his ads. He hasn’t been by in a couple of weeks though.”

“He talks to you about me?” The napkin rolled from between her fingers, and her thumbnail sliced into the pad of her index finger.

“He did. Amanda saw him out with a group of people the other night. Melanie Marshfield was there,” Kara said. “I don’t know. Maybe it was nothing. Or maybe he’s tired of waiting around for you.”

Haylie picked her coffee up again but set it back down without taking a sip. She dug in her purse and tossed a handful of bills on the table. “I’ll let you get some sleep. Call me if you have any questions.”

Kara grabbed her arm before she could get away from the table. “Call him, Hay.”

* * * *

Haylie opened the door to find Grady seated on the sofa, elbows on his knees, head bowed. His shoulders shook and a muffled sound she hadn’t heard in years came in short bursts. He was crying. Lucy lay on the floor near his feet, head on his paws.

She hurried over, but he shrugged her away. Lucy’s eyes moved back and forth from one to the other, but his head stayed on his paws and his tail lay unmoving on the floor. The patches on his coat had almost grown in, and all the stitches had been removed. He was taking longer walks and favoring his fractured leg less every day. He was on the mend. But now it appeared Grady might be broken.

Haylie sat in silence waiting for him to give some indication he wanted to talk to her. She wouldn't push him. She understood the need for privacy better than anyone. Then she saw it. Face down on the coffee table in front of him. A photograph.

She reached for it. Grady's arm shot out. His hand caught her wrist.

"Why didn't you tell me?" His eyes welled with tears.

She sat silent. What was there to tell? How do you tell someone what she had been through? How do you explain something you can't put words around, wouldn't want to give words to? She hated her father, hated him so much that until he showed up at her door, he only existed as a ghost in her mind. One of those horrific ghosts that come in the night and strangle the life out of people, the kind movies are made of.

The pictures he left for her were a slap in the face. Forcing her to remember what she wanted to forget. They were duplicates. One set had already been used as evidence against him at his trial. Even back then she had refused to speak about what he'd done.

Her attorney told her if she testified he'd go to prison for sure, but without her testimony he might get away with what he'd done. She had only stared in silence at the repeating horizontal stripes of the wallpaper in the prosecutor's office, a thin line of burgundy, a thinner stripe of green on either side of a wide band of navy blue. All around the room, the colors repeated, but she didn't utter a sound.

Inside that room, she never spoke a word. Not one. Outside she didn't speak about what had happened either. If her aunt hadn't found the pictures, no one would have ever known. Haylie never would have told. Her father never would have spent a minute in jail. Now, his sentence had ended. He had paid for what he'd done, but he would never let her forget. She would pay for the rest of her life.

"You know all about me," Grady said. "Everything." He looked betrayed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"How did you get that picture?"

“Found it stuck to the wall behind the trashcan when I took out the trash.” He wiped a tear from his cheek and continued to grip her wrist.

“I’m sorry you found it. I’m sorry you saw me like that.”

“Nothing about this is your fault. You were a kid. And whoever did that to you needs his balls cut off. Isn’t that what you always told me?”

Haylie closed her eyes.

“You never talked to anybody, did you?”

Haylie met his eyes but didn’t answer.

“All that therapy you pushed me through. Told me I had to go. Had to talk it all out, do what they wanted me to do. You didn’t do any of that, did you?”

She shook her head. Her mother never took her for counseling, never acknowledged what had happened. Never stopped blaming Haylie for her father’s absence.

“You just handled it on your own, huh?” Challenge and sorrow filled Grady’s voice.

“I’m doing fine. We’ve got a roof over our heads. I can afford to feed you, that’s an accomplishment in itself.”

“Don’t get cute.” He loosened his grip on her wrist. “I couldn’t ever figure out how a hottie like you who had her stuff together couldn’t get a man. But you don’t want one, do you? You can’t let this shit go enough to love anybody. That’s why Blake doesn’t come around here anymore. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“Girl, you’re screwed up and you don’t even know it. And I don’t need all those years of therapy to tell me that.”

“Why’d you sell pot?” she asked.

He did a double take. And probably not just because she’d changed the subject so quickly. She’d never forced an explanation from him before, about anything.

“I never sold it.”

“You mean you hadn’t gotten around to selling it yet?”

“No. I mean I smoked it. I bought it from some friends who sold it. And I listened when they told me I could make more money selling weed than I could working my ass off all summer delivering pizza.”

“You got lazy.”

“I got stoned. It makes you lazy. And I drove around with a bunch of baggies in my car for a couple of weeks, but couldn't ever get up the nerve to pass them off.”

“What about the money I found in your duffle bag?”

A sheepish grin spread across his face. “I pulled it out of my savings and got the bank to give it to me in twenties so I wouldn't have to tell the guys I was chicken shit.”

Haylie groaned then laughed with relief.

He put his arm around her shoulder. “You gotta talk to somebody, Homma. Not me. But you've got to get it out, or it'll eat you up inside.”

“I'll think about it,” she lied. “By the way, I like the fro.”

He grinned and rubbed his hand over his hair. “Yeah, the chicks are digging it. I even caught Ashlyn eying it.” He waggled his brows.

“She's old enough to be your Homma.”

“Nah, that's your job.”

She rose and reached for the picture. Lucy's head jerked up. A growl rumbled in his throat and a ridge of hair stood along his spine.

Grady jumped off the couch and headed to the door.

“Don't answer it.” She wasn't ready for him to meet her father. She would never be ready for that.

Grady looked back, his eyes full of questions. Then, as if she hadn't made any sense at all, he swung the door open.

A Fed-Ex driver held a box in one hand and his signature board in the other. Grady signed and handed the delivery over to Haylie.

She lowered her head. Her father had already accomplished what he'd set out to do. He had her scared half to death.

“You going to open it?” Grady asked.

Coming from Blake's office, it probably had something to do with the upcoming trial. She ripped the tab and removed an odd shape wrapped in brown paper.

"What is it?"

She unwrapped the figurine and held it up to him.

"You've already got one of those, don't you?"

"This is the one I've always had. Any idea how Blake got it?"

* * * *

Ashlyn, Kara and Amanda, drinks in hand, gathered around the table Haylie had commandeered at Banana Bob's.

"So what's the emergency?" Kara asked.

"Someone broke into my house." Haylie turned her plastic cup between the palms of her hands.

"Oh my God! How much stuff did you lose?" Amanda asked.

"Nothing. Only one thing was taken and I got it back."

"What was it?" Kara asked.

"A figurine my mother gave me. It's valuable."

"No jewelry? Electronics? Nothing else?" Kara said. "You sure Grady didn't try to pawn it for pot money?"

"Of course not, he's not a thief."

"Just a weed dealer," Kara said with a smirk.

Ashlyn shot her a warning look. "So how did the figurine get returned?"

"Blake got it somehow and Fed Ex-ed it to me."

"Blake? What's he got to do with this?" Amanda leaned forward, her red hair spilling over her shoulders.

"I don't know, but I'm pretty sure he didn't get it by accident. I've kept it next to my bed since I was a kid. He would have recognized it was mine."

“So someone took something from your house and you think they gave it to Blake? How would a random thief even know the connection between you two?” Ashlyn asked.

Kara slammed her beer down on the table. “Are you saying you’ve got a fucking stalker?”

“Oh my God!” Ashlyn whispered. “Do you know who he is?”

Haylie fixed her eyes on the table and considered how much she could tell her friends without opening up the entire can of worms.

“A man came banging on my door a few weeks ago. I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want you guys to worry.”

“So you’ve seen him,” Ashlyn said. “You can identify him to the police, give a description, so they can nail this guy?”

Haylie shook her head. “I can’t tell the police, and I don’t expect you to understand why.”

“What!” Ashlyn’s voice rose loud enough that people nearby stopped their conversations and turned to the Belles’ table.

“I can’t believe Blake hasn’t called the police,” Kara said.

“I don’t think he knows.”

“How could he not know? You said he sent it back to you,” Amanda said.

“Grady’s his client. He probably thinks Grady had something to do with it. Blake and I aren’t speaking so I haven’t discussed it with him.”

Kara’s ocean blue eyes narrowed to slits. “Are you sure Grady didn’t take it?”

“It wasn’t Grady,” Haylie said with certainty.

“Is that denial, or are you holding out on us?” Kara said. “What else do you know?”

“I know it wasn’t Grady. I know the thief was the same man who beat on my door the other night. And...” She hesitated. “I know he’ll be back.”

“You *have* to call the police,” Ashlyn said.

“I agree.” Amanda handed her cell phone across the table. “Call them now.”

“Who the hell is this guy?” Kara said. “And don’t give me some bullshit. You know who he is, don’t you?”

Haylie remained silent.

“Fine,” Kara said. “We’re not going to sit here and let your stubbornness get you killed.” She flipped open her cell phone and keyed in a number.

“Don’t call the police!” Haylie said, reaching for Kara’s phone.

Kara shifted, pulling her phone out of reach. “I’m not calling the police. Yet.” Then after a pause. “Blake? It’s Kara. You mailed a package to Haylie. How did you get it?”

After a few minutes, Kara ended the call and gave the ladies a full report. “He said the figurine was left on his desk. He recognized it as yours, figured Grady left it there, though he couldn’t figure out why, and he shipped it back. He said he would’ve called to tell you, but you’ve got your head too far up your ass.”

“He said that?”

“No, I added the colorful description. He said he was tired of ramming himself into your life like a bulldozer.”

“So it was just left on his desk?” Amanda questioned.

“Yep. He found it the morning after one of Grady’s appointments.”

“Grady didn’t leave it,” Haylie said quietly. “He broke into Blake’s office too.”

“You think the same man who broke into your house to steal the figurine and nothing else, then took his only loot to Blake’s office and left it on his desk?” The tone of Ashlyn’s voice made it clear how feasible she thought the whole rigmarole sounded.

“Why would anybody go to so much trouble over a damn Lladro?” Kara shook her head. “I’m not buying it. Grady was there. In both places. You haven’t convinced me yet he didn’t have something to do with it.”

“It’s not a Lladro. It’s worth about fifty times as much, and it wasn’t stolen for its value. It was a message.”

“What kind of message?” Amanda leaned forward on her elbows, worry lines creasing her forehead.

Haylie wrung her hands beneath the table so her friends wouldn’t see how hard she trembled. “He was saying he can get to me. He knows the company I keep, and I’m not safe anywhere or with anyone.”

“Who would haunt you that way? You’ve never made an enemy in your life,” Ashlyn said.

“I made one,” Haylie corrected her softly, “and he just got released from prison.”

“Dear God!” Amanda breathed.

Haylie steeled herself. She knew the questions would come, but she couldn’t leave the Belles in the dark, not if he targeted one of them next. “He’s just trying to scare me, but if he knows about Blake, he might know about you too. Keep your doors locked and don’t provoke him.” She dug the picture she’d printed off the website for registered sex offenders out of her purse and slid it to the center of the table.

Kara snatched it up first. “Monroe? What’s the connection?”

Haylie swallowed hard. “I’m lucky enough to be related to him.”

Kara flipped her phone open again. “This time I’m calling the police.”

* * * *

Haylie checked the locks on all her doors and windows and dialed her mother’s number.

“Hello?” Maureen’s voice tinkled with laughter, a note it hadn’t carried in years. Haylie braced herself. Charm oozed out of Carl Monroe like slime. Only Haylie could see the repulsiveness of it. Her mother was enamored.

“Mom.” Haylie sucked in her breath. She couldn’t call the police without giving her mother fair warning, she couldn’t break her heart like that again.

“Who are you calling for?” Maureen giggled again. “Stop it, Carl,” she laughed softly.

“Mom, it’s me.” Haylie closed her eyes. She’d never get through to her mother with him there. “Can you call me later?”

“I’m sorry, you have the wrong number.” Another giggle before a click ended the call.

Betrayal should become easier to stomach after a while, but it wasn’t. Haylie’s insides churned as her mother’s words rang in her memory. “Just because you broke this family apart, don’t expect me to. How can you live with yourself and the lies you’ve told?”

Haylie slid her back down the wall. Her bare feet stretched out on the carpet in front of her and the numbers on the phone blurred beneath her stare. Minutes ticked by on the antique clock above the stove, and still she couldn’t bring herself to dial the police station.

Kara had given her an hour. If she hadn’t made the report by then, Kara swore she’d report the stalking herself. Kara didn’t bluff, but Haylie didn’t have it in her to live this nightmare again. No one could understand the hell her life had been after her father’s arrest. Living with the secret of what he had done was almost easier. In some ways covering for him was less painful than living with a mother who blamed her for what had happened.

Someone pounded on the door. Lucy barked once but didn’t growl or take his territorial stance. Haylie willed her racing heart to slow. Her father couldn’t have gotten there that quickly, and Kara’s hour deadline hadn’t passed.

The pounding came again followed by, “Haylie, let me in.”

Blake.

Kara had probably called him, and if she didn’t deal with him now, she’d have to deal with him later. She pulled herself off the floor and answered the door.

He grabbed her shoulders as soon as the door swung open. "What in the hell's going on?" he asked. "It'll be easier to tell me than the police, and they should be here any minute."

"No!" She wrenched herself free of his grasp. "I'm not talking to the police! Why can't you people understand that?"

"What do you think stalkers do when they get bored lurking in the shadows? Don't pretend this is something you can ignore and it'll go away." He blew a heavy breath. "And if that is what you're thinking, *we people* aren't going to wait until they drag your body out of a ditch to file a police report." He leveled his gaze with hers. "I don't care if you hate me for the rest of your life, I won't stand by and let some asshole threaten your safety."

The compassion she saw in the dark depths of his blue eyes brought fresh tears to hers. She looked away.

"Whether you tell me who broke into your house and my office or not, I'll make damn sure the police have a lead to follow up."

Haylie turned back to him. "What do you mean?"

"Your father just got out of prison. He left those photographs at your door. It doesn't take a lot of deduction to narrow the list of suspects. This obviously isn't random. Come on, Haylie," he urged softly. "Fill in the gaps for me. Stop protecting him. He doesn't deserve it."

Her mouth opened, but not a sound escaped.

"I saw the pictures, remember." His voice, already low, dropped even lower. "And I looked up his case. Most of the records were sealed to protect you, but I know what he was convicted of. I know what he did to you. I'm not going to let him hurt you anymore."

"He can't do that to me again." Her voice was so low she wasn't sure he could hear her. "He won't kill me. He just wants to intimidate me until I agree to pretend we're a happy little family."

She closed her eyes. Blake had researched her father's trial. Sealed records or not, he knew more than she would ever tell him.

And he had seen enough in the photographs to give him a mental picture he'd never be able to wipe clean.

Haylie scrubbed her arms as if she could rub away the seedy shame of her past.

He took her wrists and held firm. "That bastard's not going to torture you like this. I won't let him."

Lucy looked up from his nap under the counter and growled, his eyes on the front door.

A sharp knock was followed by, "Harper County Sheriff's department."

"You can do this." Blake released her to answer the door.

Haylie trembled on the sofa as Officer Levitt introduced himself and Blake welcomed him inside.

After repeating the scant details of the case Blake had already given him, the officer shook his head. "I'm afraid there's not much I can do here, other than file a report so that you have record of suspicious events in case anything escalates. The pornography does warrant arrest, if we can find someone who saw him either leave it at your door or in the immediate area when it was left. Of course, you'd have to turn that over as evidence."

Haylie shuddered and swallowed the bile that rose in her throat.

Blake put his arm around her shoulder. "Can't you arrest him for breaking and entering?"

"I understand your frustration, Mr. Sheridan. But without sign of forced entry either here or at your office there's not much to go on, especially since there doesn't even seem to be anything missing." He nodded to the figurine on the table between them. "Are you sure there's nothing else that might have been taken?"

Haylie nodded.

"This wasn't a robbery," Blake said, obviously working to keep his patience in check. "Not in the traditional sense." He rubbed his palm along Haylie's arm. "This was an act of intimidation. If you can't do anything about the unlawful entry Haylie would like to file a

trespassing charge. That should be enough to convict him of a probation violation.”

“Do you have any witnesses that saw him here?”

Haylie shook her head.

“We can arrest him, but a conviction would be a long shot. The child pornography would have been our easiest way to nail this guy, especially if he’s got a prior, but since there’s no evidence that you’re willing to turn over...” Officer Levitt held his palms up. “I’m sorry. The best I can do is promise to show up if he comes back and you call us out.”

Haylie closed her eyes and sat as cold and lifeless as stone.

“Are you positive you can identify the man who came to your door, Miss Monroe?”

“He’s her father!” Blake didn’t bother to hide his impatience. “Of course, she can identify him.”

Officer Levitt sighed. “I’ll turn in my report tonight and I’ll interview some of your neighbors to find out if anyone has seen him on the property. Other than that...”

Blake stood, prompting Officer Levitt to take his leave.

“For what it’s worth, Miss Monroe, I believe you. I patrol the area and I’ll keep an eye out for anyone matching his description. In the meantime, keep your doors and windows locked and be aware of your surroundings when you’re coming and going from the parking lot.” He handed each of them one of his cards. “Call me at the station if you remember anything that might warrant an arrest or you notice anything else missing.”

Haylie nodded her thanks, but couldn’t trust herself to speak. Her tongue had locked down. She’d said too much already. The repercussions would be dire. Her father would know what she had done as soon as his probation officer called. He may already know. Not much slipped past Carl Monroe.

“Kara’s on her way over,” Blake said. “She’ll stay with you tonight.”

“I don’t need a babysitter.”

“You need a bodyguard,” he countered. “At least until we figure out how to get this asshole back behind bars where he belongs.”

“I thought you tried to keep people out of jail.”

“Not this again.” He walked away from her and ran his hands through his hair. “Am I going to have to turn prosecutor to get any respect from you?”

She blew a hot breath from her lungs and bowed her head. “I don’t want to fight with you.”

“Makes two of us. We’re on the same side here.” He crossed the distance between them and pulled her in close.

Her muscles uncoiled in his arms but the ache in her chest almost consumed her. She missed him so much it hurt to breathe

“I’m not going to turn over the pictures without your consent, but we have to turn them in.”

She spoke into his chest, hiding her face in shame. “All those pictures were used as evidence in his trial. And I can’t prove he left them here. Even fingerprints would be compromised now... not that he would have left any.”

Blake’s hand warmed her back. “But if we can find a witness that saw him here, use phone records to prove he’s called you, and turn the photographs over to the police, the circumstantial evidence will start to stack up. For someone like him who’s already on parole, sometimes that’s enough to get a judge to see things our way.”

Haylie knew enough about the justice system to know Blake was being hopelessly optimistic. And he was too good an attorney to not recognize the same himself.

“All we have to do is wait for him to screw up, and he will,” he continued. “The combination of his mistake and any little bone we can throw to the prosecutor will get him back behind bars.”

An all too familiar blackness began creeping around the corners of her mind and she shook her head to clear the fear away.

“What is it, honey?” he said, stepping back to look her in the eye. “What am I missing here?”

She blinked back the tears that threatened to fall. “Officer Levitt will see the pictures. His supervisor will see them. Who knows how many other cops will take a look.” She muffled a sob. “They’ll see *me*.”

A long minute of silence passed, and then he took her in his arms again. “We’ll hold onto the pictures for as long as we can,” he finally said. “Nobody has to see them yet, and if we can get enough evidence against him, we won’t use the pictures at all.”

Kara flew into the condo without the courtesy of a knock, but she stopped short when she saw Haylie in Blake’s arms.

“Looks like a ‘let’s kick this stalker’s ass’ party.” She gripped an overnight bag over her shoulder and a six-pack of Sam Adams hung from her fingers. “Who wants a cold one?”

Blake backed away from Haylie and dropped his hands to his sides. “I’d better go. Call me if you need anything, and lock up behind me.” At the door he turned back and addressed Kara. “Use common sense, even if she refuses to. And call the police if you so much as hear the floor creak. You’ve got my number.”

* * * *

“Does he have court in the morning?” Kara asked, pulling her beer down to her lap and aiming the remote at the television. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him run away from you that fast.”

“I don’t know what his schedule is. But I don’t think I’m as appealing to him as I used to be.” Haylie swallowed the knot in her throat. She couldn’t blame him. She didn’t blame him. She would let him use their argument in front of the jail as an excuse if he wanted to, but she knew the truth. She had always known what his reaction would be if he found out about her past. Men like Blake didn’t want women like her.

“It looked like you two had made up when I got here.”

She lifted her beer to her lips. “No. He just didn’t like the idea of someone breaking into his office and my house.”

“Maybe he didn’t like the thought of somebody messing with you.” Kara stopped channel surfing, and settled back with her eyes glued to the bare-chested men volleying a ball back and forth in a tournament on the beach.

“Let’s talk about something other than Blake.”

“Alright.” Kara drained the last of her beer and powered the television off. “Tell me what you did to piss this stalker off.”

“Talk’s overrated.” Haylie got up and opened the cabinet she kept her movies in. “Chick flick or action?” The phone interrupted Kara’s answer. “You choose,” Haylie said on her way to the get the cordless off the kitchen counter.

Maureen Monroe greeted her in a whisper.

“You shouldn’t have to sneak around to call me, Mom.” Anger took a backseat to the disappointment that weighed heavily on Haylie’s chest.

“I’ve only got a minute. He’s in the shower,” Maureen said. “I’m sorry about earlier. Did you need something?”

“No.” Haylie bit back the truth then changed her mind. She had to do this, but it would be better to do it in person, and it’d take longer than a minute. “Can you come see me? Tomorrow?”

A long minute of silence passed while her mother no doubt weighed the possibility of getting caught. The act of visiting her only daughter would be traitorous. Loving the man she married, no matter what he’d done to her child, was loyalty. That’s the way it worked in Maureen Monroe’s world. Haylie had accepted those facts, but it was still a bitter pill to swallow.

“I don’t know,” Maureen finally said.

“Mom. Please.” Haylie bit down on her bottom lip hard enough to taste blood. “I need you to come.”

"I'll try." Maureen drew in a sharp breath then said in a firm tone, "I've told you damned telemarketers to stop calling. I'm on the do not call list!" The phone clattered and a dial tone hummed in Haylie's ear. Her father had gotten out of the shower.

Haylie swallowed the resentment lodged in her throat and braced her elbows on the counter. She should just let her father tell her mother whatever he wanted to. She'd only believe his side of the story anyway. But Haylie couldn't do that, she had to at least try to make her mother understand. Deserved or not, loyalty was a hard habit to break.

"Didn't get the maternal gene, did she?" Kara pulled two more beers out of the refrigerator. She popped the tops off and walked one over to Haylie. "You don't need no stinkin' mama." Then in a serious tone, she added, "That's what you've got Belles for. Drink up."

Haylie tapped her bottleneck to Kara's and gulped the cold beer like a lifeline.

* * * *

"Just tell me you're ok and I'll leave you alone." Blake's deep voice flowed straight through her. Haylie pressed the phone hard against her ear and gripped the pillow beneath her head.

"I don't want you to leave me alone." She bit her bottom lip and closed her eyes. She shouldn't tell him that. It wasn't fair to either one of them.

"You push me away every time I get too close." His breath hit the phone. "I can't do this anymore."

Her heart stopped. He had never given up on her before.

"I just want you to trust me, Haylie. Not to make me pay for what your father did to you. I need to know every time you get scared or I screw up, you're not going to run away."

"I've never been able to talk about what he did to me. Not with anyone."

“He sold your virginity and then distributed the video and photographs as porn. I know what he did to you. I don’t know why you couldn’t tell me that.”

“I was afraid I’d lose you.” Hot tears flowed down her cheeks and her voice caught. “I knew I would disgust you.”

“Disgust me? Honey, your father disgusts me. You break my heart.”

Haylie sobbed into her pillow. Blake knew everything. There were no secrets between them. It felt like a dam had burst inside her. Emotions she’d held back for most of her life rushed out in a roar, and behind the fury, a peace she couldn’t remember ever feeling before settled in her soul. She wiped her tears away and steadied her breath. “I guess I’m a pretty big mess, huh?”

“You’re the most incredible, beautiful, sexiest woman I’ve ever known. And I want to be with you more than I’ve ever wanted anything. There’s nothing we can’t get through together, if you let me in.”

“You really still think I’m sexy?”

“Sexy?” He groaned. “I need to be inside you so bad right now I can’t think straight. If I were there right now...”

“Tell me what you’d do to me. Where would you touch me?”

“Tonight, I don’t think I could hold back. I’d sink so deep into you I couldn’t see or hear or feel anything but your wet pussy around my cock. Your soft body moving against mine. The sounds you make. The way you touch me. God, Haylie, I swear sometimes when I’m inside you I forget how to breathe.”

She slid her hand down her belly, between her swollen lips. Her finger brushed her clit and she gasped. Another stroke and she moaned his name softly.

“Honey...are you...”

“Uh huh.”

“Are you going to come for me?” She could hear the strain in his voice. “Tell me you’re going to come for me.”

"I'll do anything for you," she whispered.

"Don't stop. I want to hear you come for me."

She circled her clit the way he would, the way he'd come to understand the perfect amount of pressure, the most sensitive spot. "You know me so well," she breathed. "You do everything so right. I can't ever get enough of you." Her breath hitched.

"Come with me," he growled. "I'm going now. Come with me."

She let herself go. Her body uncoiled in waves of heat and light and pure bone shaking pleasure. She cried out, gasping his name.

His loud groan told her he was there with her every step of the way.

"Honey." His breathing slowed. "I want this. Us. I don't ever want to wake up without you in my arms."

She curled into herself, savoring the warmth of the fire beneath her skin. Her heart swelled, and a smile spread across her face. "You can catch all kinds of fish now that you've got that dirty talk down. Don't limit your options."

The sound of shattering glass shot Haylie off her bed like she was spring loaded. "Kara!" She dropped the phone and left unanswered Blake's, "What the hell was that?"

* * * *

The rock that shattered the guestroom window didn't come with a note, but the message rang clear. Her father had been watching. He'd been in her house. He knew which room she slept in. And tonight he knew she had a guest in the guestroom. Haylie couldn't have read his warning better if he'd written it on the wall. *He would go after her friends.*

When the sun came up, she'd be calling a glass company and not the police. She would visit her mother and pretend nothing had ever happened. Just like he wanted. She would never put the Belles at risk.

She and Kara had the shards vacuumed out of the carpet and cardboard temporarily taped over the window before Blake beat his fist against the door. Kara let him in while Haylie measured out teaspoons of coffee and dumped them into the coffee maker.

“Is she ok?” he demanded.

“I’m in here,” Haylie answered him.

Within seconds he was at her side, checking her up and down like a mother whose kid had just tumbled off the monkey bars. “I’m fine,” she said. “It was just a rock through the window.”

“And the police aren’t here yet?”

When Haylie didn’t answer, he turned to Kara. “You didn’t call the police?”

“Take it up with zip lip there,” Kara said. “I’m getting a shower and going to work.”

Blake didn’t bother waging an argument. He dug his wallet out of his pocket and thumbed through business cards. Haylie saw the Sheriff Department logo on the card he pulled out and tried to grab Blake’s phone before he could punch in the numbers.

He held the phone out of her reach. “Give me one reason not to call.”

She bit her lip. “He’ll do something worse next time,” she said. “To one of the Belles.”

Blake clapped his phone closed. “He tell you that?”

“He didn’t have to. I know how he thinks. If he’d been threatening me, the rock would have come through my window. He’s been in here. He knows where I sleep.”

“Mother fucker!” Blake slammed his fist against the counter. “You think he knew Kara was here?”

She nodded. The aroma of coffee filled the room and daylight streamed through the sliders. In the corner Lucy watched the whole scene through heavy lids, and down the hall water rained against the shower tile.

Blake braced his arms on the kitchen sink and looked out the window, searching the parking lot for any sign of her father. Haylie had no doubt he'd rip Carl Monroe apart with his bare hands if he ever saw him.

"If I don't call the police, he won't do anything."

"How do you know what he'll do?"

"I'll do what he wants. I'll go home for a visit. I'll pretend nothing ever happened. I'll do whatever I have to do to keep him away from my friends. He just wants to know he can control me," she said. "As long as he thinks I'll do what he wants, he won't have any reason to threaten me. This whole nightmare will end."

"Do you really believe that? Do you think he is the least bit rational?" He took her by the shoulders. "He's a time bomb, you're not going anywhere near that man."

"I know what he wants. I know how to play his game."

Blake ran his hands through his hair and for the first time she noticed how tired he looked. How red the rims of his eyes were, the stumble on his cheeks, the rumpled clothes he'd obviously thrown on in a hurry. She closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around him. Blake pulled her hard against him.

The coffee maker gurgled the last of the water through the filter. "I know you think I should call the police, but I know the man," she said. "I know what he's capable of. I know what he's trying to do. Let me handle this."

"The police need to be handling him. Not you."

"The police aren't going to do anything. We can't prove it was him. You think he left a fingerprint on that rock? He probably had somebody else throw it." She took a deep breath. "But I'll guarantee you he sees every car that pulls into this complex and tracks every person that walks through my door. If a cop shows up here again, he won't stop at a broken window. He won't stop with me. I sent him to jail the first time. He'll make damn sure I don't do it again."

Blake leveled his eyes with hers. “You didn’t send him to jail the first time.”

“He didn’t send himself.”

“You didn’t say a word,” Blake continued. “Wouldn’t give a statement. Wouldn’t answer a single question the detectives asked. He was convicted on witness testimony and photographic evidence. The defense used your lack of cooperation to defend him.”

Haylie’s mouth flew open but nothing came out.

“Post-traumatic stress syndrome, the prosecution argued.” He shook his head. “But that wasn’t it, was it? You just refused to talk. Even after what he did to you, you wouldn’t do anything to send him away.”

Her blood roared through her ears, and her heart pounded like a jackhammer in her chest. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” She turned away from him and grabbed a coffee mug from the cabinet. She didn’t realize she’d lost her grip until she heard the mug shatter across the floor. Before she could respond, he had her in his arms, suffocating her in his warmth. She fought to break free, but he held firm.

“You’re not doing this by yourself.” His voice was low in her ear. His tone made it clear there was no point in arguing. He wasn’t backing down. “I don’t know why no one was in your corner the first time, but this time you’re not alone. He’s going back behind bars where he belongs. And you’re not going anywhere near him.”

She slid her hands under the back of his shirt, cupping his smooth skin in her palms and trailing her fingers along his spine. The contours of his muscles only hinted at the strength coiled within them, an energy that left her breathless. In bed or beating his friends over a ball, he moved with the force of a Mack truck and the finesse of a dancer. Blake would do everything he could to protect her. But she wasn’t worried about herself. “If we call the police, someone will get hurt.”

* * * *

Blake pulled his jeans over his hips. Haylie's hair splayed across the pillow like a chocolate octopus. The bedding covered most of her beautiful body, but one of her breasts played peek-a-boo with the sheet. His heart hitched. He'd never let anything happen to her.

He slipped out of her bedroom and carried his cell phone outside. She might be afraid of her father, but he wasn't. He'd make sure every move the man made was documented and admissible in court. At the rate the idiot was moving, it wouldn't take long to put him away again.

He punched in a number he knew by heart and waited.

"Ron. I've got a job for you," he said.

"Got a lot on my plate right now. Is it a big one?"

Ron Donald owned Big Mack Investigations, a small but effective one and a half man P.I. firm. He and Blake had grown up together, and Ron knew the South Alabama coastline better than anyone.

Blake gave Ron all the current information he had on Carl Monroe. "I'm not going into this guy's past," he said, "but he's as bad as they come. I want anything you can give me to put him back in prison."

"He really pissed you off, didn't he, buddy?" Ron let out a low whistle and a laugh. "I'd hate to be him."

"Do me a favor. If you see Haylie, don't mention this."

"Haylie Monroe? Didn't know you were seeing her again. Same last name. What's the connection here?"

"He's her father."

Ron grunted. "You going after the family now?"

"If you don't help me put him behind bars, I'll have to kill him." Blake knew more truth hid behind that threat than he would ever have thought possible.

"Here's the deal," Ron said. "I've got a couple cases going right now. My little sister's wedding is in two weeks and she's marrying

my only employee. But I'll dig up what I can, keep an eye on Monroe every spare second and give you something as soon as I've got it."

"I owe you one," Blake said.

"Don't worry, you'll get the bill." Ron laughed. "Talk to you later, buddy."

Blake hung up and dialed his office. Gloria answered with her usual chipper greeting. "Hey," he said. "Clear my books today. Reschedule what you can. Don't worry about the rest of it."

"Yes, sir." She paused. "Is everything ok?"

"Everything's fine. You can reach me on my cell if there's an emergency."

"Yes, sir," she said again. "Oh, and I found an envelope shoved in the door this morning. There wasn't any address... to or from. Do you want me to open it?"

"No. Put it on my desk. I'll take a look at it when I come in."

Haylie's shadow fell across him. He turned to see her standing two steps beyond the patio, his shirt hanging to the middle of her thighs.

He clapped the phone closed and dropped it in his pocket. "I was on my way back to bed." he said before parting her lips with his. "And so were you."

Chapter 9

Blake was in the shower when Lucy trotted over to the door seconds before the doorbell chimed. Haylie pulled the towel out of her hair and checked the peephole. Maureen Monroe twittered like a bird, checking over her shoulder and wringing her hands. She'd catch hell for coming. There was no doubt about that.

Haylie opened the door and moved aside. Her mother rushed in, then stood like a stranger at a respectful distance, making no move of affection. Even her face gave away nothing of the sentiment she should have felt for her only child.

But she had come, Haylie told herself. That had to count for something.

"I don't have long," Maureen said.

Haylie motioned toward the sofa. Maureen accepted the invitation, but sat on the edge as if she was ready to sprint away if her daughter gave her half a reason to.

"He's been here," Haylie said quietly. The water in the shower had stopped. Blake would be out soon, and her mother would bolt for sure.

Maureen's lips tightened into a straight line, almost disappearing completely. "Why shouldn't he try to see you?" she said. "He's your father."

"He left those old pictures at my door."

"I don't ever want to hear another word about those pictures!" she snapped. "You hear me! Not another word!"

Maureen had never acknowledged the photos. She'd never looked at them. Refused to believe anything anyone told her about them.

Except that Haylie had been smiling in every one of them. That was the biggest lie Carl Monroe had ever told, but it may as well be the truth because Maureen believed it.

“Last night someone threw a rock through my window,” Haylie said, keeping her voice quiet.

“Your father was home last night. I know you’re not accusing him.” Maureen jumped to her feet, trembling with defiance and denial.

“Mom.” Haylie took her mother by the arm. “I just want him to leave me alone.”

“Then stop it with your lies, Haylie Marie! He’s lost seventeen years of his life to you! You won’t stop ’til he’s gone for good, will you?” Crimson anger stained Maureen’s pale skin and dark circles strained through the makeup below her eyes. She looked more fragile than Haylie had ever seen her. “What did I ever do to you?” she asked, a quiver in her voice.

“It wasn’t you,” Haylie whispered.

“You want me to live the rest of my life alone? Would you finally be happy then?”

“Of course not.”

Maureen jerked her arm free of Haylie’s grasp and lifted her chin. “If all you’re going to do is tear this family apart, I don’t need a daughter.” She strode to the door.

“Tell him you don’t want me,” Haylie said. “Tell him you told me to stay away. Tell him I said, he wins.”

Maureen slammed the door behind her, and disappointment sat like a ton on Haylie’s shoulders. Someday, she’d stop expecting something from her mother that didn’t exist.

She turned to see Blake standing at the end of the hall, a towel slung low on his hips, his hair wet and tousled. Even through the tears in her eyes, he looked better than a man had a right to.

“Do you really think it’s that easy, honey?”

* * * *

“Oh, good. You made it in after all,” Gloria said with a smile as Blake entered the reception area. He took the stack of messages she handed him with a nod.

“Hold my calls,” he said, then went into his office and shut the door behind him.

He propped his feet up on his desk and reached for the unmarked white business size envelope that lay centered on his desk blotter. Sealed, wholly unremarkable, and undoubtedly another one of Carl Monroe’s games.

He debated whether to open it, or turn it over to the police, but like Haylie said, the man wasn’t going to make it easy to catch him. He sliced the seal with his letter opener and sat back ready for whatever the bastard had to say. He wasn’t prepared for what he saw.

Bold on an otherwise blank page was a URL. www.daddys-girl.org

The paper crumpled in his fist. It didn’t take a genius to guess what had been posted on the Internet. Blake snatched the phone off his desk.

As soon as Ron answered, Blake jumped in. “Your future brother-in-law’s the computer geek, right?”

“Yeah, but right now he’s too busy making sure his cummerbund matches the bridesmaid dresses to be of any use. Whatcha got?”

“Carl Monroe posted pornography on the Internet. Can you trace it back to him and shut the site down before anybody has a chance to see it?”

“I doubt we can do it that fast, but we can get it done.”

“As fast as you can. And get enough documentation to make the charges stick hard.” Blake gave Ron the URL and threw the paper in the trashcan beneath his desk.

* * * *

Haylie stared at the sunny yellow block walls of her cramped office and tapped her eraser on her to do list. She'd taken care of everything, even the follow-ups. The cocktail auction should take off without a hitch. She had three days to find a dress and get her nails done.

A tune played inside her purse. She dug her cell phone out, not recognizing the number.

"Hello?"

"Haylie, is that you dear?" The older woman's voice sounded familiar, but Haylie couldn't place her. "This is Ina Peters," she continued. "Your mother's neighbor."

"Mrs. Peters. How are you?" Haylie's heart flopped like a fish on the sand. She'd given Ina Peters her number in case of an emergency.

"I'm fine dear, but..." The older woman lowered her voice. "I'm not trying to be a nosy neighbor, but..."

"It's ok. What happened?"

"There was some commotion over at your mother's late this morning. It sounded bad. Your daddy..." She paused. Ina Peters had lived next door to the Monroes for thirty years in one of Velma's oldest neighborhoods. She knew the reason Carl Monroe had gone to prison, and she had plenty of reason to think Haylie wouldn't ever call him daddy again. "Carl," she continued, "tore out of here on two wheels. I went over to check on Maureen. At first she pretended she wasn't home. I got her to talk to me through the door but she wouldn't let me in. I think he messed her up pretty bad."

Haylie's breath caught. He'd never gotten physical with her mother before.

"You mean he hit her?" Her throat clamped around the words.

"She held a towel to her face. I couldn't tell for sure. I think I saw blood."

“Thank you, Mrs. Peters. I’m on my way.” Haylie started to hang up, but hesitated. “If he comes back before I get there, please call 911. And stay inside your house, don’t let him know you saw anything.”

Grady stuck his head in the door just as Haylie dropped her phone in her purse.

“Gotta run,” Haylie said, squeezing past him, “I’ll see you tonight?”

“In time for dinner.” He smiled.

“If you get there before I do, take Lucy out, and lock my office for me ok?”

“Sure thing.” Grady waved her off and took a seat behind her desk. The phone rang before she made it three feet out the door, but she left it for him to answer and broke into a run for her car.

* * * *

Blake stuffed the last of the files he hadn’t had a chance to review into his briefcase and loosened his tie. He reached for his mouse to shut down his computer when Gloria buzzed in. “Mr. Sheridan. Ron Donald is on line one.”

Blake picked up the phone. “That was quick.”

“We’ve got a problem.”

Blake gripped the receiver and waited.

“That website’s a doozy alright. Enough to get him an express ticket back to where he came from.”

“So you got what you needed. Proof he posted that shit?”

“That’s our problem.” Ron blew a heavy grunt through his nose. “That URL’s registered to you.”

“Me? How’d the son of a bitch manage that?”

“It wasn’t hard. Got his hands on your credit card information, email address, the basic personal info, and signed you up.”

“You shut it down yet?”

“Not completely, but enough of the links are broken, nobody can get to what they’re looking for. Davey’s working on it. He’ll have it down tonight.”

Blake eased his strangle hold on the phone, enough to get circulation back in his fingers.

“I’m working on the money trail,” Ron said. “We might be able to nail him that way.”

“Money trail?”

“Forty-nine ninety-five to view video, nineteen ninety-five for still shots.”

“A lot of customers?” Blake closed his eyes. Haylie would come apart if she ever found out a single image had been sold.

“More than a few,” Ron admitted. “Some sick fucks in this world.”

“See if he’s got any other sites set up in my name, or hers, or anybody else you can think of. If you find any, tear them down first and ask questions later.”

“You got it. Call your credit card companies, get new cards, and get a copy of your credit report. If we can’t pin identity theft on him, and the bar association gets wind of this, you’re going to have a headache on your hands.”

“Anything else?” Blake’s lungs burned with pent-up fury and every muscle in his body ached to tear Carl Monroe apart limb by limb.

“He’s trying to provoke you,” Ron said. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

Blake fell back in his chair. “Got any advice I can follow?”

“Keep Haylie close and give me a little time. Assholes like this want attention too bad to stay under the radar. He’ll give us everything we need.”

“Maybe we should just call the police,” Blake said.

“Ordinarily, I’d agree. But if Haylie’s right, and I think she might be, he’ll go after somebody close to her. The cops don’t get in a hurry

'til blood's been shed. It's easier for now, if we only have one person to worry about. We'll call Harper County's finest when we can hand Carl Monroe over on a silver platter."

* * * *

Haylie pulled up in front of the modest brick house she'd grown up in and parked in the street beneath the broad limbs of an old oak. Two cats scattered off the porch and the curtain in the front window fell quietly back in place.

She looked around quickly, and hurried up to the steps. The old screen door springs responded with a screeching groan, and from the living room came the sound of the television.

She slapped her palm against the front door. "Mom, it's me. Open up."

For the next few minutes, the television was the only answer.

"If you don't let me in, I'm sending over an ambulance and the police," Haylie yelled.

The television went silent and her mother's footsteps moved slowly toward the door. Haylie waited while the locks turned and the door opened a couple of inches.

"Get out of here, before he comes back," Maureen said through the crack, her face shadowed in the darkness of the room.

"What'd he do to you?"

"He got mad I went to see you without him. Just lost his temper. I'm fine."

"Let me see." Haylie pushed against the door. Maureen reluctantly stepped aside. As the afternoon light filled the drapery drawn room, she gasped at the sight of her mother's face. One eye had swollen shut and a gash ran from her hairline to her temple. Too overwhelmed with anger and hate and guilt and love to respond with words, she took her mother in her arms and rocked her gently.

Maureen's arms hung limp at her sides. "Don't make a fuss."

“You need to go to the hospital.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Did you black out?”

“Maybe for a minute.”

“Come on,” Haylie said, taking her by the arm.

Maureen jerked away. “No.” Her voice was firm even as her eyes filled with tears.

“You can ride to the hospital with me, or in an ambulance. Your choice.”

Maureen’s fingers went to her head and trembled along the perimeters of the wound.

“You need stitches. You may have a concussion.” Haylie fought to keep her voice calm, to not scream at her mother for protecting the man who’d done this to her.

“I passed out in the kitchen,” Maureen said slowly. “Hit my head on the table when I fell.”

It took Haylie a minute to understand. “No,” she said. “You tell them what happened. Don’t lie for him.”

Maureen lifted her chin in defiance. “That’s what happened. He wasn’t even here. If he had been, he would’ve taken me to the hospital himself.”

Fury and pity swirled together in the pit of Haylie’s stomach, blending together so seamlessly she couldn’t tell one from the other. It was different when she refused to turn him over to police herself. She never once kept silent to protect her father. She only protected the people she cared about, the people who needed her to be strong. She had protected her mother.

“No, Mom.” She crossed the room and picked up the phone next to the sofa. “We’re going to tell them the truth. If you can’t, I will.”

The fallout wouldn’t be pretty, but Haylie didn’t dwell on the possible repercussions as she called for an officer and an ambulance to be sent to her mother’s address. He couldn’t hurt her mother

anymore or make her life miserable or threaten any of the Belles. He'd be back in jail before he could hurt anyone else.

"They won't catch him," Maureen said from where she stood by the door as Haylie placed the phone in the cradle. "He won't ever go back."

Maureen's struggle ripped across her battered features. She had never before betrayed the man she married. Not once. And before Haylie could figure out why she would betray him now, tears filled her mother's eyes.

"He said this is nothing compared to what he's going to do to you." Maureen's body quaked hard with the admission, and her hands fell trembling to her sides. Haylie guided her to the sofa.

"I'm not afraid of him." She folded her mother's bloodstained hands in hers. "He can't ever hurt me worse than he already did."

* * * *

"Judge just issued a warrant for the arrest of Carl Monroe." Ron's voice wasn't filled with half the cockiness it should have been.

Blake grinned into his cell phone and kicked his feet up on the stack of case files on his coffee table. "You work faster than a shot of tequila. How'd you nail him?"

"I didn't. He's wanted for domestic battery."

Blake leaned forward, dropping his feet to the floor. "Battery on who?"

"His wife. Worked her over pretty bad, according to my sources."

Blake ran his hand through his hair. He shouldn't feel relieved, but he couldn't help it. Haylie hadn't been involved.

"I wouldn't expect him to get picked up anytime soon," Ron continued. "He'll run. He's got nothing to lose."

"I can't believe she turned him in." He'd heard enough of Haylie's conversation with her mother to understand where the woman's loyalties lay. Maybe things looked different to her on the

receiving end. All that mattered was the bastard had written his own ticket back to jail, and Haylie wouldn't have to deal with him anymore.

“Haylie’s name is on the report,” Ron said with a heavy sigh. “If he wasn’t already planning to come after her, he will once he figures out she called the police.”

Chapter 10

“You’re like static cling,” Haylie said as Blake wrapped his arms around her and almost made her drop the earring she was putting in her ear. “I can’t get rid of you.”

He stepped back and turned her in a slow twirl. “What do you expect when you look like this?”

With tonight’s cocktail auction to worry about and Blake and Grady constantly underfoot for the past two days, she hadn’t had much time to fret about her father. Her mother wouldn’t accept her phone calls, but Ina Peters called every night with an update. Maureen was recovering and wanting desperately for her husband to come home.

No one had heard so much as a whisper from Carl Monroe. Maybe he had taken the chance to get out of Dodge while he still held a shred of freedom. Or maybe he lurked in the shadows outside her door. Haylie shook off the thought. He wasn’t stupid enough to get that close with Blake and Grady glued to her side.

“You look amazing yourself,” she said as she adjusted Blake’s collar and ran her hands down the pressed lapels of his black tuxedo.

He caught her wrists and pulled her close. “As much as I like this dress, I’m dying to take it off you.”

“You’re going to have to wait. I need it to rake in the dough tonight.”

His lips trailed her neck. “How much money do you need to raise?”

“Truck loads.” She sighed, trying to focus while his tongue sent flames all the way to her toes. “A hundred grand would get us through

the year, but I'll take what I can get. If enough business owners lend support tonight, others will jump onboard soon. That's the plan anyway." She disentangled herself and moved to the mirror.

Blake moved her hair off her shoulder and kissed her neck again, then turned her slowly, hands on her waist, fingers gliding over the blue silk of her dress. The fire in her body didn't compare to what he'd done to her heart. Her feelings for him went beyond sexual. It stretched into terrain she didn't think she'd ever navigate again. "We'll be late," she murmured.

"They can't start without you."

* * * *

"Wow," Ashlyn whispered in Haylie's ear, her eyes glued on Grady as he stood behind the microphone and had the entire room of social piranhas hanging on his every word. "He's a natural."

"Sorry I'm late," Amanda said, taking the barstool across from them.

"No apologies necessary." Haylie let out a low whistle and gave Amanda's date the once over.

Amanda leaned forward as the gorgeous devil she brought with her stopped a waiter to place a drink order. "Research, he's a fitness model."

"If Blake ever leaves me, I'm going to start writing romances," Haylie whispered back.

Ashlyn nodded toward Grady. "Don't change a thing. What you do is amazing."

Haylie's heart swelled. Grady did make her proud. He carefully detailed all the ways the organization would benefit driven young people like himself. He mentioned making mistakes and the importance of Haylie's guidance in his life. He didn't go into detail, or mention his arrest and the upcoming trial, but even if he had she had no doubt he would have kept every one of them on his side

anyway. His polish and finesse despite his rough beginnings was commendable. He was young and bright, and the future was written in his eyes. But Grady wasn't a one-man show. Kara had warmed the crowd up better than anyone could have. Her voice and talent for radio combined with a face and body made for television drew every eye and ear in the place.

Haylie couldn't help but smile. Her friends were her rock. Without them, she wouldn't stand a chance.

Grady stepped down to a round of applause and Kara picked up the mike again. "Alright, folks. You've been freeloading long enough." She paused while laughter filled the room. "Happy hour has ended. Now you're going to pay through your teeth for every drop of alcohol you consume. Who's buying the first round? Only five hundred dollars, for you and one of your closest friends." She paused to wink at a graying gentlemen sitting at the closest bar height table. "And yes, I'll be your friend, Mr. Gentry."

Charles Gentry nodded and summoned the nearest waiter. "A drink for the lady. A scotch for me. And bring my wife a double."

Laughter skittered about the room.

"We're not drinking alone, are we?" Kara began making her way through the crowd, working the tables as the band fired up. In her wake people moved to the dance floor as waiters hurried back and forth to the bar.

Haylie said goodnight to Grady and let Blake lead her to the dance floor. He pulled her close, his palm warm on her back, resting just above the silk that dipped to the base of her spine. "You're doing it, babe. Tonight couldn't be going better."

She smiled up at him. She couldn't argue. Everyone was having a good time, drinks were flowing and the party was just getting started. She was in the midst of one of those moments where the entire world seemed right.

A shiver zipped down her spine, and she turned around expecting to see someone there.

“You cold?” he asked, rubbing the goose bumps that had risen on her skin.

“Just a chill.” She shook off the uneasiness and let him guide her through the music.

After a couple of songs, Kara addressed the crowd again. “I don’t know who’s buying this round, but the price just went up.” She paused for effect then added, “Don’t blame me. Y’all vote republican so you ought to understand inflation. One thousand dollars for you and two of your closest friends.” She lowered her voice to a seductive drawl. “Charlie, are we still friends? Or am I looking for a new man now?” More laughter preceded a chorus of, “I’ll be your friend.”

The generosity ran deep, and by the end of the night as the prices rose higher and the drinks tapered off, Haylie was drunk off satisfaction alone. She was engulfed in a conversation with Charles Gentry’s good natured wife, Mallory, a tireless philanthropist, when a deep voice replaced Kara’s on the microphone. She turned to Blake as he addressed the guests.

“On behalf of the beautiful lady who allowed me to escort her here tonight, Ms. Haylie Monroe, I’d like to thank all of you for drinking like fish.” The crowd responded with their usual joviality. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it’s time for last call. On a brighter note, the bartender just dug up a bottle of Gran Patron Platinum tequila, and I’d like to invite all my friends... and anybody who has a cousin I kept out of the big house ...” He raised his brows and looked around the room, resting here and there on specific individuals to uproarious laughter. “I’d like to invite you to join me in a drink. I’m paying ten thousand dollars for mine, and it’ll cost you the same. Double if your last name is Marshfield.”

Ed Marshfield was quick to comeback. “I’ll pay double when you start driving a Chevrolet.”

“I’ll come by the showroom tomorrow,” Blake responded with a smile. “Now, who’s joining me besides Ed?”

Waiters hurried to deliver the shots around the room as Haylie stared in amazement, first at Blake then at the guests' response. He had easily raised more money for the foundation in five minutes than had been raised all night.

Kara sidled up next to her with a shot glass in each hand. She passed one to Haylie. "Compliments of the Gentrys."

Haylie raised her glass. "To the Belles."

"And to that hot ass devil over there who just kicked this party into high gear," Kara added, nodding toward Blake.

Haylie raised her glass in Blake's direction then went to thank him.

She waited at his side for the last of the drinks to be delivered. "I'd like everyone to join me in a toast," he said. "To the most amazing woman I've ever known. A woman with vision, determination, intelligence, and... I could go on all night." He gave Haylie his most devilish wink. "And when she lets me, I do." The crowd roared. Blake waited for the laughter to die down. "In all seriousness though, A.L.F.A.A. was Ms. Haylie Monroe's conception and the answer to a lot of prayers. Without her and support from all of you, A.L.F.A.A. would not be possible. So to Ms. Haylie Monroe, and to all of you." He raised his glass.

Haylie resisted the urge to shimmy as the liquor burned a trail to her belly. Even expensive tequila was made to kill ya!

She handed her glass to one of the waiters, took Blake's hand and leaned in to place a kiss below his ear. "Thank you," she said.

He caught her gaze and trailed his fingers up her bare back. She recognized the look, before he spoke the words. "I love you," he said.

She pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

Kara stepped up to her side. "Ready to make a grand exit before these people realize how much money they've pissed away? Literally, not figuratively."

* * * *

A row of limousines waited along the curb outside the Hyatt on Mobile bay. Blake handed his valet ticket to a young man in a short waistcoat and tucked Haylie into his side. His warmth against her bare shoulders countered the cool breeze off the water until a black BMW pulled up and their valet stepped out.

“What the hell?” Blake said, dropping his arm from her shoulders. He strode over and knelt in front of his car. Haylie didn’t know how to read the expression carved into his face when he glanced her way.

She started for him, but he reached her first and guided her to the door the valet held open. As soon as the young man closed Haylie’s door, Blake pulled him aside. The two spoke in tones too low for her to hear, even after she put her window down.

Something had happened, and judging from Blake’s reaction it was more than a scratched bumper. She hadn’t noticed anything wrong with the car when it pulled up. There was a vanity plate on the front she hadn’t bothered to read. She’d never read it before either, never even noticed it. She’d never seen Blake pay so much attention to his car either. He kept it clean, but he wasn’t one of those men who kissed his wheels goodnight. He treated his BMW more like transportation than a toy.

“Is everything ok?” she asked as he reached through the open window and grabbed a small leather case out of the glove compartment.

“Don’t worry. Everything’s fine.” He and the valet disappeared to the front of the car again, both of them kneeling too low for her to see what they were doing.

After a couple of minutes, he dropped something on the floor behind his seat and slid behind the wheel. Halfway across the bay bridge before he said, “Your father paid us a visit. He put a plate on the car. ‘Daddy’s Girl’.”

Haylie tasted the tequila at the back of her throat. “Pull over,” she said, barely holding the vomit down.

She had the door open before Blake came to a stop in the emergency lane. With her chest pressed against the concrete guardrail on the side of the bridge, she threw up into the bay while he held her hair and the wind whipped her silk dress around her legs.

“He’s going to hurt somebody,” she said, when her body gave up the revolt. “One of the Belles.”

Chapter 11

“Blue’s your color, Sunshine.” Carl Monroe’s voice was like a knife piercing the morning calm of Haylie’s bedroom.

“What do you want from me?” she said into the phone. Fury flashed like a flood through her.

“Just calling to tell you how beautiful you looked. And that friend of yours, what’s her name? Kara? I recognize her voice from somewhere. She’s a stunner.”

“Leave her alone,” Haylie warned.

“They’ve got this cute little dachshund down at the animal shelter. And that little princess from Birmingham who runs the place sure was nice to talk to.”

“Stay away from my friends.” Her voice held steady, even as the tremor of fear worked its way through her and the phone jarred against her cheek.

“I’ll tell you who gave me a hard-on though,” he continued, as if she hadn’t said a word. “That brainy little redhead writes some sexy stuff. I’ll bet she knows a thing or two about the bedroom. Probably could make more money between the sheets than between the pages. What do you think, Sunshine? Think men would pay for her?”

Haylie’s spine stiffened.

Blake reached over and spread his hand across her back. “Hang up. Hang up and call the police.”

“Better not listen to your boyfriend. You can’t trust him as much as you think you can.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Video is so much better than still shots. He must’ve liked it. He’s there in bed with you now.”

Haylie’s hand trembled. Blake snatched the phone away from her.

“Monroe!” he yelled, then followed with a swear. The dial tone cut through the silence of the room as he put the phone back in its dock by the bed. “What’d he say to you?”

Haylie rocked slowly against her pillow, but said nothing.

“Baby?”

Her skin puckered with goose bumps and a deep chill settled into her bones. She didn’t want to believe him. Her father lied. He manipulated people. Blake wouldn’t have seen the video and not told her. He wouldn’t have watched it.

“My God, you’re freezing. Honey, talk to me.” He pulled the covers over her and wrapped his body around hers. “He can’t hurt you. I’m right here.”

“He said you saw the video.” Accusation filled her voice.

“I had it taken down. It’s gone now.”

She tried to grasp what he meant, but the words didn’t make sense. “Taken down?”

“I have a friend who knows computers. It’s gone. The whole website.”

“Website?” She choked on the sob that jumped from her throat.

“I wasn’t going to tell you. I took care of it. You don’t have to worry about it.”

She struggled away from him and crossed the room, her body like a block of ice.

“How many people saw it?” She couldn’t keep her teeth from chattering as she pulled a heavy sweater and a pair of jeans from her closet.

He watched her from the bed. “I don’t know.”

“Did you like it?” Her voice cracked and she scrubbed the tears from her face. She felt sick. Betrayed.

“What?”

“Did it make you want to fuck me? Is that why you’re here now?”

“Haylie. You know better.”

“What do I know? How many times did you watch it?”

“God damnit!” He bolted off the bed, and came toward her. He’d never shouted at her before. She’d never found out how far she could push him. He towered over her, his chest within inches of hers, anger shooting off him in flames. She grimaced expecting the pain of his grip, but his hands were gentle and when he spoke again his voice was low. “If I had actually seen that video, I would be out hunting Carl Monroe with a baseball bat right now.” His breath staggered. “I hope to hell the police find him first because I will kill that man if I get my hands on him.” He cupped her face. “You can trust me, honey. Don’t ever think you can’t.”

She looked up to see the love in his eyes, and her heart squeezed. “Why do you put up with me?”

His thumb traced her jaw. He lowered his head slowly and took her mouth in a kiss that started out gentle but grew more passionate with each stroke of his tongue. Fire burned in her belly. Flames licked at her nipples and danced between her legs.

His naked body pressed against her clothed one and she walked him back to the bed. Hands on his shoulders, she coaxed him to sit. He reached for the bottom of her sweater, but she took his hands and slowly sank to her knees, kissing a trail down his chest, over the smooth skin of his abs, and the hard muscle packed beneath. His cock stretched toward her mouth and a low groan rumbled through his chest.

“Honey, get up here in bed with me.” Breath heated his words.

She shook her head, and raked her fingers through the short dark hair that trailed down his lower abdomen before reaching low to caress his balls and tease the sensitive skin behind them. They drew tight in her hand and his cock jumped.

In the dim light filtering through the blinds, the drop of dew on the broad head glistened. She stroked his length once, before taking him in her mouth.

He hissed in a sharp breath and gripped her hair. His hips pushed in a slow rhythm and his thighs tensed.

She loved the feel of his cock against her tongue, of his strong body struggling to hold back. She loved everything about him. She sucked, drawing a lazy path with her tongue and following the cues of his strangled groans and quick breaths.

His hand fisted in the comforter and his grip tightened on her hair.

“Honey...”

She ignored his warning, sucking harder, taking him to the point of no return with every stroke of her hand. His cock gave a final swell and his whole body stiffened.

She didn't stop until the last spasm of his orgasm subsided and he pulled her into his arms.

* * * *

Just before lunch Grady came through the door grinning from ear to ear.

“I think you found your calling last night.” Haylie's carefully applied makeup and resolve to fight fire with fire hid most of the remnants of her early morning run-in with her father. Only the ache in her chest for the way she had treated Blake refused to be masked. Even after they made love, the guilt remained. Trusting him should come naturally. He shouldn't have to fight for it tooth and nail. “I just got a preliminary total from the Hyatt,” she said. “Are you ready for this?”

“Hurry up.” He rubbed his hands together, unable to hide his excitement. “I've got news of my own.”

“Just over three hundred thousand dollars! I never imagined... If it wasn't for you, Blake and Kara.” She shook her head. “You all were a powerhouse.”

“Is that all?” He waved her off, pretending her news was nothing compared to his.

“You can top that?” She raised her brows in a challenge.

“Blake worked a deal. I dropped the names of a couple of thugs my buddies deal with sometimes and my charges are going to be dismissed.”

“He can do that?” She wasn't sure whether she should be angry the law could so easily be manipulated or just grateful he'd taken care of Grady the way he had.

“He said it didn't hurt that somebody who came to the auction can influence those kinds of decisions. He wouldn't say who he was talking about, but he had it all worked out when I met him down at the station this morning. You've got a pretty cool boyfriend, Homma.” Grady grabbed a box of powdered donuts out of the pantry and moved on to the refrigerator. “You need more milk,” he said, shaking the carton. Without bothering to get a glass or a plate, he bellied up to the counter. Lucy assumed his begging position, paws on the counter, snout centered between them, and eyebrows lifted into a perfect pout.

While Grady fed him a donut, and Lucy licked the crumbs he dropped off the tile, Haylie slipped off to her room and dialed Blake's number. “I don't think I apologized to you enough this morning,” she said when he answered.

“You want to apologize some more?” His sexy laugh put a wide smile on her face.

“And I want to thank you for what you did for Grady.”

“He's a good kid. He doesn't have to be dragged through the system and tagged with a record to learn his lesson.”

“I know.”

“Did you just admit you were wrong? Do some criminals deserve a second chance? I think Satan just got frostbite.”

“You feeling cold?” She couldn’t have landed a better devil if she tried.

“Can I come over?”

“You’re asking permission? Hell did freeze over.”

“Be there in an hour?”

“Ok, but I’ve got dinner plans that don’t include you. I’m meeting the Belles at the Crab Shack.” She couldn’t protect them from her father any longer unless they knew who to watch out for and what he was capable of.

“Got dessert plans too?”

“How about a double helping of apology with a great big thank you on top served in bed.”

Chapter 12

Blake held Haylie against his chest as waves challenged his foothold and the waning sun turned the sky shades of orange and purple. She was quiet, guarded.

Telling the Belles about her past wouldn't be easy for her. Her cheek pressed against his heart, she clung to his neck, and their hips bumped with every movement of the water around them.

"I think it's getting close to dinner time for the sharks," she said, interrupting his thoughts.

"Come on." He lifted her thighs and settled her legs around his waist. "I couldn't blame one of them for taking a bite out of you."

She smiled and fastened her arms tighter around his neck. "You haven't bitten me yet."

"The night is young and the moon is full." He carried her up the beach and laid her in the sand before collapsing on top of her. Her wet hair hung in thick strands over her shoulders, and sand dusted her skin like sugar. He knew the map of her body as if it was the route home, and still the need to explore every valley, swell and curve bore so deep into him he couldn't fight it. He brought his mouth down between her breasts to feel the beat of her heart on his lips and taste the salt on her skin. He trailed kisses up her chest to the gentle slope at the base of her neck. Her hands held firm at his sides, her fingers and sharp grains of sand dug into his skin.

"What is it, honey?" he whispered close to her ear. "What's holding you back?"

She turned her gaze on him. "I haven't told you to stop."

"You're not exactly urging me forward."

“Since when do you need urging?”

He rolled to the side and leaned on his elbow, staring down at her. “Your friendship won’t change when you tell them. That’s what you’re worried about, isn’t it?” He finally understood what kind of number her parents had done on her. All these years, she thought she was to blame and anyone who found out would turn on her the way her mother had.

She held her bottom lip between her teeth, and stared at something over his shoulder.

“I love you more than I ever have, and the Belles will too.” He leaned in for a kiss. Her lips were like a drug and her tongue had a direct line to his dick. One stroke and he turned rock-hard. Two and insatiable hunger whipped through him. He pulled himself away before he had to drag her back in the water. “As soon as your father is back behind bars, I want you to start planning the wedding.”

Her eyes widened in shock.

“You heard me. I’m not letting you get away from me again. You’re going to marry me this time whether you want to or not.”

Haylie laughed.

“I’m serious.” He pressed his lips to her forehead. “I hired Ron Donald to find him and keep an eye on you. He’ll start surveillance on your condo at eight o’clock. And I’ll be back later.”

Her hands dragged saltwater and coarse sand up his back. “I love you.”

He nuzzled her ear. “Ready to go in?”

“Go ahead. I think I’ll stay down here a little while longer.”

* * * *

Her heart still pounding from his devilish proposal, Haylie kissed Blake goodbye and ran her fingers through the sand as he made his way up through the dunes. She dug her toes beneath the warm water

washing up on the shore and let her mind wander until the early evening light began to fade.

She stood up to brush the sand from her legs. The warm breeze whipped through her hair and a chill trickled down her spine. She twisted her head around. She had the beach to herself except for the broad figure of a man standing on the concrete pavilion between her condo and the gulf. He'd probably been there the whole time, enjoying the fading light and the hypnotic rhythm of the waves. She shook off the uneasy feeling and began making her way home.

She was halfway across the pavilion when she heard unhurried footsteps behind her. The same uneasy feeling that had come over her at the water zipped down her spine again. The man she'd seen standing on the pavilion wasn't her father. He was too big, tall and wide enough to be a linebacker.

She reached the other side of the pavilion and began traversing the wood walkway that led past the back of the buildings. Up ahead, Old Mr. Dodson's television flickered through his sliding glass door. If she screamed he'd never hear her.

The lights in her condo shone onto her lanai and Lucy stood at the door barking frantically, his tail straight as an arrow. The footsteps behind her matched her pace. Whoever it was could have caught her by now. Maybe he wasn't after her. Or maybe the person at her back was her father and not the big man she'd seen. Carl Monroe would savor the hunt, would salivate over the scent of her fear.

The closer she got to her condo, the louder Lucy's barks became. He jumped up and threw his paws against the glass, scratching frantically to get out. A ridge of hair stood up along the center of his back.

She glanced down the row of condominiums. Four duplexes past her own, smoke curled up from a grill on the patio.

She took off at a sprint. Lucy's barks echoed in her ears, and her bare feet pounded the wood planks. Behind her hammered the labored breath and heavy steps of her pursuer.

Haylie ran as hard as she could toward the scent of grilled hamburgers and the music of Jimmy Buffet. Just as she reached the first slats of railing a man slipped inside the condo, closing the sliding door behind him and cutting off the sounds of steel drums and guitar.

Inside the condo animated people were engrossed in conversation and margaritas. A man made his way to the kitchen carrying a platter stacked high with hamburger patties and toasted buns. She whipped through the opening in the railing and crossed the narrow patio in three steps. Grabbing the slider's handle like she owned the place, she jerked the door open enough to slither through, then slammed it behind her and flipped the lock in place.

The conversation stilled. A man yelled, "What the hell!"

Haylie bent over at the waist to catch her breath and held her hand up in peace. "Somebody... chasing me..." she managed as the adrenalin that flooded her system poured sweat from her body and hammered her heart in her chest.

The room half-emptied as the men set down their drinks and pushed past her to go outside. Two of the women checked her over while another picked up the phone to call the police.

"Somebody, turn that music down. I can't hear!" the woman with the phone yelled.

The stereo went silent and Haylie kneeled on the carpet by the door.

The woman holding the phone said, "They want to know what he looks like."

Haylie slowly shook her head. "I don't know."

Three of the men stepped through the open door. "Ain't nobody out there now." The one talking held up a battered ball cap. "Found this. But that's about it."

A loud pop rang from somewhere in the complex, like a single firework. Haylie jumped.

"Backfire," one of the men said. "Old Henry's grandson is fixing up that Ford Fairlane."

“Sorry I bothered you.” Haylie stepped onto the patio. Maybe Blake hadn’t left yet. He might have taken a shower to wash off the seawater. If not, she’d grab her keys and go to his house. She had made it as far as the wooden path when one of the women called out.

“John, go with her. Don’t let her walk out there alone.”

“I just live a few doors down. I’ll be fine.”

John stood out on the walkway behind his condo and watched her Haylie make her way home.

“Thank you,” she called back to him as she reached her patio and opened the slider. Her condo was silent as a tomb. The only sound came from the rush of waves onto the shore.

It wasn’t until she shut the door behind her that she realized what was missing.

“Lucy?”

The only response was a low whimper, or had she imagined that? She called Lucy again. Nothing.

“Grady?” Maybe he had changed his mind about staying in his dorm. Lucy could have followed him to the guestroom to drop his bag. Or maybe he’d taken him for a walk. No. Lucy’s leash was draped over the doorknob of the coat closet.

“Blake?”

She made her way down the hall, flipping the light switch as she passed it. Lucy didn’t charge out of one of the bedrooms to meet her. There was no sound of water lapping the toilet bowl because someone forgot to put the lid down.

“Lucy? Here, boy!”

She didn’t realize the depth of her mistake until she reached the end of the hall. The soft glow of her bedside lamp lit her room, and in the dim light her father grinned at her like a hunter who’d just bagged the biggest buck of the season.

“If you’d come along the way I wanted you to, the dog wouldn’t have had to die,” he said. “I always liked dogs.”

She scanned the room, searching the shadowy corners. Lucy wasn't there. "You bastard." She sniffled. Her hands fisted at her sides.

He laughed and moved closer, halving the distance between them. "You're not a fighter, Haylie. Never have been. Don't start acting tough now. I've got men lined up who've paid good money for a show. They don't want a fight. And neither do you."

Bile rose in her throat and fear gripped her, but she willed herself to stay calm, to remember the techniques they'd practiced in the defense class Amanda had dragged her to. He wasn't a big man. With a swift kick to the groin and an eye jab, she could level him long enough to get out the door and probably make it all the way to her car. Even if she only got as far as the parking lot, the cops should be there any minute. She just needed to hold him off long enough for the police to arrive.

She took a step back.

"Don't run, Sunshine. We're just going to walk out of here and go for a ride."

"Fuck you." The words ground out between clenched teeth.

He reached for her. She grabbed his wrist, twisted and stepped into his chest like she'd been taught. Before she could leverage her body to send him to the ground, his other arm came around and the cold barrel of a gun rammed into her throat.

"Uh, uh, uh," he warned. "Don't piss Daddy off." He twisted his wrist free of her grip. "The way I see it, you owe me a pretty penny. Think of all the money I lost sitting behind bars. All the nights I couldn't sleep with my wife. And what am I supposed to do now? Work at the 7-11? Hell, they won't even hire me. I'm a convicted felon, a sex offender." He twisted his hand in her hair and jerked her head back. She bit down, refusing to cry out, to give him the satisfaction of her pain. "You're going to make plenty of money for me tonight."

He ran the gun over her chest and down her side. "I'm glad you kept yourself in such fine shape. Won't be hard to sell you at all."

A giant of a man came to a stop in the doorway. "She's fast," he said and pushed his hand over his bald head. "Lost my damn hat." His Foo Manchu carved the only lines on his round face and a huge tattoo ran the length of his forearm. An anchor. "We better get her out of here, before the cops come to check out that gunshot."

Haylie opened her mouth to scream, but her father jabbed the gun into her windpipe hard enough to leave her wheezing.

"Come on, baby girl," he growled in her ear. "Better keep the bruising to a minimum. It don't look good on camera, and you're gonna be a star."

"You'll have to kill me first." She spat at the bald man and twisted her head around fast enough to catch her father's forearm between her teeth.

* * * *

With the town streets in the rearview, and the two-lane blacktop that led out to the beach ahead, Blake drummed his thumbs against the steering wheel. The speedometer registered close to seventy when he eased off the gas near the intersection of Highway 59 and Mandido Beach Drive and blue lights flashed across his windshield.

"Shit."

He slowed down and pulled to the shoulder. Now would be the time to have a great set of tits and a killer smile. Blake steered his car onto the crushed shells that lined the roadway and reached into his glove compartment for registration and proof of insurance.

His car rocked as the police car sailed past him, siren wailing. In his rearview, another police cruiser, lights flashing, came up fast, then sped by. Had to be an accident or a homicide to pull more than one of them out in that big of a hurry.

A hundred yards up the road, a familiar red Hummer swerved and sped toward Blake in the oncoming lane. Larry Melvin's driver wouldn't stay out of jail long at this rate. Blake gripped the wheel of his car, prepared for an evasive maneuver if the guy was smashed or just felt like running over somebody. The Hummer whizzed past, windows tinted too dark to catch a glimpse of anyone inside. Even the windshield was darker than the law allowed.

In the rearview, he watched the Hummer leave the pavement long enough to kick up a cloud of dust from the shoulder before the driver jerked it back on the road again. Idiot. It'd be a miracle if he didn't kill somebody tonight.

Two miles down the road, he saw the flash of cruiser lights again. The parking lot of Haylie's condo was lit up like a laser light show and officers covered the ground between the buildings like an army of ants. The whole damn department must have come out.

Every nerve in his body stung like it had a bee buried butt deep in it. He whipped into the parking lot, and ignoring the arm signals of a uniformed officer, parked his car into the slot next to Haylie's.

Before he could get the door open two officers swarmed him. "Sir, are you a resident?"

"No. What's going on?"

"We'll have to ask you to leave. For your own safety."

"My girlfriend lives here. She's been getting threats."

"What number is hers?" the officer asked.

"One oh two. In the first building there."

The officer's eyes darted to his partner and Blake jerked his head toward Haylie's door in time to see an officer emerge with a figure in his arms, cradled like a baby.

"Haylie!" He pushed past the cops and tore off toward her condo.

Within three feet the officers had him by the arms as he struggled to break free. "She's not in there, sir," one of them said. "We'll need to ask you some questions."

"Where is she?"

“Sir, please.”

Blake settled down enough to allow the police officer to lead him over to the hood of his car.

He never should have left her alone. What in the hell had he been thinking? “Is she...” He couldn’t finish, couldn’t dare ask what he feared the most.

“She hasn’t been located,” the officer said. “Now, you said she’s received threats?”

Blake tried to wrap his mind around the officer’s words. “What do you mean hasn’t been located? Do you have reason to believe something happened to her?”

“If she was in trouble, where would she have gone?” the officer asked.

Blake rattled off the names of the Belles and keyed Kara’s number up on his cell phone. The officer copied the information, while his partner dialed Kara.

“That’s her car.” Blake pointed at the year old Camry parked next to his car. “I just left her an hour ago.”

Another officer approached. “We’re taking the dog to the emergency clinic. It’s still alive.”

“Lucy’s hurt?” Blake’s mind reeled. What in the hell had happened in there? “Call Ashlyn Langford, Mandido Beach Animal Shelter. She’ll take care of the dog.”

The officer nodded and turned away.

“You’ve got to tell me what happened.” Blake could barely hold it together. His entire world rocked beneath his feet. He couldn’t lose her this way. His muscles burned, and his hands curled into fists.

“Sir.” The officer’s patience was forced. “If you’ve got information that will help us find your girlfriend, we need you to tell us what it is.”

“If she’s not here, why isn’t somebody out there looking for her?” Blake yelled. “What the hell is the whole fucking department standing

around here for?" He had to find her. He didn't have time to waste jerking off with these idiots.

"Do you know who would have abducted her?"

"Abducted?" The word slammed into him, as if nothing had made sense before those three syllables were uttered. He had to put his palm on the warm hood of the car to stay on his feet. "Her father," he said. "Carl Monroe. Convicted pedophile recently released from prison, skipped parole, and has a warrant for domestic battery. He broke into Haylie's house and threatened her, but you guys didn't think that was enough to go on." His arms shook with restraint. "We've filed several reports against him."

The officer jotted furiously in his little notebook. "Anything else you know about the guy? Friends? Associates? Employer? Where he might have taken her?"

Blake shook his head, and racked his brain for anything he'd read in the case files that might lend a clue.

Another officer approached swinging a plastic evidence bag with a tattered red baseball cap inside. "One of the men at the place she went for help found this when he went after the guy."

Blake squinted at the baseball hat. He'd seen the logo emblazoned on it before. "Hold that up."

The officer with the notebook nodded his approval, and the other officer held the bag toward Blake.

"M3X Productions is Larry Melvin's company," Blake said, and then with a glimmer of hope added, "I just passed his red Hummer on Mandido Beach Drive headed toward the Florida line. He was almost at the intersection of Highway Fifty-Nine, swerving all over the road."

The officer radioed the information to dispatch, asking for officers to pull over any vehicle matching the description on Highway 59, and to call in help from the Escambia County Sheriff's office in case Melvin had headed into Pensacola. He sent two of the uniforms to Melvin's house to see what they could find there.

Blake shook his head. They'd never find her at Melvin's. He kept his house clean as a morgue. He'd gloated about that and a lot of other stuff that was protected by attorney-client privilege. But Melvin had screwed with the wrong person if he expected any privileges.

He should have made the connection before. Melvin's pornographic production company made the perfect set-up for a sicko like Carl Monroe to hook up with. The first time he'd sold Haylie, his only outlets for profit were grainy VHS tapes and still photographs. Now with Melvin's production company he had digital equipment and the Internet. Blake's blood ran so hot, he could feel the burn.

"I'll need your personal information," the officer with the pad, said.

Blake rattled off his cell phone number and dug his driver's license out of his wallet.

"You're the attorney that defended Melvin?"

"Good memory."

"We've been after him for years, and thanks to you he's back on the streets."

Blake pushed his hands through his hair and tried to recover from what felt like a punch in the gut. "I didn't know he operated this way."

"Bad guys are bad. They operate anyway that suits them." The officer handed Blake his driver's license. "Don't go far. If we have any questions we'll call."

Blake's phone rattled in his pocket. "You seen her?" he asked without bothering with pleasantries.

"Hell no!" Kara yelled. "What's going on?"

"Did she contact one of the other girls?"

"Amanda's here. Ashlyn hauled ass to the animal hospital. Haylie was supposed to meet us for dinner, but she hasn't called any of us."

"What do you know about her father?" Blake was already moving toward his car. There was no time to waste standing around a parking lot.

“Nothing. She’s never said a word about him.” Kara repeated the question to Amanda and turned her attention back to the phone. “Nope. Not a word. He must be a real bastard.”

“He is.” He already had the key in the ignition and shifted into reverse. “And he’s got her.” He aimed his car toward the street. “Anything else she refuses to talk about?”

Kara consulted with Amanda. “She won’t set foot on the military base.”

“N.A.S. Pensacola?”

“That’s the one. We tried to take her to the museum and the Officer’s Club a couple of times, but she refused to go. Never would say why. Come to think of it, she doesn’t go to Pensacola at all. Ever.”

Pensacola Naval Air Station wasn’t far, barely across the Florida line and in the direction Melvin’s Hummer had been headed. Armed guards were stationed at every entrance and without a military ID or a really good reason, it was going to be hard as hell to get past the gates. Since September 11th, the military didn’t play around. Even great tits and a killer smile wouldn’t get him past those sailors, and if they would, he didn’t have them.

“Start heading toward Pensacola, I’ve got a phone call to make. I’ll call you back.”

Chapter 13

Footsteps and voices echoed off the ceilings and metal walls of the building her father and the buffoon he called Hank had her in. Haylie couldn't see through the blindfold that bit into the corners of her eyes and the back of her head, but the acoustics of the place told her they were the only three people there. For now.

She explored her surroundings as best she could with her hands duct taped behind her back. They had thrown her on something soft. Not a mattress. It had less structure. More like an oversized bean bag. Velvet. The floor she walked in on, still barefoot and in the swimsuit she'd worn to the beach, was concrete.

Her father's boot heels clicked closer and the door at the far end of the building rattled shut.

She strained her ears to see if he was alone. She didn't detect anyone else and she allowed herself a breath of relief. The torture wouldn't start yet. Her father didn't care to touch her. He only cared about the money he could make.

"Comfortable?" Carl Monroe asked.

She clamped her mouth closed, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a response. An open hand connected with her cheek. The sting sparked a flame of determination. He would pay for everything he had ever done to her. Everything. She wasn't the tongue-tied little girl he'd tangled with the first time.

"Where's your friend?" The first time she blocked out as many details as she could, but not this time. Tonight, she wouldn't forget a thing. Every person involved would pay for everything they did.

“Don’t worry, Hank’ll be back. For his efforts tonight, I’ve promised him a freebie.”

“Didn’t think you could handle me by yourself this time?”

Her father snorted. “I didn’t need Hank’s help with you. I brought him along in case your boyfriend tried to play hero.”

She winced. Blake wouldn’t be playing hero. He wouldn’t even be missing her yet, and the Belles would just be sitting down to dinner. Who knew how long it would take them to sound the alarm.

She wasn’t going to delude herself. There wouldn’t be a grand cavalry running into to rescue her. This wasn’t a movie. This was her life.

He fumbled at the back of her head and snatched the blindfold off, pulling hair with it. She struggled against her wrist and ankle constraints to no avail and squinted beneath the brightness of the lights aimed down on her. A no-budget movie set surrounded her, cheap spotlights and a backdrop painted like a desert sunset behind a wide purple velvet bean bag. Off to one side, a steer skull leered at her from the base of a fake cactus.

Beyond this little studio area she could make out the concrete floors, metal walls and open rafters she had guessed were there. She was in a warehouse. An old, half dilapidated warehouse. The same place he’d taken her the first time. Only then it had been different. There’d been no elaborate set up, just a mattress on the floor.

Haylie shut the memories off before they consumed her. This time she wasn’t a little girl who still held out for a chance her father would change his mind, that he would save her. That he loved her enough to protect her. Or that he loved her at all.

A helicopter beat the air in the distance. It wasn’t coming for her, just part of a military exercise.

“Ready to be a movie star?” he asked.

She clamped her teeth together. “What makes you think anybody wants to buy this trash?”

“There’s a World Wide Web of customers, Sunshine. It’s not like the old days when we had to whisper and pass notes.” He nodded to a monitor set up in the corner. “Tonight we’re streaming live video. Instant stardom. How many Hollywood actresses would give their left tit for that? We’re calling it ‘Buried in the Desert.’ Catchy title don’t you think?”

Something in his eye sent a chill down her spine. The title held more than innuendo.

“You’re going to kill me, aren’t you?”

“*I’m* not.” He glared at her. He’d always hated it when she didn’t catch on as fast as he expected her to. That’s how she’d become so good at reading his mind. At reading between the lines, in general.

“Who is?”

“That’s a surprise.” His smile reflected pure evil. The corners of his mouth twitched and his thumbs rolled across his fingers in anticipation. He glanced toward the computer monitor. “But with all these witnesses, you can rest assured he’ll rot in jail.”

* * * *

Blake put his cell phone on speaker and dialed Kara’s number. He didn’t have time to waste. Larry Melvin had answered his home phone and swore Blake hadn’t seen him out on the road. After a few well placed threats that blew his attorney-client privilege to hell and back, Melvin admitted Hank Hawkins might have taken the Hummer out. And he might be working on a project in an old warehouse off Fairfield Avenue in Pensacola. None of Blake’s threats got him to give up the address, but at least he had a direction to start looking in.

He’d already put a call into to Officer Levitt and told him what he knew. The time it would take to coordinate a police effort across state lines might cost Haylie her life. Somebody needed to scour every warehouse anywhere near Fairfield Avenue.

Kara picked up the phone on the second ring. "You know your way around Pensacola?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"We're looking for a warehouse off Fairfield. An old warehouse. There might be a red Hummer parked nearby, but look for anything that looks out of place."

"Amanda's with me."

"When you get in the area call me."

He hung up and pressed the accelerator to the floor.

* * * *

With her legs curled behind her back, Haylie could just reach the tape around her ankles, but the tight binding around her wrists made maneuvering her hands difficult. Her fingers kept getting in the way of one another and they were tingling and clumsy from the lack of circulation.

Once she got her nails under the edge of the tape it peeled up easily. Still, the removal was slow going. She ignored the burn in her biceps and the pain in her wrists. Her father wouldn't be gone long. And when he came back he probably wouldn't be alone.

The lights beamed down bright enough to spring sweat from her pores and the cameras stood at the ready. The only thing he needed now was an audience and someone to kill her.

Carl Monroe was not a patient man. He wouldn't be standing around all night twiddling his thumbs. Waiting for anything pissed him off, and tonight his mood was too good to be running behind schedule.

At the far end of the building a door opened. She worked faster, but fumbled. The duct tape she'd already unwound adhered itself to her thumb and precious seconds ticked off as she worked to jerk her hand free.

Footsteps echoed off the ceilings and walls. Her father hadn't come back alone. Her muscles burned from the strain, and she had no way to judge how much tape remained. The footsteps drew close, but then another sound stopped her heart. The protests of someone struggling. The deep guttural screams of someone whose mouth had been gagged or taped. Her father's swears followed a shuffled of feet.

"Don't make me put a bullet in you," Carl Monroe warned. "Haylie should've taught you not to piss me off."

Her brain screamed. Who did he have? One of the Belles? Judging from the ferocity of the struggle, probably Kara. She had to get her feet free. Together the two of them could put up a pretty good fight. Kara didn't have a weak bone in her body.

She ripped the last of the tape from her ankles and searched for a place to hide. Nothing but the obvious. The prop screen. The first place he'd look. She stretched her legs and rotated her ankles to get the blood flowing again. They were getting closer. She started to her feet, but sank back down. If he found her gone, nothing would stop him from killing Kara. The man had a gun. And a goon.

She tucked her legs back behind her and jerked her arms. The duct tape binding her hands, but it didn't budge.

* * * *

"Blake, we're here. Just about to turn onto Fairfield off Navy Boulevard. Which way should we go?"

Blake drove around a rundown building next to the railroad tracks. Chains locked all the doors from the outside and the windows were too high to use for easy entry. He'd checked four buildings, and so far none of them looked like anything had gone on inside for a long time.

"Go right," he said. "Start checking any big buildings on the right side of the road. I'm working the left."

"We'll find her." The determination in Amanda's voice steeled him.

“You’re damn right we will.”

Somewhere Haylie was in a fight for her life. Failure wasn’t an option.

On either side of the street, rundown and thriving businesses stood side by side. This wasn’t your typical warehouse district, and true warehouses around here were few. Most of the larger buildings were abandoned strip malls and department stores. Blake pulled into the next parking lot on his side of the street.

“What do you see?” He spoke into the dark interior of his car.

Kara’s voice came through the phone. “We just passed a big building set off the street. The lot is wooded and blocked off with a big chain link fence. Looks like it might have been an old junkyard or used car lot.”

“Is the fence locked?”

“We can get in if we have to, but I’m not sure we should waste that kind of time unless we really think she’s in there.”

His heart raced. He couldn’t afford to make the wrong call. “Take a quick look down the rest of the street. Go as far as the railroad tracks. If we haven’t found her, we’ll go jump that fence.” Hot sweat trailed beneath his arms. If she was in there and he’d just lost precious time not getting to her... If he was too late... He slammed the heel of his hand against the steering wheel. Damn it. They needed an army out here looking for her, and so far he hadn’t passed a single police car.

Ron Donald had his eye on Melvin’s place and the places he was known to operate out on Mandido Beach. Police were searching for Melvin’s Hummer. And still Blake knew they weren’t doing enough. He wasn’t doing enough. Nothing would be enough until he had her in his arms again.

Blake abandoned another parking lot and pulled back onto Fairfield, running the light that changed to red as he approached.

* * * *

“Grady!” Haylie’s blood ran cold when her father stepped under the bright lights with Grady at the tip of his gun. From the looks of the shiner around Hank’s eye, and the thin stream of blood that trickled from his nose, Grady hadn’t made it easy for them to get him there. He was a born fighter. He wouldn’t have survived otherwise. Just because he didn’t have a temper, didn’t mean he couldn’t defend himself.

The big oaf wouldn’t have stood a chance without a gun, which meant he and her father each had their own. Grady’s arms had been duct taped behind his back. Another strip of wide silver tape covered his mouth. When he saw Haylie, he threw a series of kicks and twists that left both men with marks they wouldn’t soon forget.

Carl left his partner to take Grady’s onslaught and went directly to Haylie. He pressed the barrel of his gun to her temple and yelled Grady’s name. “You ready to watch her die?”

Grady froze. His eyes flashed in a way that told Carl Monroe exactly what would happen to him if he laid a hand on her.

“He won’t do it,” Haylie mouthed.

Her father was bluffing. If he killed her now, there’d be no witnesses other than Grady and the goon. Carl Monroe didn’t do anything without an audience. The bigger the audience the better. And his plans didn’t include killing her himself. He’d told her that much.

She shifted just enough to make sure her freed ankles were completely hidden behind her back. Hank walked Grady over to the bean bag and shoved him off balance. He landed next to her and immediately threw a kick to the wider man’s groin, narrowly missing his target. Hank hefted himself on Grady’s legs with a grunt and caught the roll of tape Carl tossed him.

Grady struggled, but settled down when Carl leveled his gun at Haylie again.

Carl checked his watch. "It's almost show time." He jerked his head toward the computer and Hank moved off Grady to go set up the feed.

"Here's a few ground rules," he said, waving his gun from Haylie to Grady and back again. "People have paid good money for our little show tonight."

"Leave Grady out of this," Haylie said. "He's never done anything to you."

"Can't leave him out of it. He's your co-star."

Fury ripped through her, and blood roared in her ears. She could have killed her father with her bare hands, gun or no gun. And she would've if her hands weren't rendered useless and asleep behind her back.

"Like I said there are some rules," Carl continued. "The game is simple. As long as you follow the rules we all keep playing. When the game ends..." He waved the gun toward Haylie again. "Somebody dies."

Next to her, Grady struggled with his constraints. If she could get five minutes alone with him they could get the tape off, but there was no logical reason her father and his partner would leave them now.

"Don't wear yourself out," he said to Grady. "The tape's coming off. Everything's coming off. You and Sunshine are going to entertain our audience for as long as you can. Because when you stop, Hank's going to give you his gun and you're going to shoot her. If you don't, we're going to turn off the cameras and I'm going to shoot you, then her. Either way, she dies. Your life is up to you."

Grady shook his head violently and yelled into the duct tape over his mouth.

"Relax a minute and think it over." Evil darkened his eyes. "Hank's a good photographer and it doesn't take him long to get set up."

* * * *

Blake's lungs burned, ready to burst. He'd checked every possible building on his side of the street and pulled off the road in front of the overgrown lot Kara had mentioned earlier. A couple of old buildings, one bigger than the other, sat fifty yards back on a lot filled with crumbled asphalt and knee high weeds.

Tire tracks and a wide arc of bent grass marked the opening of the gate and the entrance of a vehicle. He felt it in his bones. She was here.

Not as many businesses lined this side of Fairfield between here and the railroad tracks. Kara and Amanda were on their way back.

"I'm going in," Blake said. "Wait outside and call 911 if you hear anything."

"Like hell," Kara said. "We'll be right behind you."

He knew better than to argue. Belles stuck together like glue. "Cut the lights when you get here," he said. "And stay back enough they don't hear us coming."

"I'll call 911 now." Amanda said.

"Not yet. If she's not here we'll be stuck answering questions and fighting arrests for trespassing." Blake said. "We'd don't have that kind of time."

* * * *

"Ladies first," her father said as he opened his pocket knife and shifted Haylie over to cut the bindings on her wrist.

As he lifted her weight from the bed, she swung her knee into his crotch with as much force as she could muster. The blade pierced her palm, but the knife fell from his grasp. She brought her legs to her chest and kicked both heels into his stomach with every ounce of strength she had, knocking him to the floor. His head hit with a crack and he lay motionless.

Hank moved with amazing agility for a man his size, but Grady rolled between the giant of a man and Haylie. She scrambled back to try and grab the knife. The blade sliced into her finger again before she could find the handle. With her hands behind her, the weapon was useless and Grady couldn't hold Hank off for long. She bent herself in half and slipped her hips and legs through the loop of her arms, bringing her hands around to her chest.

Grady had put himself in a bad position. Hank loomed over him. "Don't lay a hand on him!" Haylie shouted.

Grady scuttled backward on his heels and his butt, knocking into the table of recording equipment. The web cam clattered to the ground, pieces of the plastic casing slid across the concrete floor.

Carl Monroe swore as he lifted himself up, and a gunshot echoed off the metal ceiling and walls. Haylie jerked her head toward Grady. Hank had his weapon drawn, feet spread, and barrel aimed squarely on Grady's chest.

Grady's frantic movements sent her to her feet, but the pain that ripped through her sent her down again. Grady hadn't been shot. She had. She looked down at the blood spilling from the tiny hole in her side as if it belonged to someone else. Clouds crept into her vision before everything went black.

* * * *

Blake had almost reached the old warehouse at the back of the lot when a gunshot ricocheted off the walls of the long, narrow garage thirty yards to his right. He took off at a sprint.

"Blake! Don't!" Amanda yelled. He couldn't have stopped if he wanted to.

The garage's rolling doors were intact and all of them closed, but as he rounded the side of the building he could see light coming through a small window set high on a half-rotted standard entry door. The vehicles must have been parked further back, out of sight, which

meant the people inside could be at the opposite end of the building, or he could stumble in on top of them. Or they could be anywhere in between. He couldn't see inside to get his bearings, but he didn't hesitate.

He hit the door at a run. Ten feet ahead of him Hank Hawkins had a gun trained on Grady. Still running, Blake plowed into the bigger man like a locomotive, taking him to the ground. Another shot rang out and Hank's gun slid across the floor. Blake landed a punch before the third shot sounded off the wall behind him.

He jerked his head up. Carl Monroe strode toward him, arms bracing the stock of his weapon, a smile stretched across his face.

"I was hoping I'd get a chance to get rid of you," he said, leveling the barrel with Blake's chest.

Blake caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. Another shot fired, and Carl Monroe hit the floor, blood streaming from his temple.

Haylie shifted her aim to Hank as he stumbled to his feet.

"Don't," Blake barked. Then seeing the blood smeared across her abdomen, he ran to her.

"I killed him," she said.

Still in the line of her gun, Hank held his hands by his head in surrender.

"Let me have that." Blake kept his voice as soft and calm as he could. The dark bullet hole in her side had him boiling with rage, thanking God she was alive, and scared out of his mind he could lose her yet.

She let him take the gun from her hand. Her eyes were glazed and her skin pale.

Carl Monroe lay the way he'd fallen. Grady had already made it halfway to Haylie, moving like an inchworm across the blood splattered concrete floor.

“On your stomach,” Blake said, holding the gun on Hank and easing Haylie down on the bean bag. Hank complied, assuming the position, arms stretched straight out from his sides, legs spread.

“You’re ok, baby,” Blake said as Haylie collapsed against his hip. “The Belles are outside. They called for help.”

“I killed him,” she repeated.

Blake pressed his lips to the top of her head and rubbed his hand up and down her arm. She was cold. He couldn’t tell how much blood had seeped into the purple velvet beneath her, but her eyelids drooped and her breathing slowed.

“Don’t go to sleep,” he said, fighting the fear that gripped him. “Stay awake. Stay right here with me.”

Outside, sirens grew louder.

Grady reached the bean bag and buried his battered face against Haylie’s leg. His full-grown body wrenched with the sobs of a child.

Police burst through the door like a hand grenade. Blake tossed the gun to the floor and raised his hands.

Chapter 14

“Lucy’s doing well,” Ashlyn said. “He’s already pouting to come home.”

“Are you sure I’m not dead?” Haylie asked. “Only dead people get this many flowers.” Blooms covered every corner and flat surface of her hospital room.

“Just imagine you’re visiting my mother, and she’s making you stay in the guestroom with the Laura Ashley drapes.” Ashlyn grinned.

Haylie laughed then cringed at the pain in her side. She’d been lucky. The bullet had missed her organs and major arteries, but she’d lost a lot of blood and would have a couple of ugly scars as souvenirs. The small caliber bullet had gone straight through, exiting as cleanly as it entered.

“How’re you doing?” concern filled Ashlyn’s voice.

She pinched the sheet between her fingers and turned toward the window. “I killed my father.” Tears filled her eyes. “I guess that kind of seals my plans for the afterlife.”

Ashlyn reached for her hand. “He would’ve killed Blake, and Grady, and you. You did what you had to do.”

“It was a choice.” She could’ve aimed lower, or fired a warning shot, or just let fate take care of the details.

“It was the best choice, given the situation.”

“You don’t even believe in euthanasia,” Haylie said with a doubtful look.

“I like to think I would’ve made the same choice you did.” Ashlyn wiped the tears from Haylie’s cheeks. “You saved the lives of two

men who love you very much. And you saved yourself. Don't ever regret that."

Haylie released a shattered sigh. "My mother will never forgive me. She hasn't even called."

"You'll always have a family."

The Belles, Blake and Grady had refused to leave her side for the first twenty-four hours, and since then the nurses had threatened to install a revolving door on Haylie's room. She did have a family. The best family in the world.

The door swung open and Blake walked in empty handed.

"Thank God you didn't bring flowers," Ashlyn said. She gave Haylie a kiss on the cheek. "I'll leave you two alone." She winked at Blake. "She's still healing."

He sat on the bed and brushed a lock of hair off Haylie's cheek.

She took his hand. "I need to get out of here. I have a wedding to plan."

"Yes, you do. But you're going to be on bed rest for a while."

She ran her fingers along his muscled arm. "The doctors told you that?"

"I'm imposing that restriction myself." The devil flashed in his eye and a sexy grin spread across his face as he leaned close for a kiss.

She wound her arms around his neck, hungry for a taste of him, for the fire in his touch.

His fingers slipped into the opening of her hospital gown and brushed the bandage on her back. He moved his hand slowly around her side and traced the gauze that covered the entrance wound then eased her down on the bed.

"Come here." She urged him closer. "I haven't thanked you for saving me yet."

"You'll have to thank me later." He tugged her earlobe between his teeth. "The door doesn't lock and it's time for your tongue bath."

Haylie laughed and grabbed her side as the pain rocketed through her. “You are such a devil!”

THE END

www.wendidarlin.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wendi Darlin's Hell's Belles series is a celebration of saucy women and devilish men. *Devil's Advocate*, set in a fictional depiction of the beautiful South Alabama coast, kicks off this series with heat and heart.

A native of northwest Florida, Wendi writes about the places and people she knows and loves.



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com