

Loup Garou

A man with dark hair, wearing a dark, open coat, stands in a dark landscape. Behind him is a large, glowing orange moon partially obscured by dark, wispy clouds. To the right of the man, a glowing, blue-tinted werewolf head with yellow eyes and bared teeth is superimposed. Below the werewolf head, a dog's head, possibly a Rottweiler, is also superimposed, appearing to howl or bark with its mouth open.

*Gayle
Farmer*

**LOUP
GAROU**

by

Gayle Farmer

Loup Garou

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This book, like all the others I've written,
is dedicated to my husband, Jeff, my best friend,
who always believed in me.

Special thanks to Fred West
hugs,
Annabelle

LOUP GAROU

Prologue

Swamp sounds saturated the warm steamy night. The bugs chattered and hummed, beating relentlessly against the dim porch light. The river lapped at its banks, home to frogs and other aquatic denizens. The indolent roar of an alligator echoed through the night.

The moon rode the bright sky, dodging in and out of the puffy clouds. Sluggish breezes flowed overhead, whispering of the night to come and adventures that awaited. They built steadily, waxing and waning like the orb they emulated. They began a low moan, in concert with the soft rushing sound of cypress fronds rubbing together.

Darius strode through the house, aimless, wandering from room to room, kicking anything that got in his way, including Arnold, his best friend in the world. With a peculiar cry, the abused feline jumped onto the back of the sofa, every hair on his ink-black body standing on end. Back arched, he hissed.

Oblivious to Arnold, he continued to pace while his mind seethed and his needs grew. The collar of his shirt constricted his breathing and he fumbled at the top buttons, finally wrenching them off and baring his chest in one vicious ripping move. His hands formed grotesque paw-like fists, and he pounded one into the other, enjoying the sickening thud of flesh smashing against flesh.

Heavy sighs wafted through the cypress trees now. The breeze had increased in volume, causing their long snake-like limbs to quiver and set the lacy Spanish moss to dancing in the warm gusts.

The rhythm of the water slapping against the nearby dock set his nerves on edge, and he almost shrieked when he stubbed his toe on the end table, overturning the lamp that sat on it. The heavy brass stand hit the oak floor with a shuddering

crash and glass shards from the broken bulb skittered across the room in all directions. Arnold scampered for the bedroom, hissing and spitting as he ran.

The hunger filled Darius as his pace increased and he could stand it no longer. With a howl of fury, he jerked the front door open, almost ripping it off the hinges. The humid summer night wrapped its moist clammy arms around him as he burst onto the porch. The insects ignored him and continued their nocturnal concerts; bullfrogs filled in the base notes like banjos. The bayou sang her siren song, calling him as she did on nights like this. It was a call he could not resist.

He charged down the steps and across the narrow lawn to the dock. Heavy footsteps took him to the end where he tethered his small trawling boat. He released the ropes, pushed away from the dock and fired up the engine. It hummed to life as though anxious for the next adventure. He turned the bow toward the channel, keeping the throttle slow.

The full moon popped out from behind a cloud, turning the face of the lake to a glittering mirror. Darius raised his eyes to the pale glowing orb, feeling the changes taking place in his body. He glanced at the heavily matted hair growing on his hands and the curved, talon-like nails. He threw back his head back and howled.

The mellow sounds of jazz rose in the air and mingled with the smoke that drifted across the room in lazy spirals. The *Blues Tube*, unknown in the heady circles of New Orleans jazz, served up a variety of musical talents that pleased the locals and occasional visitors without the exorbitant cover charge found elsewhere. A frequent haunt of the mid-thirties crowd, the club often hosted clients looking for entertainment of a different kind.

The skunky aroma of pot mingled with cooking odors, a variety of perfumes, and sweat. Ladies of the evening sat at the bar, occupying the three seats nearest the door. They scoped out the trade, hoping for a kind and generous john to make their

night prosperous. Their pimps lounged against the back wall, vigilant, protective of their merchandise.

Roli Mabel, a Cajun of unknown age, occupied a two-top behind the little stage, his briefcase resting against the table leg. A low-level drug dealer, he provided weed, coke and meth to an ever-increasing number of regulars. Privacy wasn't really needed at the *Tube*, whose owners believed in a laissez faire attitude to say the least, but it made the tourists a bit more comfortable when illegal activity wasn't right in their faces.

Two women in their early thirties sat at the bar, holding hands. They'd been partners since junior high and were a fixture at the clubs in the area. Their singing voices and soulful harmonies put the crowd in mind of Joan Baez, and their increasing number of fans had earned them a permanent place at the *Tube* years ago. Scheduled to go on in a short while, they enjoyed the brief respite before starting their forty-five minute gig.

The musicians took the stage and began their warm-up routine, with the girls to follow five minutes behind.

Bebé disengaged from Lise and gave her arm a quick pat. "I'll be right back, Sugar. I left the tape recorder in the car. Order me another drink, huh?"

Darius tied the boat to a tree limb growing out of the riverbank, lowered himself into the knee-deep water and moved toward shore. He kept his worlds separated, conducting his hunting expeditions far from his other life. The chance of recognition in his current state was hard to imagine, but ever careful, he exercised due diligence, limiting his forays to isolated areas.

The *Tube* was a common and favored hunting ground, offering easy prey in various states of incapacitation. Although of enormous strength when in his wolf state, he preferred quick and quiet to an attention-getting fight.

Best of all, the area surrounding the bar bordered on the waterway, giving him easy access to the parking lot. Thick shrubs and a tangle of trees and prickly undergrowth combined to keep most folks away. He waited in the shadows for his next victim.

The band, now in the early stages of warming up, offered random guitar riffs, the mellow tinkling of the piano and the mournful cry of the sax.

Lise finished her drink and glanced at the door, curious. What could be taking Bebé so long? She ordered two more drinks from the bartender and carried them to a small ledge next to the bandstand. Singing was thirsty work.

She picked up both wireless microphones, laid them on the music stand and glanced at the clock over the bar. *Could I have missed her coming back? Restroom, maybe?* She ran her tongue over her full lips and headed for the ladies room. Little more lipstick couldn't hurt.

From his spot behind the concealing cypress, Darius watched Bebé cross the parking lot to her car, unlock it, and bend down into the back seat.

She smelt him before she actually saw him and froze. He shoved one knee between her legs, threw an arm around her neck and brought his face next to her cheek, yellow eyes glowing with hunger and lust. He growled low in his throat, wound his paw through her hair, grasped it and jerked her head backward at an impossible angle. With the other paw, he ripped her blouse open, baring her breasts.

Golden eyes wide, he brought his muzzle to her face, sniffing her, savoring her smell. He licked her lips once, twice, then snuffled again, sliding his tongue deep into her gaping mouth and tasting her with long probing darts. His ears flattened to his head as his lust mounted. He pulled her head back farther still, eyes boring into hers for a long moment before he flipped her onto her back and gathered her in his arms. His lips quivered

and a slow trail of saliva dripped from his muzzle onto her naked breast. He licked her lips again, snapping and growling under his breath.

“Oh, God. Loup garou,” she moaned as he pulled her from the car. “Loup garou.” Eyes rolling in her head, she fainted.

Overcome with lust, he could hardly contain himself as he carried her into the swampland toward the river and one of his many lairs.

The women were important to him in many ways but he could not, as yet, control the urge to kill them after mating. Although a full-grown adult in his regular life, Darius was but an adolescent in his altered state, and like most juvenile werewolves, he allowed his sexual urges to overcome his better sense. It was time to overcome his lethal compulsions and think ahead.

They were all potential mates and he needed offspring to carry on his blood, he knew that. But the passion generated during the act overwhelmed him and he broke their necks.

Shocked, Lise came out of the restroom alone, her eyes darting around the capacity crowd and then to the bandstand, willing *Bebé* to be there. She checked the clock over the bar, again while a chill swept her body in waves. Where the hell did she go?

The bandleader lifted his shoulders and made a *what next* face at her. She gave him the signal to play a short opener and headed to the car. Something was wrong, that’s for sure. No way she’d miss a performance and disrespect her fans like that.

Lise hurried out the door, down the steps and across the parking

She saw the passenger door hanging open and skidded to a stop well before she reached the vehicle. The hairs on the back of her neck tickled like something alive and she instinctively crossed her arms over her chest. The interior light still burned,

casting ghastly shadows across the blacktop, but it was dim, indicating a battery drain. The door had been open for several minutes.

“Bebé? You out here, darlin’?”

No one was in the car, at least not sitting up. Her teeth began to chatter. Anything could be hiding on the floor, hunched down, waiting to spring at an unsuspecting victim. Sweat poured down her cheeks and her innards turned to water.

Oh, dear God. Please, please, sweet Jesus.

Lise moved to the side of the car, still some twenty feet away, but clearly able to see the empty interior. She started to call Bebé again and then realized there was no point. Frantic and scared to death, Lise ran back into the club to the first phone she could find.

Like all the other girls, he couldn't resist playing with her after he'd finished. For the most part, the act itself and the length of time it took to satisfy him killed them, but when they survived, he'd play with them, unwilling to end the encounter. He had some exquisite games, but not tonight. She had not survived the mating ritual, but he broke her neck anyway, secured her hands and legs, and took her out to the waterway.

He stuffed her body under one of the trees that lined the bank, wedging it between the long roots that went from the stately old trees deep into the water. Chances of discovery or any connection to him were nil. The alligators took care of that.

Darius walked along the riverbank and gloried in the solitude, the isolation. He felt at one with the creatures that lay in the water or along the bank. No one spied on him or followed him. Only one person knew this part of him even existed. It gave him a strange feeling of power like no other and he chuckled, imagining the expressions on the faces of those who saw him on a daily basis. He strolled along the water's bank, heading for the little trawler tied up a bit further downstream.

He enjoyed the light sloshing sounds the stream made in the inky darkness as he reminisced about the past hour. It reminded him of the frenzy, the ecstasy he'd achieved with her. It went on forever, that delicious sound, and the ripping flesh, accompanied by the insatiable lapping rhythm, aroused him once again. Unable to resist, he threw his head back and howled.

Detective Vic Perina pulled on a pair of rubber gloves and picked up the tape recorder between thumb and index finger.

“Did you touch this tonight, Ms. Gaston?”

“No, sir. I didn't go near the car. That's what Bebé came out here to get, though; the recorder. We planned to try a new song tonight and the harmonies are tricky. She wanted to tape it, see where we could improve.”

“I want to take it back to the precinct and let the forensics guys go over it, see what they can come up with. When they're done, you can have it back.” He slipped it into a plastic baggie and turned to Lise. “Ya hear from Bebé, give us a call straight away. No sense us spinnin' our wheels for nothin' while she's out havin' a good old time.”

“I don't know where she is or what she's doin' but one thing for sure. She ain't havin' a good time. She's serious about her work, the fans are everything to her, and to imagine she went out to the parking lot five minutes before show time, with a packed house waitin' to hear her sing, an' decided to take off with some dude is ridiculous. Never happened. For one thing, we're lesbians, been together fifteen years, so just forget that whole idea, detective.”

“Shit, gal, who the hell do ya think cares?” He looked at her with thinly veiled disgust and shrugged.

Forensics Specialist, Frank Harris was as superstitious as any good young Cajun could be. While a professing Catholic, he

also had strong beliefs steeped in the culture of Voodoo worship. Only twenty-three and a recent graduate from the police academy, he took his job seriously. He closed his computer down for the night, gathered the papers off his desk and read the words once again.

Several hairs recovered from the car identified as belonging to the canine family, probably the girl's pet.

Other than that, the car was clean. No signs of a struggle and no other evidence had turned up. He played the tape recorder for the tenth time, still not believing his ears, and pocketing the device, headed upstairs to have a chat with Detective Perina.

“Okay, Captain, I hear what y’all’re sayin’ an’ I agree. We’ll get right on it. Yes sir, goodnight.” The detective hung up with a scowl that changed to a smile as Harris entered the office. “What’s happenin’, Frankie?”

“I don’t know what this means, boss. Hard to figure out, but it don’t sound good, y’know? I’m not sure what it is, but it’s really weird. Take a listen, you tell me.”

Expression grim, Harris hit the play button and leaned up against the desk, listening to the noise of scuffling, low growling and what sounded like fabric tearing. There was another loud grumble or growl, followed by harsh tortured breathing and the sounds of scratchy material rubbing against the voice plate of the recorder.

Perina, more than a little frustrated, turned to Harris, his hands raised in exasperation. “What?”

“Wait for it, boss.”

“Oh, God. Loup garou,” said the female voice, gasping and quivering in panic, but completely understandable. “A loup garou.” Then there was silence.

“What the hell?”

Harris and Perina stood there motionless, staring at each other.

“What the hell’s that mean, boss? That has to be the last thing that gal ever said. What ya figure it means? Wolfman? I mean, did she frickin’ say werewolf? What the hell’s with that?”

Perina glanced at the younger man, a strange expression on his face. “After y’all been doin’ this as long as I have, nothin surprises ya. Point a fact, this here ain’t the first loup garou in my career.”

He pulled his keys from his pocket and unlocked the bottom desk drawer. From deep in the back recesses, he removed an old-fashioned revolver and a metal case, which he also unlocked. He opened the lid and there, snuggled in individual notches nestled nine silver bullets. Three empty slots caused Harris to comment.

“What happened to the others, boss? Did ya bag ya a werewolf?”

“That I did. Hope I’m still as good a shot as I was then, cause them critters is fast.”

Frankie’s eyes lit up, his mouth spread in a huge grin. “Get outta here! Ya mount it? Where’s it at?”

“Ya don’t get to mount ‘em, Frankie. They turn back once they die, y’know. That’s why ya most generally never see ‘em unless they’re charging at ya. Ah man, them critters can move. An strong? I’m sayin’.”

“Wait ‘til I get home and tell my Emmy. She won’t believe me.”

Perina stared at his young friend, eyebrows raised and nodded. “Once they get the taste, they’re never satisfied. Crazy buggers.”

He picked up the gun and one by one, inserted the silver bullets. Now only three remained in the case. He yawned. “Let’s call it a night. I’m beat.”

“Me, too,” Frankie said, and both men headed for the parking lot.

In the distant bayou, a wolf howled where no real wolf lived. “Like I said, once they get the taste....”

Chapter One

“I really need a break.” Ella lifted her empty glass, stared at it in amazement and signaled Al for another. “Truly, absolutely. I’m buzzed out. I haven’t had more than five hours sleep a night in so long, I can’t remember. The holidays were the biggest we’ve ever had, but I figured once Christmas and New Years ended, we’d roll back into a normal rhythm.”

“Yeah, right. God, what’s normal? And since when did January and February become big wedding months in LA? Five in two months, can you believe it?” Terry patted her growling stomach and got to her feet. “I’m going to see what Chef has left over. Can I bring you something?”

“You know what I like, sis, whatever, and a little salad with blue. Thanks. I’m just going to sit here and decompress.”

Al arrived with her martini and a question. “The entire restaurant’s empty and the book is closed. I’ll turn off the sign and lock the security doors if you want.” He peered at her in feigned concern. “You look frazzled, girl. Probably should be home in bed. If I get a vote, I’d love to go. Got a date, looks good.”

She waved a slender white arm at him in tacit agreement. “Sounds like a plan to me, Al. Shut everything down and have a good night. Oh, and can you turn on the news? I’d like to see if we’re all still here. The way I feel, I might not know the true story.”

His chuckle rumbled as he approached the bar, picked up the remote and pointed it at the TV. He brought the device back to her table, patted her arm and smiled. “Catch’ya on the flip side, boss.”

“Uhuh,” she murmured with a nod, already engrossed in the latest televised race across the LA freeways as some felon tried to evade police. Every time she watched one, she’d giggle in memory at the hilarious Cris Rock skit where he cautioned, “If

ya run from the po-lice and they gotta come chase your ass, ya can bet they're bringin' an ass-kickin' with'em."

Strangest thing, sometimes they *did* get away, just often enough to keep the hope alive. They'd ditch the car, hide out wherever and outwait the cops. Sometimes the driver simply wouldn't give up, preferring to duel it out in a gun battle, which never boded well for the perp. *Death by cop* the media had come to call it, right there on the TV for your viewing pleasure.

She shook her head and shrugged as this one came to a peaceful end. The driver opened the car door and threw himself down on the ground, hands clasped behind his head. No doubt, he knew the drill. Two officers stood over him while a third handcuffed him. Go, Rampart. Another takedown for the LA boys in blue.

The next newsworthy item involved the robbery of a fashionable jewelry store just off Rodeo Drive. Third time in as many months, and the irate owner was vowing retaliation on the next perp.

Now there's a guy who could use one of our dogs. I'll have to make sure to tell Jim.

With a chuckle, she muted the TV and closed her eyes while her stomach rumbled a tune, waiting in quiet anticipation.

Terry had a flair for artful presentation, often creating platters at the level of *chefs-d'oeuvre* that drew comments of awe from Chef, who was not easy to please, let alone impress. She had no training but what he'd given her, but he had studied for decades under the best, and he considered her his protégé. Therefore, he was determined to teach her every trick he knew. Her successes were direct reflections on him and she never passed up the opportunity to give him the credit.

His training sessions, both intense and thorough, brought out her latent creativity, causing him to share every plating secret he knew. He was rightfully proud when she referred to him as her mentor.

When it came to anniversaries or wedding receptions, Terry went all out, creating works of art almost too beautiful to

eat, and her eye for composition turned out exquisite arrangements that included a variety of edible flowers. She'd taken on the job of plating design for all their special events and developed quite a name for herself in a town not easy to impress.

The society page columnists and the journalists at the gourmet magazines knew her on a first name basis and often found themselves dining at Ella's as guests for lunch or dinner.

Many times her presentations graced the top featured weekend layouts, her spectacular arrangements showcased next to some beaming bride who smiled into the camera as her wedding reception went down in local social history. They adorned the front page of the Sunday society section of several LA newspapers, enticing every woman in Hollywood without a live-in staff or club membership to get in line.

Before long, every bride in a 90-mile radius wanted her reception held at *Ella's*, hoping their wedding might get a featured spot in one of the papers.

Mercifully, most brides could not afford a reception at *Ella's* but the myriad who could haunted them months in advance, vying for the best dates, the best times. It wasn't long before Terry and Ella knew every society matron and hostess in the county.

Terry had started a trend and was wholly to blame for the increase in their wedding receptions.

Ella came back to reality as Terry wheeled the cart to their booth. She stretched her arms over her head and yawned. "Thought the gypsies got ya!"

Upon seeing the cart close up, she exclaimed, "Good God, girl, you must be hungry."

"Ravenous and so are you. You just don't know it yet." Terry popped something into her mouth and made crunchy yummy sounds. "Well, I hardly know where to begin. Owing a restaurant is a kick, and Mondays are the best. It seems Chef had just hit his stride when the customers stopped coming. I caught him red handed out there with so many treats it's ridiculous.

Tomorrow's happy hour should go down in history. Check out these Oysters Rockefeller. I mean, so plump, and oh, don't bother with that face. I was just being polite, anyway. They're all for me. Those little lamb sliders are out of this world, and try the crab stuffed 'shrooms, El. I just ate one ... to die for. And the scallops. Guess it's seafood night tonight."

Terry slid into the booth, pulled the plate toward her, picked up the fork and squeezed lemon on the oysters. She smacked her lips at Ella and dug in. Sounds like *hollandaise*, *so sweet*, and *I love basil and garlic*. It went on through all six oysters.

Single serving dishes littered their table and by the time they'd finished, not a morsel remained. They burrowed into the deep padding, not sure if they could move. Sated, unable to even smile, Terry leaned back against the leather seat, closed her eyes and sighed.

Ella slanted her eyes as far toward Terry as she could without turning her head. "He's really good, isn't he? Chef."

With slow deliberation, Terry raised her wineglass in salute. "He's an unnumbered Wonder of the World. I can't imagine what he's doing here. All I can figure is he's killed someone somewhere, probably in Paris, and just wants to keep a relatively low profile. Why else would he work with us?"

"Humph! Maybe it's because he earns a yearly salary with six figures in it. Maybe because he's the undisputed king of his small but very elegant and may I say state-of-the-art domain and I cater to his every freakin' whim." She made soft kissy sounds and lapsed into silence with a chuckle.

After a while, Ella let out her breath in a slow hum. "It has to be murder, I agree. It's the only answer, really. Probably over a purloined sauce, like that incredible remoulade he, oh God - maybe it's that cheese puff thingy he does with the crab and caviar? I could see it, a murderable provocation, for sure, stealing that kind of recipe. Makes my mouth water just talking about it, but who would dare?"

She leaned deeper into the booth, yawned again and closed her eyes. “He takes them home with him every night, y’know. The recipes. They’re in that metal box he carries around. I offered to let him put them in the safe. The look he gave me, I swear.”

Terry opened one black eye for a moment. “He’s been here almost ten years. Aren’t those ours? Isn’t that like proprietary information? Like the stuff you create on the job belongs to the company, right?”

“You’re gonna tell that to Chef? Really? You gotta be kidding. Well, they can only hang him once.” She gurgled at the idea and winked at Terry.

“Ha, you’re right there. No point in even broaching the question. Not a wise move.” She glanced at the clock and shrugged. “Wonder where the guys are. Lenny usually calls if he’s going to be this late.”

Jim sat on the veranda with Ella, staring at the sun rising over distant mountains and drinking their morning coffee. She looked so tired his heart went out to her. There was no reason she had to work so hard and it was really beginning to piss him off.

Surreptitiously, he watched her lift her cup. It seemed like an effort and this from a woman who reminded him of the energizer bunny only a year ago. The dark circles under her eyes didn’t help and even her wonderful hair looked a little peaked. Too much beauty parlor and processing. She needed to let it just hang, be normal.

“Hey, gorgeous, you sleep okay? The last six months have been wild between the detective business, and the restaurant. You look a little tired.” He knew this was dangerous territory and tried his best to combine solicitation and admiration in the same sentence.

She raised black eyes to him, a quizzical look on her face. “What? I’m showing my age?”

He gaped at her a moment as his heartbeat increased and then settled. “Whoa. It just blows me away when you don’t wear your contacts. I think this is like the third time I’ve seen you without them. Uncanny. You could be Terry, especially with your hair down like that.”

Ella chuckled. “When we were kids, before I needed glasses, we’d fool people all the time. Our folks were the only ones – they could tell us with our backs turned.” She chuckled again, drained her cup and refilled it from the carafe before her.

“It’s the first of the month, time to change to a new pair, so I took them out last night just for a treat. Feels good to sleep without them. Then this morning, I didn’t want to bother. I’d really hoped to sleep in a bit, but it’s the coffee. I smelled it perking and couldn’t wait, not another second. One sniff was all it took.” She took another sip, smiling at him over the lip of the cup. “I’m tired, though. Guess I am getting old. We’re turning forty in a couple of months, y’know.”

“Old my foot. You just work too damned hard, the both of you, and there’s no need for it. I know the restaurant is your baby, but you can hire someone to do the daily grind stuff. Your core staff, Chef, Al, the head waitresses, they have the whole routine down pat. Short of a fire or an earthquake, they should be able to do it all, including scheduling.”

Ella made a fussy face and turned toward him. Before she could say a word, he spoke.

“Look, the choice is yours, of course, but well, how would you like to take a long spa holiday? Some serious retail therapy? Pick the place and we’ll go. The restaurant really needs a good makeover anyway – the carpeting in the dining room would benefit from a thorough spring-cleaning, but replacement would be even better. Really, honey, and the walls look tired, too. Maybe a fresh coat of paint would jazz things up. It’s been at least five years. What’cha think? I’m all for a major renovation, do our part to prop up the economy. God knows it’s a cash cow, made a fortune last year. This might be the time to put in that outdoor fire pit and back patio. I loved that idea, but there never seemed to be time. Now is a good time, right?”

Ella yawned, raising slender arms above her head in a contagious stretch. He caught her hand on the way down and held it, kissing her palm.

She sighed. "I have to admit it, I'm bushed. Terry and I were talking about it last night. And truly, one time is as bad to shut down as another. Never a good time. And you're right, I'm a control freak, because all I need to do is find a new host and I won't have to work at all, not really.

"Replacing Terry will be much harder. She's a true *garde manger*, that's what Chef calls her, and she's got another spread running in the *Sunday LA Dining News*. Photos from the Harrington wedding reception, in case you're wondering, remember that one? I told her she was becoming a frequent contributor. Really, I'm so proud of her. I've got feelers out on an assistant for her, too, so I've been thinking along similar lines. I've got a friend in Florida, Heidi Tassone; talented sous chef. I'm hoping to coax her out here. Great gal." She drained her cup and poured another, topping off his as well. "A trip sounds great, actually. What do you have in mind?"

Grin wide, he rose and squeezed her shoulder. "Get the contacts in, baby. Wait until you see. I'll be right back."

She tittered in excitement and headed for the bathroom. New contacts in place, she ran a comb through her hair and pinned it up on her head, grinning in anticipation. This was a big deal. While Jim wasn't anyone's definition of a hermit, he usually left things like planning trips and vacations to her, at least for the most part.

Except for that golf tournament out in Palm Desert, she couldn't remember a single vacation he'd ever planned and that one turned into a thriller for sure. She glanced in the mirror and nodded. *Here comes forty and I look like I need a vacation.*

Jim returned clutching a dozen brochures in one hand and a couple of travel magazines in the other. He tapped the photo on the first magazine and said, "How about that?"

"Switzerland? Whoa."

“We could ski. The air is clear and clean.”

“And cold.” She slid a quick glance at Jim, sighed and began leafing through the brochures. “We already live on the ocean, so that doesn’t thrill me and I hate the cold.” She discarded brochures for Europe, Hawaii and Tahiti, moving at a good and rather disappointing pace until she reached the last two, one for Charleston and one for New Orleans.

“Tour the Antebellum South. Enjoy guided river tours, visit plantations and mansions that predate the Civil War. See history preserved, learn what it was like to live during the days of Gone With The Wind.”

She discarded the brochure for Charleston and continued to read about New Orleans, silently this time, eyes widening as she absorbed more of the details.

“This one includes a boat tour and Amy wouldn’t like that, but we could still do it by ourselves. We could fly in, get involved in a tour if we need it, although knowing us, we’d do fine on our own. I’ve always wanted to go to New Orleans, just not at Mardi Gras. That’s over, right? Easter?”

“Yep, not too long ago. It’s too far to drive, but we sure could fly down and rent a van. Terry and Lenny will want to come along. That way we can shut down the PI office and give the staff a nice vacation, too. Imagine it, two full weeks and there’s so much to do in that area. From what I hear, the food is spectacular.”

She turned to him and grinned. “Another busman’s holiday, huh? It’s true, though. I love to check out the different cuisines, see alternative ways of doing the same basic dish. You’ve got a date, sweetie. I know Chef will enjoy a couple of weeks off. He’s getting a little worn around the seams, too. Yes. Let’s just shut down for two weeks, everyone can de-stress and then we’ll open with a vengeance, a new look and a menu with Cajun cookin’. Well, a couple of Cajun dishes. Small plates. I’m not sure the Hollywood crowd is up for mudbugs.”

Chuckling, Ella pulled her cell from her pocket and made eyes at him. “Let me see if they’re awake yet. What kind of time frame are you ... hey, Sis. Jim and I’ve been talking

about taking a vacation. Sound good to you? The restaurant needs renovating, paint, carpeting, the whole deal. We can close down the PI office as well and give everyone a nice two-week vacation. Jim and I are thinking about a couple of weeks in New Orleans. Sound good to you guys?"

They'd had a particularly good lunch crowd on Tuesday, so the mood was upbeat as Ella called the staff meeting to order. Everyone who worked there attended, including Chef and Al. Eyes wary, they waited to see what Ella had to say at this most unprecedented meeting.

"To cut to the chase, kids, we're closing down for two weeks, last meal served Friday night. The restaurant really needs a good facelift and we're putting in a couple of new things, including an outdoor patio with heaters and micro-mist. All this will take time and we're aware of that. We'll continue to pay your salaries plus 30% to offset loss of tips. We'll maintain all your benefits, including accrued vacation, which will not include the shutdown time, and your medical insurance will remain in force.

"Please check with the local catering companies and see if you can get some additional work to cover this time. I'm sorry for the inconvenience this will cause many of you and if there were any way we could revamp the restaurant and keep it open, we would. Unfortunately...." She spread both hands in front of her and shrugged.

The mood was surprisingly positive. The last several months, with its numerous special events and banquets, as well as the normal clientele, had kept them hopping and a subtle sigh of relief whispered through the staff. They'd made great money and now they'd have some time to enjoy spending it.

"Gotta tell ya, Ella, sounds so good to me. And just so's ya know, this gal's gonna spend two weeks stretched out at the beach. R&R sounds fine to me."

Two of the bus boys chimed in with plans, and before it was over, Ella had a standing ovation. The meeting broke up shortly after that. One hour to the dinner shift and there was still a lot to do.

Chef Guy Gadious sat across the desk from Ella, a stern look on his face. “Eet is good thing you’re closing, Madame. Eet is in zee eyes, m’dear. Zey are tired. You are taking a vacation, oui? To New Orleans wiz Terry; she told me all stories.” He brought his fingers together and kissed the tips.

“Ah, za cuisine for to die. I am quite green wis envy.” He reached into his pocket and withdrew half a dozen business cards. “Zees places, you must go for samples. Mon Dieu, es magnifique. Ask za server to make your presence known to zee chef wiz zis cards. On za back of each, I have signed wis a note. Bon appetite!”

He rose with a smile and pulled another paper from his pocket. “Also, I have zee wish list for zee kitchen. Zis is what I need it, must have and where to buy. Thank you and bon chance.” He put the list on the desk with the cards, took her by the shoulders and kissed both cheeks. “See you in two weeks and bon voyage.”

It was a little after two on Thursday and the word that they’d be closed for two weeks took its toll on business. They had only twenty dinner reservations tonight and half a dozen for tomorrow. Ella considered closing after tonight.

The twins had talked of nothing but the upcoming trip, where they’d stay and what they’d do since they made the decision Tuesday morning.

Terry’d wanted something swank, preferably with a pool and an in-house spa within walking distance of the French

Quarter. That's what Chef recommended they do, and he would know.

However, hotels of that nature had grave reservations about not one but two big dogs of dubious and unfortunate reputation. Therein began the dispute that soon went viral.

"We're going to have to rent a house or a condo. They go by the week, so that won't be a problem, and since this isn't their season, we should be able to find something nice that's close in and still good for the dogs." Ella continued to leaf through the travel catalogue, making note of the rentals that suited their needs.

"*What?* You're bringing the dogs? Don't you ever get sick of planning every damned thing we do around them? I mean, what's with that? Maybe you don't care, but I get good and sick of it! Sick of it." Terry turned to her twin, dark eyes flashing in anger.

"It's like, *oh, we can't go on a cruise. What would we do with the dogs?* That's bull! They could go to the farm and play around with Rudy. It's not like we're talking about jamming them into a kennel at Pet Stop. God Almighty, it's worse than having a herd of kids."

Mouth forming a perfect O, Ella gaped at her for a moment and then pursed her lips. "*A herd of kids?* Since when do you not like Amy and Tony? When the hell did that happen?"

"*What?* Oh, no you don't! I never mentioned whether I liked them or not. My opinion of them is not under discussion. You know I like them. I love them. What I said was, why do they have to come with us everywhere, all the time? You always do that, El. Try to throw me off. Not this time. I'd really like an answer, if you have one."

"Well. She's ... they're family. How could we do that? Go off and leave them?"

"See, this is what I mean. We're not talking about jail, a canine prison. Rudy would have a ball with them, you know that. I just don't understand why every move we make has to be...."

Conversation ended as a sleek black form glided off the sofa and approached the girls, ears flagging, head cocked. The doberman shoved her sleek muzzle under Ella's hand and whined, concerned at the raised voices.

"Did you hear that?" Ella said in a singsong voice. "Is that old Terry a meanie or what, Ames? Can you believe what she said? Your feelings are hurt, aren't they, girlie?"

The dog stared at Ella, head tilted, tiny little growlish moans starting in her throat. She raised her long muzzle and a low little woo-woo answered the question, ears fluttered like hummingbird wings. Short stubby tail rotated.

"And after all the great things you've done for her. It sounds like she's just an ingrate, doesn't it? What a grouch."

Straight man to the clown, she waited for the dog to react. As if on cue, woo's came at a regular cadence now, some louder, some softer as she talked in tandem with Ella about Terry's treacherous words.

Terry stared at Ella and Amy, slowly shaking her head. Completely engaged and playing their parts, they fed each other like practiced dancers, and when Amy rose on her hind feet and began to twirl, Terry gave up.

"Ah, y'know, you two outta take it on the road, I'm not kidding. Talk about original." She got to her feet and headed for the door. "We've got a meeting in three minutes with the decorator. Be sure to bring Amy so we can get her input." The door closed behind her.

The travel agent droned on. "In the end, we only found four that would meet your requirements, but they're all very nice. The first..." Ella shifted the phone on her shoulder and glanced at the computer screen as the attachments rolled by, showing the rentals available. They were all fine, but nothing

jumped out at her. She glanced at Terry who shrugged noncommittally.

The agent continued, “Now we never did discuss the B&B idea, but I’ve got something that might appeal to all of you. Only a miracle could have made this place available on such short notice, but a wedding scheduled for next weekend was called off and The Retreat is available.”

The photo showed the typical architecture of the area, including tall columns, lots of wrought iron, and trees and flowers they’d never see in California. They noted the size of the suites, the prime location, easy access and the privacy and all kinds of perks. It was just the thing.

“Well behaved dogs welcome, see? Sounds good to me, Sis. What say?”

Terry agreed and they made the deal.

Two weeks spent at a Civil War era mansion brimming with antiques and lots of old, New Orleans history that had a five star rating and boasted about its fabulous and authentic Creole and Cajun dining. What’s not to like?

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you enjoyed *Something Wicked*, the most recent of the *Sessions & Browning* series. If you haven't already done so, perhaps you'd enjoy reading the books in order, starting with *Secret Lives*.

SECRET LIVES

A wave of fear swept over Jim, settling in his stomach. This was going to end up being a bad night. Was Bob in the car too? If he was, why? There was no way in hell he would miss his big day in court tomorrow. Surely they were not planning to drive back home tonight. Then it hit him with a jolt. He jumped away from the car, both hands clenched in fear.

"Oh, sweet Jesus," he said, jerking the nozzle from the gas tank. "Oh God, please let me be wrong. Son of a frickin' bitch." He slammed it in place, jumped into the car and sped back to the road. She wasn't talking because she couldn't.

The windshield wipers struggled to keep his vision clear as he roared up the hill. Reaching into the console, he retrieved his handgun and slid it into his jacket pocket.

If he had not been alert, he probably would have missed it altogether in the thick falling snow. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the distinctive red sports car flying down the hill in the opposite direction. It was past him before the knowledge clicked. Bob's Jag. It had to be.

"Dear God. Please don't let me be too late."

He reduced his speed to a crawl, unable to see more than a few feet in front of him. Inching up the hill, he pounded the steering wheel in impotent fury as gusts of wind buffeted the Suburban. He actually passed the Escalade before he saw it. He pulled over to the side of the road and backed to within inches of Terry's front bumper.

Jim turned the ignition off, grabbed his heavy parka from the back seat, and shrugged into it. He glanced down at the tracking device in his hand before slipping it into his pocket. She was nearby, that was for sure.

As Jim got out of the Suburban the wind hit him, almost jerking the door from his grasp. He grabbed it with both hands and slammed it as swirls of snow masked his view. He hurried to the dark car, gun drawn as he peered through the opaque passenger window.

The door was unlocked and the dome light came on, showing him the empty interior. The keys hung in the ignition and a purse sat on the floor, tucked under the lip of the front seat. Jim put his gun back in his pocket, retrieved the tracking device, and closed the door.

“Terry,” he yelled, cupping his hands around his mouth. He looked down at the ground, squinting. With no footprints visible on this side of the car he ran to the driver’s side and noticed slight indentations in the snow leading to the rear. Jim followed them to the edge of the hill. He scanned the forest and screamed her name again. The wind whipped the words from his mouth.

He reached the brink of the hill, unable to see any distance in front of him in the driving snow. The steady increase in the beat of the receiver told him he was on the right track. His feet slid out from under him a couple of times, and once he went down on his knees.

When he reached the bottom of the hill, Jim glanced at the device; judging by the pulse, she was very close. He slipped it back into his pocket and cast frantic looks from side to side, unable to see through the heavily falling snow. He fell to the ground in a panic and started digging in the drifts, jamming numb hands into the accumulated undergrowth.

“She’s only been out here for a couple of minutes, for God’s sake, she can’t be buried too deep. Terry!”

He almost shrieked when he found her body and pulled her to him, horrified. She was soaking wet, wearing only a light sweater and thin wool slacks. He tapped her cheek as he

searched her body for signs of violence. No blood past the scrapes and cuts she probably got rolling down the hill ... no broken bones that he could see. She was out cold, inert. Had Bob dragged her or was she unconscious from the fall? It didn't matter at this point.

Jim looked up the hill, drew a deep breath, and then looked back down at Terry. She had to wake up. Strong as he was, he was not sure he could carry her up the steep, snowy hill. He called her name as he shook her. He whipped off his heavy parka and stuffed her in it, zipping the hood over her head.

"Terry, wake up. We're going to freeze to death if we don't get out of the snow. Terry!"

She moaned and opened her eyes. "Jim?"

"Yes, Terry. Try to stand, honey, it's okay. Just lean on ...Terry?"

He lifted the unconscious woman in his arms, amazed at how light she was. Maybe he could do it. He wrapped his right arm under her armpits, set her on her feet and pressed her back tight to his stomach. In this position, he could push her in front of him with his thighs as he climbed.

She was limp in his arm, lurching in front of him like a stuffed dummy, taking one agonizing step after another. The movements caused her blood to pump, increasing her heart rate, and she moaned several times.

Twice they fell, but the stands of small trees actually helped, giving Jim handholds and things to seize onto. They were less than half way up the hill and he was breathing hard, a painful stitch like fire pierced his side. He leaned against a tree, trying to catch his breath, Terry propped in front of him like a rag doll. Her head lolled from side to side as she began to regain consciousness.

"Jim?" Her voice was woozy and out of focus.

"You're going to be fine, Terry. Try to help me, okay? Here we go."

It felt like forever before they reached the road. Jim's heart pounded from fear and exertion as he leaned her up against the side of the Escalade. His breath came in quick hard gasps as

he tried to slow his painful heartbeat. His chest was on fire and the stitch in his side felt like a burning stake. He could barely feel his soaked, steaming clothes, marveling in some obscure part of his mind how amazing it felt to freeze and perspire at the same time.

LETHAL INTENT

Twenty minutes passed before an exasperated Devon finally opened the door. "I'm sure you don't realize it, but there are five exterior doors on this side of the building alone, and the harbor lights are all over the place."

"Sorry about that. I've never been here before."

Devon waved a hand. "Excuse me, Jim. I don't mean to be rude. This is the wildest night of my life and I'm a bit on edge. Equally worrisome is my mother. This is not how she usually spends her evenings; it's a wonder she hasn't keeled over from fear. Positively harrowing." He ran a hand through his hair, lips pursed.

"And what could Joe possibly have on his computer worth dying for ... several people dying for? I knew the man well and he did not indulge in anything illegal, trust me. He didn't even speculate. His honor, his code of fair play, his behavior; nothing warrants this. And by the way, earlier you asked me if they'd mentioned Delia. Are they all together on this thing? Did Delia kill Joe?"

They entered the elevator and Devon punched the button for the eighth floor.

"We've only had the chance to read one file, but it looks like it. Joe uncovered her connection with the art thieves, did some research on what pieces she stocked your galleries with and uncovered several big problems. When Lenny finishes the case he's doing now, from tomorrow on we'll be free to concentrate on Joe's murder. By the way, how's your mother doing?"

"It hasn't hit her yet, but when it does, she'll need me. That's why all this aimless wandering up and down the corridors

trying to find you made me grumpy.” He looked down at the lacerations on his swollen hands and shook his head wide-eyed. “Plus, I’m in pain; they’re killing me. It’s a first.”

“Imagine what his face looks like.” Jim glanced at Devon, amused.

Devon straightened his shoulders and nodded. “I acquitted myself quite well for my first fight.” He looked at his bruised knuckles, then at Jim and nodded again. “Really.”

“I can believe that.”

“Well. I’ll get even better.”

“I have no doubt.”

The elevator opened with a swish. They stepped out, turned left and stopped midway down the hall. Devon slid the card in the slot, removed it and opened the door.

Jim studied the entry as they walked into a small foyer. The hall to the left presumably led to the bedrooms. A desk with a green accountant’s lamp and a computer hookup shared space with a phone.

Across the room, Joan sat on the sofa and stared out the huge window at the stars, a glass of wine in her hand. She turned toward them, smiled and waved in welcome. Her voice, slightly slurred, matched her facial expression.

“It was terribly rude of me, I know, and I apologize, but I’ve made great inroads in the bottle of merlot. So much so, I called down to room service to get another, as well as a substantial number of hors d’oeuvres. I haven’t had a thing to eat all day but lobster. I’m starved.” She patted the sofa next to her. “Please, join me.”

Devon sat beside her, staring earnestly at his mother’s wine glass. “Perhaps you might want to wait for the food to arrive.”

She leaned into him and grinned, eyebrows raised in a coquettish glance. “You’re not the boss a me.”

“But really, Mother, don’t you think you’d better wait?”

“Wait for what? Tonight I was kidnapped in a foreign country, shanghai’d to some ... I don’t even know how to describe that building they kept me in, and threatened to within

an inch of my life. As if that's not enough stress, I have to watch you beat the tar out of some guy with a gun, yet, and you think I should wait before I finish my wine? What for, the end of the world? A tsunami? You know an earthquake is coming?"

She gazed at him, lips quirked in a smile. "I'm a big girl now, Dev. I don't need you to monitor what I drink and besides, it's been a rough night."

Joan grinned at Jim then, turning her attention on Tony. "What a magnificent creature. I've always loved the Doberman, best watchdog out there, I think. I had one as a child. What's his name again?"

"This is Tony," Jim said with a chuckle.

"So, Tony, you're quite a hero dog, aren't you?"

Tony cocked his head this way and that, listening to her. His expression showed the interaction as his ears raised and lowered in rapid succession. Round amber eyes gazed at her.

"He's not supposed to pay any attention to you. At least that's how he was trained. After living with Ella and Amy for a year, he's lost a bit of his touch."

Joan gave a snicker. Heavy-lidded dark eyes sought Jim's. "Off his touch? Lost ... he took care of business tonight." She turned her eyes to the dog and extended a hand. "Hi, Tony. You're my hero."

The stumpy tail wagged as the dog shared his attention between Jim and Joan. He whined under his breath and wagged harder.

Jim shook his head. "Spoiled as rotten as Amy, aren't you? Okay, go say hello. Be nice."

As Tony approached, Devon rose putting his body between Tony and Joan. "No, Mother, he bites. I really don't...."

"Hush, Devon, you're my hero, too."

Tony sat by her side, eyes half closed, basking in the gentle touches, the scratching under his collar. His tail wagged his hips as he grinned, every tooth in his head showing in a delighted doggie smile.

There came a knock on the door, followed by a muffled cry of "Room Service."

Jim rose, snapped his fingers at Tony and whispered, “I don’t want anyone knowing we’re here.” He and Tony walked quickly to the hall and hid in the dark.

FIRESTORM

The girls watched the antics of the bears as they dove into the icy pool for their live dinners, coming up with a wiggling fish in their powerful jaws. They meandered down the walkway and headed to the restaurant, deep in thought.

Molly glanced at Beth and shook her head. “What did you make of Sam?”

“Sweet, fun to talk to and he’s even hotter close up.” She grinned at Molly and shrugged. “Great bod and just right with the muscles. I hate that bulked up look, y’know?” She puffed up her cheeks, rocked back and forth and made sounds like a mad monkey. “But him? I like his looks, muchly. Plus, he’d just shaved. Man, I hate that prickly look. What makes guys think girls like that?”

Molly nodded, continuing to scan the crowd. “Beats me; some stupid actor started it, I guess. Actually, the grunge look really turns me off. Can you imagine the breakouts you’d get after kissing someone like that? Eeuw, not my bag, but you know what? He’s a lot older than we first thought. I bet he’s at least twenty-five.”

“Give me a break. Nah, I bet he’s only, like, eighteen. He’s just starting college, so how old is that...eighteen? Isn’t that right?”

“You can start college at any age, and I’d guess at least twenty ... he just looked older, he seemed older. Well, when you consider we’re only fifteen, twenty is older. I can’t imagine what he sees in us.”

They walked along in silence. Finally Molly said, “The more I think about it, the more I mean it ... I don’t like him. There was just something off.”

“Why are you obsessing about this?” Beth said. “He seemed very nice and friendly. Besides, who cares; it doesn’t really matter. We’ll probably never see him again.”

Molly chuckled. “I wouldn’t bet on that. He really liked you.”

“Give me a break. You know that’s just silly.”

They approached the host station at the restaurant and Molly gave her name for the reservation.

“Please follow me.” He led them to a large corner table in the back of the room. Beth chose the chair next to the high bank of windows, Molly at her right. The host placed five menus on the table and left.

“Can I ask you a question?” Beth glanced at her friend, eyebrows up, her face wearing a puzzled expression. “Why don’t you like Sam? You’re usually a really good judge of character, so it’s making me wonder. Is it anything in particular or just one of your famous feelings?”

Molly grimaced and leaned back in her chair. “Well, famous feelings, I guess. I don’t know the first thing about him, but neither do you. He gives me the creeps, like he’s playing with us or something. And yes, it’s kinda like that, sort of a premonition. But mine often turn out right, huh? How about that Maggie? I told you she was a witch from the get-go.” She took a long sip of water, shrugged at her best friend and continued.

“Sam is, I don’t know, it feels like he’s lying about something and I still think he’s way too old to be interested in us, don’t you?”

Beth exaggerated her yawn. “I’m not even sure he is interested. What makes you think that, anyway? He was just making conversation. Once you told him we had to meet your family for lunch it seemed to me like he lost interest. You’re making too big a deal out of a whole lot of nothin’, Mol. I just figured he was new to the area, maybe wanting to make some friends. You know how that is. I didn’t think he was pushy or anything did you? He just seemed friendly to me.”

“Well, for one thing, even if he did think we looked his age, once he found out the truth, you’d think he’d bail. We’re, like, jail bait, y’know? Kids!”

“If you think about it, Molly, that’s just about what he did do. Once we refused to have lunch with him, it didn’t take long for him to split.”

“That’s true, I guess,” she said, nodding but not convinced. “And isn’t it strange he wanted to eat with you so bad he invited us both on his treat? Like, that’s a ton of money to spend on strangers he’d never see again, and so odd to include me....” Her voice crackled and she waved her hand at the waiter. “Can you bring us some lemonade?”

She took a long sip of the frosty drink, shaking her head. “Man, I was so thirsty, I couldn’t say another word.” She cleared her throat and grinned at the icy pitcher. “That’s great. Anyway, I suppose he might have just bumped into us at the polar bear exhibit, but we first noticed him when we got our waffle, remember, early this morning? The next time we saw him was at the climbing wall, and like you said, maybe it’s a coincidence, but Beth, maybe he followed us, picked us out of the crowd. Maybe? And if so, why?”

“Oh, Molly. You make it sound all creepy and stuff. Where’s that coming from? He’s new in town and only wanted to make friends, even just for the day.”

“But that’s the thing, part of what I’m saying. We’re not friend material for a guy that age ... he’d consider us kids. You know that as well as I do. I mean we’re only three years older than Danny and I can’t imagine willingly spending a second with a kid his age, especially not like that. Y’know what I mean? Why’s he wasting time with us when all these college girls are here and available? He’s a good lookin’ dude and obviously has money, so why bother with two kids? I wonder what Dad will say?”

Beth’s eyes flew open. “Oh, my God, you’ve gotta be kidding, right? Don’t you dare ... God, don’t tell him, Molly. If you tell him, we’re gonna have serious issues for the whole summer. For one thing, we’ll have to stay with them for the rest

of the day ... them and Danny the Pre-teen Pervert. Don't spoil ... speak of the devil, there's the little brat now."

Danny started shouting at them halfway across the dining room. Beth turned and stared pointedly out the window, refusing to even look at him.

"I got to ride the roller coaster twice. Man that ride is such a charge." He made exaggerated motions with his hands as he collapsed into the chair next to Beth. The table rocked lightly as he continued. "I went down all the hills with my hands up. It was cool. So fun. Did you do that ride yet?"

Beth ignored him and continued to stare out the window at the throngs of people walking around the park and wished she were anywhere else but at a table in a packed restaurant listening to Danny rant. He'd actually touched her arm once in his excitement and her expression as she turned toward him grew deadly. Ice-blue eyes stared at his fingers, willing them to rot off. Slowly she brought her gaze to his. "Don't you ever touch me again."

Beth closed her eyes and turned back toward the window. She blinked in startled surprise when she realized Sam had caught her eye. He waved to her, smiling. Beth blinked again to rid him from sight, but there he stood, continuing to smile, index finger beckoning.

The waitress arrived to take their orders. Molly asked for the fried chicken basket and then it was Beth's turn.

"I'll have the hamburger platter, please." Beth handed the menu off and glanced back out the window. Sam had moved closer to the building and now stood no more than ten feet away, still summoning her.

She frowned slightly then rose from her chair and picked up her purse. "I have to go to the ladies. I'll be back in a minute."

"You want company?" Molly asked, beginning to get out of her chair.

"Nah, stay here and visit with your folks. I'll be right back."

COLD FUSION

The Russian kidnapers held a quick confab and sharp angry words passed between them. The tallest seemed to be in charge, and he turned to Arnie. Wintry green eyes stared, unblinking, attempting to intimidate. Arnie matched the stare with one of his own.

“Dr. Baker, I ask you, please. Don’t be so provocative. You know we mean nothing personally. Our government is determined that yours will not reach a goal which will once again diminish our position in the world. You must understand we cannot allow that to happen. It is our earnest hope that you will cooperate with us and turn over the formula to my country. We don’t need it for ourselves, considering the oil we’ve just tapped into, but we won’t let your country return Russia to a second place position. You cannot be allowed to stand in our way as we secure control over Europe.”

He approached Arnie, bright eyes wide, almost insolent. Like a cat watching a bird, he gazed at his prisoner. “We have accurately portrayed our position, now you must evaluate your own. You will either give us the formula ... we will give you two weeks to finish, or we will be forced to kill you and your wife. I hope you understand the seriousness of your situation.”

Arnie matched the stare. “I understand your position completely. There’s never been a doubt in my mind.” He glanced at the men who were so convinced they had the upper hand and grinned. “Okay, let me see if I have this right, gentlemen. You say you’ll set us free as long as I deliver the completed formula within the two-week time frame, right? You know that is impossible just as I know you will never release me and my wife. I can’t conceive of how you would expect me to believe that? Under what guise could you imagine that someone as smart I am would buy such a pile of shit?”

Arnie shrugged and grinned wider. “What you’re saying is that you are going to kill me and my wife in two weeks because you also know I can’t complete the formula in that

amount of time. Why not just tell the truth, lay it out on the table? And why wait? We all know the result will be the same. I can't do what you want." He grinned again, showing small white teeth.

They waited for him to say more and when he did not, the green-eyed man known as Reike beckoned with a toss of his head. "Please follow me, Doctor."

He led the way down a flight of stairs that opened to a large, nicely furnished family room with fireplace. In the far corner, under a window covered with thick wrought iron bars was a workstation complete with his personal laptop, printer and a stack of CDs and files. Arnie's eyes widened in recognition but he didn't remark on that oddity. He already knew the answer.

"Where's my wife?" Arnie glanced at the closed door on the other side of the room and cocked his head at his captor.

Reike nodded. "She's in there." The man hesitated and shrugged. "There is no way out of here, so don't waste your efforts in trying to escape. The bars are set into the windowsill with cement. There is a small kitchen around that corner and the refrigerator is stocked with sandwiches and sodas. Coffee is in the cupboard as well. Use your time in an efficient manner, Doctor. The clock just began."

Reike turned and walked back up the steps as Arnie charged into the bedroom to find Candace. She leaped from the bed, a wide smile on her battered lips as he approached.

"Are you okay, honey?" He engulfed her, shaking, tears squirting from his eyes.

"I'm much better now." She cried into his shoulder as he held her close. "How's Sara? Is she okay? They'll go after her next."

"She's fine, honey. Let me look at you." He smoothed her hair away from her face, covering it with gentle kisses. He glanced at her black eye and cut lips and cheekbone. "Those dirty bastards hit you? Did they do anything else...?"

She grinned, plucky as always and pursed her puffy lips. "You should see the other guy. He grabbed me real rough, y'know, and I gave him an elbow in the side, so he slapped me in

the face. I delivered the best crotch shot ever scored. He hit the floor like a felled tree.”

“Toe tip?”

“Yep.”

“Good girl. Then what happened? What did they do to you?” His index finger gently caressed her damaged cheek. “Hurt?”

She took his hand and kissed his fingertips. “His buddy backhanded me a couple of times and I slipped and fell against the side of the fireplace. I bled a lot, so I figured to capitalize on it and pretended to pass out ... scared the shit out of the bunch of them, let me tell you. The guy that hit me just about got his lights punched out by the leader ... tall guy, really insane green eyes.”

They walked into the large room and sat on the sofa. As she passed by, she grabbed a pencil and a pad of paper off the desk.

“Oh, sit here on the sofa with me. It’s so good to see you, Arnie.” She turned to face him and began to scribble. I think the room’s bugged.

He nodded, reached into his jacket and pulled out his palm pilot. He input a message and shifted it in his lap so she could read the face. How many of them are there?

BLIND TRUST

Kip and Suzi met him at the door, in no better spirits than when he’d left them earlier. Suzi gave an appreciative whine and shook herself several times as he stroked her head.

Kip sat tall, almost aloof, as if to underscore the misery she felt. She kept making eye contact with Rudy and then staring down the hall at nothing. After the third or fourth time, as though to assist a not very bright child, she nosed his hand, gazed at him again and stared at the dark hall.

Finally, in desperation, she took his hand between her teeth in a touch so light as not to burst a bubble and led him into Cathy’s closet. Releasing his hand, she ran to the back, scratching at the rug and snuffling, interspersed with loud

sneezes. Rudy called her off to the side, seeing for the first time the bits of plaster and paint littering the floor.

Kip never took her eyes off Rudy as he studied the floor, taking samples and putting them in a little envelope. Frustrated, she ran over to him, snuffling, and then as pointedly as an animal could hope to do it, made direct eye contact with him and slowly looked up at the hatch in the ceiling overhead, drawing his gaze with her. It took three more tries before he looked up.

A variety of emotions raged through him as he followed the dog's stare.

"Oh, my God! Good girl, Kip."

It didn't take him long to find a ladder in the pantry. Donning a pair of latex gloves, Rudy lifted the hatch cover, not particularly surprised that it opened without a problem. He hoisted himself onto the ledge of the hatch and checked out the attic. The fire escape ladder lay in a pile by the hatch, a small bag of tools, including a flashlight and some twine beside it.

A clear trail on the dusty floor led him to the condo next door. A hole large enough to shimmy through had been cut in the dividing firewall between the units. He followed the trail to the end and lifted the hatch without regard for who might hear him. He knew the unit was empty.

Opening the other hatch, he shook his head as the proof stared him in the face. There stood the waiting ladder, clear evidence that the dude had easy and obvious access to Cathy. This should be enough to get a search warrant. Rudy replaced the cover and hurried back down the passageway, through the hole in the firewall and back to Cathy's apartment.

He scurried down the ladder and took Kip's head in his hands. "Good girl, Kip. Good dog. Sorry I underestimated you. Now I know what happened to your lip. Good girl."

He let her go, rushed into the kitchen and hit the condo office button on the phone.

"Yes, this is Rudy Clark. Is Desiree Collins still in the building? Thank you and please tell her I'll be right down."

“Nothing yet, I take it.” Desiree nodded at Rudy, indicating the chair by her desk. “How about the police?”

“I have no confidence in them. If I expect to get her back, I’ll have to do it myself. Now, what’s he look like? Be as thorough as you can.”

Desiree leaned back in her chair, a faraway look in her eyes.

“He’s around 5’10”, medium build, in pretty good shape ... no gut. Dark wavy hair, medium length, no beard or moustache, nothing spectacular in the looks department, pleasantly plain, but nothing to call attention to except the most incredible eyes I’ve ever seen in my life. They’re green, very clear and big. They’re unforgettable. Other than the eyes, though, he’s regular. Nothing stands out.”

“Did he ask about Cathy, mention her in any way?”

“He didn’t have much to say about anything. I asked him some questions, he answered, but that was about it. Didn’t volunteer much. He seemed shy with me, almost uncomfortable. I found it particularly strange the way he checked out the condo. Most people, when they get ready to spend that kind of money, are interested in the furniture, the appliances, what comes with, but not him. He went directly to the bedroom, checked out the closet and the patio off it, turned around and told me he’d take it. His interest in the view, ostensibly his reason for renting the unit, sure didn’t show. He never even went outside.” She shrugged. “Strange dude.”

“Do you have a clear photo of him on the security tape?”

“Right here.” She handed him several photos, pushing them across the desk.

“He looks vaguely familiar, but I don’t know whether it’s from seeing him here somewhere, or at one of the local stores. Shy guy, huh, eyes down like that.”

“That’s how he acted with me; he was almost bashful, y’know? Strange for a man who’s a paparazzi. I always think of them as aggressive and pushy, getting in people’s faces like they do. Who knows? Maybe he just doesn’t want anyone to

remember those eyes.”

Dejected, Rudy got to his feet. “Thanks again for your help.”

“Any time, just let me know what I can do.”

SOMETHING WICKED

“Good morning, miss. I’m Lenny Browning and this is Jim Sessions. We’re investigating the murder of Kate Richardson and wondered if we might....”

“Let me see some ID.”

Lenny slipped his business card through the cracked door, which opened just far enough to reveal his PI license.

The door closed momentarily while she slid the chain from its guard. It opened to a truly spectacular sight. A young woman in her mid-twenties stared at them with piercing black eyes fringed with thick, bristly lashes, her short black hair styled in a modified spike. Skin the color of cream without a hint of color to her cheeks emphasized her Goth-like appearance.

A black midy tank top and a pair of workout shorts left nothing of her astonishing body to the imagination, including multiple piercings in both ears and belly button. Her white platform clogs added at least three inches to her already impressive height.

“Come in, please.” She stood aside and indicated they could enter. They followed her through the kitchen to the living room, eyes surreptitiously scoping out the tastefully furnished rooms.

Jim introduced himself, taking her extended hand.

“My name is Peggy Packard. What can I do for you gentlemen?”

“We’re working this case for a private client and wonder if you can answer a couple of questions for us.”

“I’ll try. Please, make yourselves comfortable.” She glanced at the dining room table and took a seat.

Lenny opened his briefcase and pulled out a tape recorder. “You don't mind if we record this, do you? Helps with the memory.”

Peggy shook her head. “No problem for me. I'll help in any way I can.”

“Okay, then let's begin. You were here when the incident occurred?”

“Incident? How ... quaint. Yes, I was here when my friend was murdered.”

Lenny blinked twice, cast a quick glance at a mesmerized Jim and continued. “What were you doing at the time? Getting ready for work?”

“No. I work out of the condo here. I'm a CPA. I was getting ready for my morning run on the beach. Just finishing my juice.”

“How well did you know Kate Richardson?”

“Well, we had good times together, close neighbors, y'know? Friends. Had a lot in common. We both liked to take in the beach, do some jogging, like that. We often rode horses up at Griffith Park. Neither of us have a guy right now, so we'd go get a bite for lunch on weekends, take in a movie and dinner, stuff like that.”

“From the police report, you stated you heard something. Like what?”

“Yeah. I'm an early riser. To me, with the sunrise being so spectacular, who can sleep? I was finishing my glass of juice, just about to walk down to the beach and take my usual jog when I heard this boom or bang next door. Hard to describe, but something hit the floor.” She waved at the walls and smiled. “They're pretty thick, don't build 'em like that anymore. Anyway, it was kinda muffled, but I definitely heard something sizeable fall. From the skating, I know the sound. After that, nothing.”

“Skating? What's that mean?”

“I'm into roller derby. I'm captain of the LA Slammers. They call me The Pack.”

Jim leaned forward and smiled, green eyes crinkled at the corners. "I thought I recognized you! I was working a runaway case several months back; kid was obsessed with roller derby. Parents thought she might go to watch the skating, and wanted me to keep an eye out there at the arena. Saw you skate several times. You girls really put on a show."

"That's nice," Lenny said, eyeing Jim, eyebrows elevated. "So, Peggy, when you heard that noise, what did you do?"

She returned her attention to Lenny and shrugged. "Well, I didn't do much, actually. Finished my juice, made a potty stop and got ready to go. I didn't hear another sound, and after a minute or two figured maybe Kate just dropped something, y'know, something like that. But when I came back from my jog, maybe only twenty minutes later, I knocked on her door and got no answer. I called her cell and went to voicemail, same with the house phone and yet her car was in the lot, just like it was when I went on my jog. That wasn't necessarily a big deal, but in this instance it was, 'cause you guys found her, and, well...."

"Can you remember the cars in the lot?"

"I remember everything. Photographic memory, true story. Okay, her car, my car, and the two couples downstairs each have a car. Full house, everybody present and accounted for."

"How about the street, what did you see there?"

"Hmm, well, I wasn't really looking, y'know." She stared into the distance then, as though reading something invisible. "Okay, there's a newer blue Lexus, one of the big ones, parked across the street, directly opposite the condo. Right in front of it is a black Honda, lowered, dark tinted windows, that gangsta look, y'know? Behind the Lexus, near to the corner, a, shit, I call 'em toasters. I don't know what they are called, they're so dumb looking. Anyway, a newer silver one. On our side of the street there's an old red van. Behind it is a Mustang." Peggy hesitated, eyebrows moving slightly. She blinked, and then turned her gaze to Lenny. "Not much help there, I guess."

“Were any of the cars familiar, even if you didn’t know the owners?”

“All except the Lexus and the toaster. That old van? I think a guy’s living in it. Surfer dude most likely, long blond hair, darkest tan I ever saw. He’s getting regular, coming for days at a time, y’know? Surf’s up. The Honda, it belongs to some Mexican kid, comes and goes real regular and so does the Mustang, like frequent guests, like that.”

“Okay. You never saw the drivers of the Lexus or the toaster? So, they were there when you left to jog. How about when you came back?”

She never hesitated. “The Lexus and the Honda were gone, but toaster was still sittin’ there, rest of them, too.”

Jim chimed in. “So, what’s the plate number on the Lexus? I’m assuming it’s a California issue.”

“It is. 325 are the numbers. I didn’t see all of it, but the letter in front of the numbers was F. At least I think so, but maybe E. That’s all I saw from that angle.”

“It’s a great start, Peggy, and you’ve been a big help.” Lenny rose and extended his hand. “If anything else comes to mind, you get an idea or if that car shows up again, please give us a call. Good luck in your next derby.”

“I’ll front ya tickets any time ya want to come out to the arena.” She grinned. “And I’ll keep an eye out for that car. If I ever see it again, I’ll give ya a call and you can put the cuffs on him.”

I hope I’ve whetted your appetite enough that you’ll want to read all the books in the series. Happy reading,

Gayle



Amy's voice rose higher, and then, like the notes themselves, she abruptly broke off to resume the deep, throaty, other-worldly sounds she'd started with, filled with anger and fear.

"That's it, we're outta here!"

Terry hurried back to the table and retrieved the heavy plastic wrap that had covered the bread, cheese and fruit. She packed the food up like a sack and ran into the suite, emptied her purse of all but her cell and filled it with half a dozen bottles of water, and the lunch.

"Ames! Let's go get Ella!"

