

MILLS & BOON



Vintage INTRIGUE

The Right Side of the Law

WENDY ROSNAU

Wendy Rosnau

The Right Side Of The Law

«HarperCollins»

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Kristen Harris was desperate to uncover the truth about who she had been before her memory was stolen from her. Her search had led her to the New Orleans waterfront and the most compelling—and perhaps the most dangerous—man she could ever have imagined....Blu Dufray seemed to know every dark and deadly secret from the French Quarter to the Louisiana bayou country—and every way to stir a woman's deepest desires. And even as he helped her chase away the shadows shrouding her past, he was making her dream of a future—in his arms....But what if the truth of her past threatened this growing love—and even their very lives...?

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“Do I know the whole truth now?” Blu demanded. “Everything?”

The question had Kristen wringing her hands. All she wanted to do was go to him and curl up in his strong arms. But would he still want her once he knew everything?

She turned away. A moment later, his hand was on her shoulder. “What else, angel? What’s so bad that you can’t tell me, can’t even look at me?”

Kristen felt him move close and, with easy familiarity, wrap his arm around her. Then his heat surrounded her, and memories of last night’s passion flooded her senses. She squeezed her eyes shut, knowing she had no right to love Blu Dufray, to want him this badly.

He bent his head. “I’ll help you, no matter what. Nothing you can say will make me walk away.”

Kristen turned in his arms and gazed up at him. “Are you sure...?” she whispered.

Dear Reader,

Once again, Silhouette Intimate Moments brings you six exciting romances, a perfect excuse to take a break and read to your heart’s content. Start off with *Heart of a Hero*, the latest in award-winning Marie Ferrarella’s *CHILDFINDERS, INC.* miniseries. You’ll be on the edge of your seat as you root for the heroine to find her missing son—and discover true love along the way. Then check out the newest of our *FIRSTBORN SONS*, *Born Brave*, by Ruth Wind, another of the award winners who make Intimate Moments so great every month. In *Officer Hawk Stone* you’ll discover a hero any woman—and that includes our heroine!—would fall in love with.

Cassidy and the Princess, the latest from Patricia Potter, is a gripping story of a true princess of the ice and the hero who lures her in from the cold. With *Hard To Handle*, mistress of sensuality Kylie Brant begins *CHARMED AND DANGEROUS*, a trilogy about three irresistible heroes and the heroines lucky enough to land them. Be sure to look for her again next month, when she takes a different tack and contributes our *FIRSTBORN SONS* title. Round out the month with new titles from up-and-comers Shelley Cooper, whose *Promises, Promises* offers a new twist on the pregnant-heroine plot, and Wendy Rosnau, who tells a terrific amnesia story in *The Right Side of the Law*.

And, of course, come back again next month, when the romantic roller-coaster ride continues with six more of the most exciting romances around.

Enjoy!



Leslie J. Wainger
Executive Senior Editor

The Right Side of the Law

Wendy Rosnau



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Wendy loves to hear from her readers. Write to her at P.O. Box 441, Brainerd, Minnesota 56401. Or e-mail her at cattales@brainerd.net.

To Jenni,
for her amazing strength and wisdom,
and for her youthful energy and blunt honesty
—every mother should know when she's wearing
ugly shoes and the wrong color lipstick. And because,
as favorites go, you like this one best.
Always, with love...

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Chapter 1

Salvador Maland pulled back the white satin sheet and slipped into bed next to his wife. When he focused on the nightgown that covered her nakedness, he said only one word. “Why?”

“Amanda’s cutting another tooth,” Kristen carefully reminded him. “If she needs me tonight, I want to be able to go to her quickly.”

It was a viable excuse, one Salva couldn’t contest. Everyone knew their daughter had been fussy for the past two days; it was amazing how a tiny two-and-a-half-year-old could disrupt even the most rigid of households. And the Maland home, located on a small island in the Caribbean just off the coast of Belize, was the most well-guarded, efficiently run home Kristen had ever seen.

“Then this isn’t about this morning. You’re not punishing me, are you? Because if that’s what this is about, I swear—”

“It’s not,” Kristen assured, though Salva’s cruelty before dawn had made her final decision easier.

She was so tired. Tired of being afraid. Tired of being on her best behavior or else. Tired of asking herself the same questions over and over again—such as who was this man who claimed to be her husband? And why had she agreed to marry a man she couldn’t remember falling in love with?

But if she knew that, she would also know the standard information a healthy mind takes for granted. She would know her own birthday and remember her parent’s faces. She would know where she’d grown up, and if she’d shared her childhood with other siblings.

Oh, Salva had given her answers. Three years ago, when she’d opened her eyes and found herself naked in his huge brass bed, he’d assured her that there was nothing to worry about; she was safe, at home with her loving husband. Then he had filled in the blanks: she was Kristen Harris from St. Petersburg, Florida. She was twenty-one, and as far as he knew, she had no family. He suspected her real name wasn’t Harris, he told her, because she had been eluding the police at the time they’d met.

That particular news had shocked her, and seeing that it had, Salva had patted her hand and assured her that whatever mistakes she’d made were unimportant. That he and the island were her future—the perfect safe haven for a fugitive on the run.

Salva’s words had made sense. Still, Kristen had insisted on seeing a doctor. The next day her husband had sent for a neurologist. Dr. Eden—George to her husband—had explained her condition, calling it retrograde amnesia. In Kristen’s case, the blow to her head in the boating accident had been the culprit for her memory loss. In most cases the amnesia wasn’t permanent, Dr. Eden had attested. There was, however, no medicine or treatment to reverse her condition.

Three years later, Kristen was still playing a waiting game, still unable to remember anything past the morning she’d opened her eyes and learned she was the wife of a perfect stranger. A very dangerous stranger.

“Then you forgive me, Princess?”

Kristen blinked out of her muse. “Forgive you?”

“For this morning.”

She would never forgive him for that or for any of the other times he’d forced himself on her. But Kristen carefully nodded, her gaze drifting over the imposing naked body that lay beside her, knowing full well that whether she forgave him or not had nothing to do with the outcome of the next few hours.

In the moonlight, all six feet, two inches of Salvador Maland radiated danger and authority. He was the perfect male specimen—a tropical tan on an athletic body, and sinfully handsome. His commanding dark eyes almost too exotic for a man.

The island women thought him breathtaking. Kristen thought him frightening. The man behind the model’s build and the sculptured perfection was the epitome of arrogance—second only to his

violent temper, which he demonstrated daily by making the maids cry and the guards shake in their boots. More than once Kristen had found herself backed into a corner pleading for mercy for herself or Amanda. And there, standing over her, wearing a smug expression while she squirmed like a vulnerable fish on a deadly hook, was this stranger who called himself her husband.

“I forbid you to leave this room tonight.” He raised his arm to rest his sleek, shaved head in the palm of his hand. “Amanda has a competent nanny. She doesn’t need you sitting up with her or walking the floor.”

Kristen had learned she was pregnant only a few short weeks after she’d opened her eyes and found herself on the island. As if dealing with an empty head and a strange husband wasn’t enough, for the next several months she had endured severe morning sickness. Seven months later she’d given birth to a little blond angel Salva had insisted they name Amanda after his mother, the island’s wealthy Creole grande dame, Miandera Maland.

In the beginning Kristen had wanted to believe Salva. She had wanted the island paradise to be her and Amanda’s refuge, and she had wanted Salva to be their savior—the hero every woman dreams of marrying. But as time passed it became clear that Salva was as dangerous and unpredictable as the jaguars that prowled the wildlife preserve at Cockscomb. He was a ruthless man, and his island paradise Kristen’s prison—a prison she ached to escape.

“Did you hear me? You will not leave my side tonight. Is that understood?”

“Salva, be reasonable. Amanda’s a baby. These rules of yours—”

Like a snake striking on instinct, he wrapped his fingers around Kristen’s neck. She fell silent, knowing what it would cost her if she challenged Salva’s authority further.

Her quick submission brought a gleam of satisfaction to his confident dark eyes. Slowly he traced her small, fragile mouth with a blunt-tipped finger. “Amanda will learn her lessons eventually.” His smile broadened, his eyes turning carnal. “And you, my lovely, have waited long enough to be rewarded for being so forgiving. Lie back, Princess.”

Dread swept over Kristen. “Salva, I don’t feel—”

His long fingers slid down her neck, squeezing and cutting off her protest, demanding that she flatten out on the bed. “You’re amazing,” he praised. “So fragile, and so remarkably perfect. From the moment I saw you, I knew I had to have you.”

Lavish compliments—this was the way it started—the prelude to several hours of enduring a woman’s worst nightmare. Dread seized the moment and Kristen began to beg. “Salva, please... I’m bruised and—”

“Shh. This morning I was angry,” he reasoned. “Tonight that’s not the case. I don’t enjoy hurting you, Princess.”

“But you do hurt me!” She regretted the words the minute she said them. His gaze turned brittle, and Kristen could see his temper begin to slowly build like a determined island storm.

“Are you thinking of denying me, Princess?” His eyes lit up, ready for the challenge.

She shook her head.

He leaned forward and brushed his lips over her mouth. His breath scalded her with the sickening scent of mint. “Mother says you’ve cast a spell over me. It’s true I’m unable to get enough of you. It’s been three years and I still...” He paused, his hard gaze studying her young face. “Are you a witch then, capable of bringing me to my knees? Or simply the most perfect creature a man could ever envision owning? I ask you, witch or wife, Princess?”

“Wife,” Kristen answered, motioning to the wine that sat on the nightstand. “A dutiful wife.”

He seemed pleased with her answer and, too, that she’d remembered the wine. He reached out and spread her long pale hair over the white satin pillowcase. “You’re my beautiful princess,” he mused out loud, then whispered, “and I’m your king.”

“I’m no princess,” Kristen refuted. Just a wife with no memory, she thought. A trapped wife, desperately seeking answers.

His cold hand covered her breast and squeezed, then slowly, possessively, he worked her nipple into a hard knot with his thumb. As he kissed her, his powerful gaze penetrated her soft brown eyes.

What was it? Kristen wondered. What was she reading in his eyes? Was it suspicion? Had she been careless earlier when she'd slipped into his private office? Had she failed to wipe clean her fingerprints when she'd taken the gun? Or was he simply testing her...again?

Kristen forced herself to snuggle against her husband's naked body. Anything to distract him, she thought—even this.

"I need to see you," he insisted, and quickly made a rag of the expensive nightgown.

Stripped in a heartbeat, Kristen squeezed her eyes shut. Her heart hammered against her chest and her breath caught in her throat. The desperate keening sound that escaped her lips was mistaken for passion and with a satisfied grunt, Salvador Maland lodged himself inside her. "Much better, Princess. Much better than this morning. Much..."

Kristen had been waiting, listening for her daughter's birdlike voice to call to her. The moment she heard it, she slid from the bed, retrieved her robe, and left Salva sprawled on his stomach in a deep sleep. In Amanda's room, she dismissed the nanny. "I'll stay with her, Celia. You go back to bed."

The nanny's eyes widened, and Kristen knew why—Salva had given her strict instructions to stay with Amanda the entire night. "No, Mrs. Maland. No, no! I can't leave."

"It's all right. My husband will sleep through the night. I'm sure of it," Kristen said, recalling the two empty bottles that sat on the nightstand in their bedroom—a testimony to her husband's passion for expensive wine. She ushered the young girl into the hall. "Don't worry, Celia. I'll see to Amanda's fussing, and you," she leaned to whisper, "if you're not tired, should check on Captain Carmichael. He may be in need of a little distraction from his nightly guard duty." She smiled, then winked at the pretty nanny.

The young dark-haired girl blushed. "Thank you, Mrs. Maland. You are so generous and kind."

As soon as Kristen was left alone with her baby daughter, she lifted Amanda into her arms. "We need to hurry, sweetheart."

Within minutes Kristen had Amanda dressed and sitting in the middle of the bed. The child resembled her mother, from her pale blond hair to her petite bone structure and delicate mouth. She was a shy little girl, with sweet brown eyes. Her mommy's eyes.

Kristen went in search of the small black bag she'd stashed earlier in the far corner of the closet. From the bag, she pulled out a pair of jeans, a black T-shirt, and dark deck shoes. She dressed quickly, and while repacking the bag with necessities for Amanda, her fingers grazed hard steel.

Kristen hated guns, but the .22 derringer she'd hidden in the bag looked almost toylike in size, thus not so menacing. She'd actually chosen it because it was the smallest gun in Salva's private collection and the one that might go unnoticed the longest. Then, too, it hadn't looked all that complicated to load or shoot. No, she didn't intend to use it on anyone. But the gun would be good for intimidation's sake if necessary. No one needed to know she had never fired one before—that is, that she remembered.

Convinced she was doing the right thing, Kristen moved on to the next stage of her plan. With trembling hands, she forced herself to do the unthinkable—an act no mother would ever consider if she had a choice. She drugged her beloved Amanda with a small chip of one of her prescription sleeping pills.

Twenty minutes later Kristen shouldered the black bag, lifted her sleeping daughter into her arms, and slipped soundlessly down the grand hall of the Maland estate. She already knew where the guards would be and which escape route to take out of the house.

Praying Celia had lured Davis Carmichael away from his post at the front gate, she left the house. She had made friends with the guard dogs the first year on the island—her kindness rewarded this day by reaching the iron gate without alarming man or beast.

Unattended... Silently, Kristen thanked Celia for enticing Davis into one of the private gardens. Lifting her sleeping daughter's foot, she punched the sequence of numbers she'd written on the sole of Amanda's shoe into the electronic keypad. As the gate opened Kristen blinked back tears and hurried to the sailboat docked a quarter mile down the beach. She didn't question her knowledge of sailing as she boarded the sleek vessel and stowed Amanda safely below; she simply thanked God for gifting her with a means to escape.

Minutes later the boat moved away from the dock. A few minutes more and Kristen hoisted the white sails to catch the tropical breeze. A mile from shore, she pulled the photo from her pocket. It was one of six she'd stolen from a file in Salva's office. She didn't know the man in the picture, but her husband must—Salva had gone to a lot of trouble to have the picture blown up to cover one entire wall in his office.

In the moonlight she studied the reckless-looking man with the shaggy black hair. He appeared to be in his mid-twenties. His sun-baked muscular chest and massive biceps looked as if they'd been carved from a slab of iron. His long, oaklike legs were crammed into well-worn jeans, and his feet were bare.

He had the look of a fisherman.

The unexpected assumption simply popped into Kristen's head as she searched the photo. The background was out of focus, but the iron man was hunkered down over a hydraulic winch used on a fishing boat.

Hydraulic winch?

How did she know what he was repairing? Or that the winch was part of a fishing boat? Had she suddenly remembered something connected to her past?

From the moment Kristen had planned her escape, her destination had been St. Petersburg, Florida. It made sense. Salva said they'd met there.

But now...

She flipped over the photograph, anxious for another memory to pop out of thin air. On the back was written the name "Blu Devil," and beneath that "Algiers, Louisiana." Once again she brought her gaze back to the man in the photo, willing him to speak to her in some way.

Was it possible she knew him, possible he knew her? There had to be a reason why she'd been drawn to his picture besides his good looks.

Kristen had waited three years for a clue as to who she was. And now, suddenly, here it was. She could be trading one nightmare for another, but if there was a chance the Blu Devil was the answer to her prayers...the smallest chance.

Salvador Maland ground Davis Carmichael's face into the quarry stone beneath his feet while his mother, Miandera, watched. "You'll die slowly, Carmichael, screaming for a quick end. But it won't come. Kristen's gone and you say you don't know who invaded my home and abducted her. How can that be? You were the guard on duty."

"No more! Please, no more!"

Ignoring his plea, Davis was kicked in the ribs again where he lay on the terrace bleeding and moaning in pain. Close to becoming unhinged, Salva screamed, "No more, you say! There will be plenty more. She's gone, you bastard! Gone!"

Another vicious kick stole the guard's breath, the third rendered him unconscious. Salva motioned to the two guards who stood awaiting his instructions to take the man away.

"Yes, take him," Miandera insisted. "Then clean up this mess."

While the guards stepped forward to carry Davis Carmichael away, Miandera tangled her arm around her son and led him out of the gate toward the beach. Nearly as tall as Salva, Miandera Maland was sparrow-thin, and her sleek black hair was the longest on the island—reaching past her knees. Her skin was a golden brown from years spent in the Caribbean, her makeup as spare as her European smile.

As they walked the sandy beach, Salva admitted, “Kristen hasn’t been off the island since I brought her here, Mother. She hasn’t been out of my sight for more than an afternoon in three years. Dammit, how could something like this happen?”

“You feel betrayed. As you should, darling. The guards have failed you...us. They will be punished,” she assured him. “And Kristen, if she left on her own, also must be punished.”

Salva jerked to a stop and gazed down at his mother. “Are you suggesting that she’s left me? That she snuck off in the night while I slept?”

“We must consider every possibility, darling. There was no forced entry. The dogs didn’t even bark. And there’s been no ransom request.”

“Would that make you happy, to learn that she’s betrayed me? You never liked her.” Salva turned his hot anger on his mother. “Answer me! Are you happy that she’s gone?”

“Nothing that pains you would make me happy, darling. And my granddaughter is also gone, remember?”

His mother had been jealous of Kristen from the moment she had laid eyes on her. But when Salva had told her about the baby that he and Kristen were expecting, Miandera had quickly tempered her animosity—a true Maland heir was rare, something to covet, to cherish and protect.

“I’m sorry, Mother.”

“I have every confidence that you will return my granddaughter to me unharmed.” Miandera reached for her son’s hand and clasped it as they continued along the beach. “I did warn you, however, darling, not to fall in love with such a young girl. I do not say this to sting your pride, but Kristen never really came around as you had hoped—youth can be so fickle. She never understood the Maland way. And her lack of memory has been a problem from the beginning. She admitted once, she wished she could remember falling in love with you.”

Salva refused to react to his mother’s criticism, or discuss Kristen’s young age or lack of memory. “Someone has breached the compound and taken them,” he reasoned. “I’m certain Kristen didn’t leave on her own, Mother.”

“I hope you’re right, darling. But the sailboat is gone. For what purpose would kidnappers steal the boat?”

“As a diversion, of course.”

“That’s possible, yes.”

They walked on.

“I saw the bruises yesterday, darling. The ones on Kristen’s arms. I only thought she may have left because—”

“She bruises easily, Mother.”

“I’m not criticizing you, darling. Some women need a strong hand. I suspect your young bride is one of those women.”

Salva refused to believe Kristen would leave over a few silly bruises. And yet, they had searched the entire island without gleaning a single clue.

“The yacht is ready,” Miandera supplied in her husky voice. “All Porter needs is a destination. Where will you search first?”

“I have a phone call to make, then I’ll decide.” Salva stopped and reached into his pocket for his cell phone. Seconds later he heard the voice of a man he had hoped never to talk to ever again.

“Crawford’s Boat Tours.”

Salva didn’t identify himself. All he said was, “She’s missing.” It was a long shot, but he needed to ask anyway. “Have you seen her?”

“No. Don’t tell me the bitch is on her way back here?”

“I don’t have a confirmation on that just yet, but she is gone.”

“Still empty-headed?”

“Yes.”

Salva turned away from his mother's questioning gaze. He didn't want to think about what would happen if Kristen stopped taking her medication and started to remember. He only knew for all concerned, he had to get her back before that could happen. And he had to do it while keeping Miandera on a short leash. There were things he hadn't told her. Things his mother must never find out.

"What about your kid?"

"Gone, too," Salva answered.

"In your line of work it doesn't pay to have weaknesses, Maland. The bitch is your weakness. You should have had your fun with her, then killed her."

Salva didn't want to hear what he should have done. Three years ago he had simply taken what he had wanted and damned the consequences. It had always been the Maland way. His little princess had, indeed, become his weakness. But he wasn't prepared to give her up—not at any cost.

"She'd only come here if she started remembering. Let's hope Little Krissy stays stupid."

"You have my number. Day or night, call me if you see her." Salva disconnected the phone and slipped it back into his pocket. Facing his mother, he said, "Tell Porter we'll hold one more day. If I haven't received a ransom note, and Kristen still doesn't turn up on the island, I'll head for St. Petersburg."

"And the Blu Devil? What of our plans for him?"

"We put them on hold for the time being."

"On hold? But we've already done that too many times. You promised—"

"Be patient a little longer, Mother. A Maland's promise is his honor. I give you my word that the Blu Devil will die. But first, I will see that Kristen and Amanda are brought back to the island. And, if there is punishing to be done, I will see to that, too."

Chapter 2

The dockside stench could curl a sensitive nose at twenty paces. The tourists who frequented the waterfront in Algiers, looking for a taste of culture, complained it griped their bellies and killed their appetites, too.

Blu duFray had grown up on the docks and, as a seasoned fisherman, he rarely noticed the ripe odor or the refuse and floating beer cans as he unloaded his day's shrimp catch off the Demon's Eye—his favorite among the fleet of seven aging shrimpers he owned.

Today's heat had crowned one hundred, a humid hundred that had forced Blu out of his T-shirt well before ten that morning. He wiped away the sweat clinging to his neck and glanced around, noting he and his crew were the last to unload their day's catch. By now the others were either on their way home or on a bar stool at Cruger's.

Out of the corner of his eye Blu saw something dark move and he turned in time to see a nun perch herself on a crate outside Thompson's Fishery. She looked miserably uncomfortable as she fidgeted in the hot sun. She damn well should be, he thought, noting the way the black habit hid all but her small, round face.

He shook his head, sure she had been sent to sting his conscience and make him feel guilty. Well, it wasn't going to net her more than a heatstroke, Blu determined. Everyone knew the Blu Devil didn't own a conscience. And he sure as hell hadn't reformed like the hungry-for-a-story journalist at the New Orleans Times-Picayune had claimed. But whether he had or hadn't, the damage was done. Since he'd rescued those six kids from a slave trader last year, he'd been plagued weekly by mission-minded angels harassing him to donate a few extra crates of shrimp to their soup kitchens.

Frankly, Blu was fed up with the whole damn situation. Yes, he'd saved those kids, but there had been a reward, compensation for his trouble, and he hadn't been shy in accepting it. Still, his picture had been plastered on the front page of the newspaper along with a lengthy article playing him up as some kind of modern-day hero.

Well, the nun had made a trip to the docks for nothing unless she had a few extra pounds to sweat off, because his pockets were empty for whatever charity she was selling. No one on this side of the river except for Spoon Thompson—the wholesale crook Blu was forced to sell his shrimp to—could afford to ante up weekly for a tax write-off.

Blu glanced at the nun once more and found her staring straight at him. Oh, hell, she was working him, all right. She had her eye on his shrimp.

Again, he cursed the unwanted publicity he'd received. If he had known how much trouble those kids were going to cost him, he would have never... No, that wasn't true; Taber Denoux had earned his iron cage, and those scared kids had deserved a happy ending.

He was all done questioning his actions. He may not like it, and most of the time he didn't, but long ago Blu had accepted that a higher power navigated his path. Oui, he was all through questioning why it had been him who had discovered Denoux's merchandise that night. In all honesty, he'd felt good seeing those kids reunited with their parents, but he'd also been eager to accept the sizable reward.

Yes, indeed, the Lord did work in mysterious ways—he didn't owe the bank his soul any longer, his men had regular pay checks, and he no longer had to work a second job.

An hour later, the shrimp unloaded and the boat cleaned, Mort said, "If that's it, you mind if I take off for a while? I got something to do."

"You got nothing to do, mon ami," Blu drawled. "What you got is a few bucks in your back pocket and a memory burning your insides."

Mort grinned. "She had a pretty smile."

"I can't argue with that."

“If you were me, what would you do?”

Blu had no authority over Mort after hours. He’d been the oldest of the kidnapped kids Denoux had planned to peddle on the slave market—the only one who’d had nowhere to go after Taber Denoux had been put out of business and hauled off to jail.

It wasn’t as if Blu had any regrets inviting Mort to join his crew. The kid had turned out to be a hard worker. He’d easily earned his wage, plus room and board. But from the beginning Blu had made it clear that Mort was expected to take care of himself. He didn’t want the responsibility or the aggravation of keeping tabs on a teenager. He’d made it clear he didn’t preach morals, give advances, or advice—hell, that would be like satan giving a lecture on the benefits of reading the Bible.

“You got something more for me to do?”

Blu shook his head. “No. Cross the river and take her someplace quiet.”

Crossing the river meant catching the ferry and heading for New Orleans or taking the Crescent City Connection. The girl in question with the pretty smile worked at a hot dog stand along the Riverwalk.

“I’ll see you later then,” Mort promised.

“Oui. The Nightwing is all yours tonight. I’m staying at the Dump, again. I got payroll to finish,” Blu explained.

The Dump—rather, the building in discussion—had been a purchase Blu made with some of the reward money he’d received for his “heroic deed.” The rundown two-story on Pelican Street, a few blocks from where he’d grown up, seemed to be a good investment at the time.

He wasn’t so sure of that now, though it had certainly pleased his mother and sister. They had been after him to settle down—preferably with a nice girl.

Blu had laughed out loud on hearing that, then promptly told them both that “settling down” was for old people, and that “nice girls” were for saints not devils.

He glanced in the direction he’d last seen the nun, but she was no longer there. Relieved the heat had driven her off, he pulled on his gray sleeveless T-shirt and jumped from the boat. Swearing as a burning pain shot into his left leg, he reached down to rub his thigh through his worn jeans as he headed toward the fishery.

The bullet wound, courtesy of the Denoux ordeal, had been slow to heal. The doctor had told him the infection he’d endured for the four days he’d kept the kids alive had resulted in permanent tissue damage and that he would always walk with a limp.

The minute Blu walked through Thompson’s front door, Spoon looked up from his desk and grinned. He was a short, wiry little man with gray hair and insightful green eyes. In his fifties, twice married and single once more, Spoon had stepped into his father’s shoes in much the same way Blu had; the only differences between the two men was their age and which side of the desk they worked on.

“A good catch today, duFray. You doubled my boys.”

“Always do.”

Blu’s blunt reply didn’t offend Spoon. The duFray Devils were top-notch, and no one in Algiers would argue that fact, or that Blu duFray was the number one reason why his fleet was still in business.

“Like I’ve always said, you got the nose for it. Your daddy had it, too. But I think yours is even better. They say you can’t teach it. I sure as hell believe it. That’s what makes your nose worth paying through the nose for.” Spoon chuckled at his own joke.

Blu remained stone sober.

At twenty-five, he was the youngest fishing fleet owner in Algiers. But it wasn’t Blu’s age or ability that had sparked the number of outrageous wagers down at Cruger’s Bar over the past few years—with his uncle Pike’s help, Blu had taken over the duFray Devils at age eighteen after his father had unexpectedly died. No, the wagers had nothing to do with whether Blu was smart enough to step into his daddy’s shoes, but whether the “old tubs”—as his boats were referred to—would be

able to stay afloat, what with the inflated prices on repairs over the years by the marine yards and the decreasing wholesale prices on shrimp.

"Name your price, duFray," Spoon insisted. "Today I'm feeling generous." Blu opened his mouth, but the older man held up his hand. "I've offered to buy you out before, I know. But I'll say it again, mon ami, you're too young to be workin' like you do and gettin' paid half of what you're worth. If I was you, I'd lighten the load and—"

"You're not me."

"But if I was—"

"You got my tally ready?"

"I can appreciate you feelin' loyal to your daddy's memory, son. But if you would have taken my offer two years ago your reputation would still be worth a damn and your mama could hold her head up like she used to."

"Leave it alone, Thompson, or I'll head over to Paradise Point and sell my catch to old man Aldwin."

"That'll be hard to do. Ain't you heard? He's all washed up. Under-sellin' me finally bellied him up. Either that, or that no-good worm of a grandson sucked him dry." Spoon grinned, obviously pleased with the other man's misfortune no matter what had caused it. "Besides, I heard you and Aldwin had a partin' of the ways a year or so ago. Don't suppose you'd care to set the record straight as to why that was?"

Blu had no intentions of trading information with Spoon Thompson. What had passed between him and Perch Aldwin was business of another kind. And it was too late to make amends—he'd already tried.

Spoon shook his head. "One of these days those old tubs of yours ain't gonna make it back in. Why don'tcha—"

"My tally," Blu reminded, growing tired of the sound of Spoon's voice and the same topic they argued over daily.

"Those old tubs are bleedin' you."

"Those 'old tubs' still top your catch any day of the week."

Spoon stood and came around the six-foot cypress desk. Side by side, the top of his egg-shaped head didn't reach Blu's massive shoulder. "It ain't the tubs, boy. Your nose is what's gettin' the job done. I've got the money and you've got the talent. Together we could go places. How about meetin' me at Cruger's in an hour and we'll settle this once and for all?"

"Save your money and your jaw, Thompson. I'm not interested."

"You're a stubborn bastard, boy. Ornery as hell, just like your daddy was. But one of these days you'll see I'm right." That said, Spoon picked up the tally sheet and handed it over. "I'm gonna keep askin'."

Blu eyed the tally, didn't like the figures, but knew it was the best he was going to get. He shoved the paper in his back pocket, then left without another word. Outside, he started up Bay Street, considering Spoon's offer, as he did at least once a week. He knew a number of independent fishermen who would jump at the chance to sell out to Spoon and go to work for him. And it would certainly lift a mountain of bills and worry from his shoulders if he did. But for thirty years the duFray Devils had been in business for themselves, and Blu couldn't get past the feeling that selling out to Spoon wouldn't only be selling out his father's legacy, but his men and their pride and dignity, as well.

A block from the waterfront, Blu realized he was being followed. He wasn't selling his fists to Patch Pollaro any longer, but the number of enemies he'd made working for the loanshark could easily explain the tail.

He picked up the pace and turned down Poke Alley—his limp always more pronounced at the end of a long day. He pulled the bandanna off his dark head and shoved it into his back pocket. His jeans were dirt-stained, his T-shirt a little better off since he'd worked most of the day shirtless.

When he reached a deserted courtyard, he ducked inside. Minutes later, the tail crept past and Blu reached out and grabbed—his reputation for having the quickest hands in the fist business aiding him instinctively.

The scream that permeated the air jolted Blu's senses. He'd been anticipating a man, but the scream was definitely feminine. He spun the figure around and promptly let go of the nun he'd seen hanging around the wharf an hour ago.

"What the hell are you after, church mouse?" Blu demanded, staring into a pair of wide eyes the color of brown sugar. To go along with her pretty eyes was a delicate nose and a rosebud mouth that was too sexy for the profession she'd chosen. She was, however, carrying the appropriate prop—a thick black Bible.

The nun quickly regained her bearings and took two giant steps backward. "I need to talk to you," she said in a hushed tone. "I'm interested in... What I wanted from you was..."

Blu groaned, anticipating her request. "Save it, church mouse. I'm fresh out of cash, and my day's catch has already been sold. You're hitting on the wrong sucker."

"I don't want your money, or your catch," she responded. "And I'm sure I have the right sucker... uh, I mean, the right man."

"Don't you people get tired of holding out your hands like beggars?"

Disgusted, Blu curled his lip and pierced her with his well-known devil's stare—the one proven to make even the dockside roughnecks squirm—then turned away and started down the alley.

"Wait! Please, I—"

Dog-tired, his leg throbbing, Blu ignored her sudden pleading tone and kept walking.

"Hold it right there, Blu Devil."

Her pleading tone was gone. And the fact that she called him by name alerted Blu that this wasn't the normal charity harassment he'd grown accustomed to—most of the nuns he'd faced were shy and could barely look him in the eye. They had also addressed him as Mr. duFray, even though his devil reputation preceded him.

He turned just as she flipped open the fat black Bible and pulled out a small .22 derringer. Aiming it straight at him, she said, "I need your undivided attention. Do I have it?"

Blu stared down the barrel of the palm-size handgun. "You've got it, church mouse. What's this about?"

"Not a handout," she assured. "Information will do fine."

"What kind of information?"

"How do you know Salvador Maland?"

The question wasn't going to get an answer; Blu had never heard the name before. "I don't know anyone named Salvador," he admitted.

"Liar." She stuck the neat little pearl-handled .22 farther out in front of her. "You have to know him. He knows you."

"Plenty of people know me, fille, that doesn't mean I know them." Blu studied the gun, the petite young girl, then the gun again. "Is that thing loaded?"

"It wouldn't do me much good if it wasn't. Does the name Kristen Harris mean anything to you?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Does she know me, too?"

Her hand started to shake, confirming she wasn't as tough as she was trying to make him believe. Suddenly her shoulders slumped and she let go of the Bible. When it hit the ground it made a wood-splitting noise and it was then that Blu realized it wasn't a Bible at all. It was a wooden box meant to look like one.

The nun dug a picture out from the folds of her skirt. "This is you, right?"

Blu took a step forward.

She shook the gun at him. “Stay where you are!”

Blu stopped, squinted at the picture. He decided it was definitely him. He was putting a hydraulic winch back together. He’d gotten good at repairing engines, too. And it took hours to repair nets and busted rigging, but his jack-of-all-trades ability was why he was still in business. “I guess that’s me,” he told the nun.

“I doubt there’s two of you,” she offered. “Besides, your name is on the back. And Sister Marian confirmed it’s you.” Her gaze followed his tall, broad frame up then down. “You don’t exactly blend into a crowd, and everyone I talked to knew right where to find you.”

No surprise there, Blu thought. He’d lived in Algiers all of his life. For the past twenty-five years his parents had owned duFray Fish, the fresh-fish market on Front Street. Then there was his stint with Patch Pollaro as hired muscle, not to mention last year’s “heroic deed” that had gained him an altogether new fan base. Hell, yes, people knew him for one reason or another.

“Now what?” Blu forced his attention away from her sexy mouth. “What’s next? You going to shoot me?”

“Not unless you do something stupid.” She slipped the photo back into her pocket. “Show me your left hand.”

The request had Blu arching his heavy black brows. “My hand?”

“Do it!” She motioned with the gun to encourage him.

Blu raised his hand for her to inspect.

“Turn it over.”

He rolled it palm-side up.

“Nothing,” she whispered, and a little sigh of relief followed. Then she closed her eyes and lowered the gun.

Surprised, but never one to let that cloud his judgement, Blu jumped at the opportunity to disarm her. He surged forward, but his boots scraping over the brick courtyard gave away his intentions. She blinked open her eyes, shook off whatever had come over her and quickly raised the derringer. “Get back!”

“Take it easy.” Blu raised his hands. “Put the damn gun down, church mouse, before you drill me without meaning to. That thing wasn’t meant to be waved around like a flyswatter. They usually have a hair trigger.”

“Then I suggest you tell me what you know about Salvador Maland, or you just might end up a dead fly and tomorrow’s news.”

“I already told you, I don’t know anyone by that name.”

“How can you not know someone who has a ten-by-twelve of you in his office?”

Blu shrugged. “Maybe he likes my face.”

“I don’t think you understand. I’m talking ten feet by twelve feet. Your face covers the entire wall in Salva’s office.”

That was the weirdest thing Blu had heard in a long time. So weird, in fact, he sifted the man’s name through his memory bank once more. But it still didn’t produce a familiar face. There was a chance he’d dealt with the man indirectly while working for Patch, but to chase down the name he would have to pay his old boss a visit.

“This picture of me, the one on this guy’s wall, is it recent?”

“It’s the same one I showed you.” She eyed his shaggy black hair, which was a couple inches shorter, but still past his collar. “Please, this is very important.”

“Can you refresh my memory?” Maybe it was the desperate look she was giving him that had made him ask. But more likely it was that damn mouth of hers—she had the sweetest little lips he’d ever seen. “How about telling me how this guy and I might have met?”

His innocent question upset her. She waved the gun at him again. “Refresh your memory? Ha! How can I do that when I can’t even refresh my own? You’re the one who’s supposed to be filling in the blanks here, not me. I traveled all the way from...” She clamped her mouth shut, aware she was on the verge of revealing too much.

“From where?” Blu prompted.

She wiped at the corner of one of her big brown eyes. “Never mind where.”

Blu realized she was fighting tears. “Listen, fille, maybe if you put the gun down we could talk this over.”

“There’s nothing to talk over if you don’t know Salva or...Kristen Harris.” She swore softly. “This has all been for nothing. How could I have been so stupid?”

“Put the gun down.”

Blu watched as she lowered the gun. Then, just as quickly, she raised it again. “I put the gun down and then we both walk away, right?”

Blu’s answer didn’t come quick enough.

“That’s what I thought. You’re not going to let me walk away, are you? Another big man with a big ego. How could I be so lucky?”

“Put the gun down,” Blu growled in a bigger voice than before.

Defiantly she gripped the gun in both hands and took aim at his head. “I don’t think so. I think you should strip, Blu Devil.”

“What?” Blu was sure he hadn’t heard her right.

“I said, take off your clothes.”

“A nun demanding I get naked? That’s a first.”

“It’s not for the reason you think. I’m not dying to get a look at...at Harvey, or whatever you’ve named it. That look you gave me a minute ago suggests I won’t get a block before you come after me. So I’m taking your clothes for insurance.”

She was right about him going after her. No one pulled a gun on the Blu Devil, then walked without paying for the privilege.

“Start with your boots.”

“Or you’ll shoot me?”

She smiled then, a sexy little smile that showed off pearly white teeth. “At this close range, I think I can hit what I’m aiming at. Don’t you?” She took aim at Harvey. “How much do you enjoy being a man, Blu Devil?”

Not as coolly as he would have liked, Blu said, “No complaints.”

“Then I suggest you protect your assets by pulling off your boots.” To prove she meant business, she tugged back the hammer.

“Bon Dieu, fille. You don’t want to do this,” Blu warned. “I never forget a wrong. Never.”

“I believe you’re a man who means what he says, but I don’t have a choice. Your boots, Blu Devil.”

Swearing, Blu leaned against the brick wall and removed his left boot. Next, he pulled the right one. But just as he was setting it down, he dropped to his knees and hurled the number twelve at the nun’s outstretched arm. The gun discharged as it hit the concrete, the bullet ricocheting off the bricks in the narrow courtyard like a Ping-Pong ball. On instinct he drove forward, snagged the nun by her long black skirt and dragged her down.

It was all over within a few hairy seconds, or so Blu thought until the church mouse hefted the boot that lay within arm’s reach and clouted him alongside the temple with enough force to cause him to see stars.

Chapter 3

“You say she was wearing nun’s clothes, but you don’t think she was a nun?”

Blu turned from the window in the New Orleans Police Department and gazed at Ryland Archard, one of the NOPD’s most respected homicide detectives. “I don’t think too many nuns pack heat, do you, Ry?”

“She had a gun?”

“A fancy little .22 derringer. A specialty piece with a pearl handle.”

“A nun with a gut warmer. That’s a first for me.”

“For me, too.”

Blu saw the amusement in his brother-in-law’s eyes. He knew how ridiculous it all sounded. He also knew what a slim chance he had of finding the gutsy little fille. But he was determined to try. He’d wrestled with the idea the entire night. Those damn eyes and her dainty pink mouth had kept him awake; that, and the headache she’d given him by crashing his own damn boot into his skull.

True, he was curious as to why Salvador Maland had put his face on an entire wall in his office, but that wasn’t the primary reason why he’d shown up in Ry’s office first thing this morning. Something important was driving that fille, something powerful enough to make her dress up in nun’s garb and pull a gun on him. She’d been scared to death, and still she’d stood her ground.

Blu wanted to know why.

“I want you to help me find her.” There, he’d said it. He’d asked his brother-in-law for help.

“Did I hear right? You want my help?”

The smug look on Ry’s face was followed by an open-faced grin. Blu swore crudely. “Oui, you heard me. I’ve already cleared it with Brodie. I’m taking time off work and he’s agreed to do double duty until I get back.”

Ry’s grin faded. “You’ve never taken a day off in your life. Well, not willingly anyway. Speaking of time off, Margo and I are headed for Texas for two weeks. She wants to meet my parents and brother.”

“When?”

“We leave tomorrow.”

“Your timing stinks.” Blu saw the way Ry’s brow arched. “Okay, so I was expecting more than just a little help. I know this isn’t your field of expertise, but I really need to find this girl.”

“If it’s that important, I’ll get in touch with Jackson. He can follow it up on this end.”

Jackson Ward was Ryland’s rebel partner—the loose cannon of the outfit. A man who was on suspension more than he was on duty because he didn’t go by the book on anything.

“So Jackson’s working?” Blu asked. “Last time we talked he was on suspension.”

“He was just reinstated yesterday.”

“That won’t last long.”

“It never does,” Ryland agreed. “But when he’s working, he’s the best there is.”

“I thought you were the best. That’s what the paper claims.”

“And we know that every word the paper prints is gospel, right, hero?”

Reminded of the harassment he’d endured over the past year due to freedom of the press over his “heroic deed,” Blu snorted.

“So Brodie’s willing to wrangle with Spoon Thompson on your behalf for a few days? That should be worth a front-row seat.”

Blu grimaced. “Oui. Those two are about as agreeable as two cottonmouths fighting over the same rat. No, Brodie’s not too happy about me taking time off, but he’s a good friend.”

“He proved it last year,” Ryland agreed. “Not too many men I know would have lived through the beating he took from Denoux’s men to protect you and Margo. No, Brodie Hewitt is a good man.”

Though I would certainly like to know where he calls home. No one seems to know his story. A man who keeps himself a mystery is a man who usually has something to hide.”

Blu remained silent. He knew Brodie’s story, but he’d sworn to keep it to himself. When Brodie was ready to deal with his past, he’d head home. But until then, Blu would value Brodie’s friendship and the big guy’s loyalty to the duFray Devils.

“Do you think this girl has something to do with your pal, Patch? You made quite a few enemies when you were working for him. Maybe she wants revenge for some old, unsettled score.”

“Then why didn’t she just shoot me? She had plenty of time if that’s what she wanted.” Blu walked away from the window and the warmth of the morning sun and sat on the chair in front of Ry’s desk. “She asked me if I knew a man named Salvador Maland. She seemed to think I should. And when I said I didn’t, she called me a liar.”

“You’re sure you don’t know him?”

“I don’t think so. Does the name mean anything to you?”

“Not offhand.”

“She had the damndest eyes,” Blu mused, still unable to forget their warm color, or her sexy little mouth.

“This is personal, then?”

“Hell, yes, it’s personal. Damn personal when a fille you’ve never seen before points a gun at your nuts and threatens to blow them off.”

Grinning, Ry said, “Sure would have made a helluva headline for the Times-Picayune.”

Blu evil-eyed Ry. “The girl pulled a gun on me and you’re making jokes.”

“You make it sound like it was the first time you’ve ever looked down the barrel of a gun.”

“It was with a young fille backing it. Claiming to be a nun, no less.”

“Is that what’s bothering you, that it was a woman?”

“You’re not listening. She was little.” Blu held up his hand. “About this big.”

“So she’s maybe five four, not a woman, and not a nun?”

Blu swore and was halfway out of his chair when Ry pulled a notepad from his drawer and said, “Not so fast. Give me some facts.”

Blu eased back down onto the chair. “You mean, a description?”

“Yeah. What did she look like? What was the color of those damndest eyes?”

“Brown. Soft brown.”

“Hair?”

“Didn’t see it.”

“You said she’s young?”

“Real young. Eighteen at the most, And she’s...” He held up his hand again. “Five feet, four inches sounds right.”

“Any identifying marks? A mole or birthmark?”

“Didn’t see any.”

Ry glanced up. “I thought you were going to give me a description.”

“She was covered in black from head to toe. You’ve seen a nun, haven’t you? They wear black... everywhere.”

“Everywhere?”

Blu refused to let Ry get under his skin. “I’ll let you know once I find her.”

“So what we’ve got is a pair of the damndest brown eyes, and she’s maybe four inches over five feet. And she’s wearing black... everywhere.”

Blu wished he had something more to offer. “Ah, her mouth...”

Ry was waiting with his pen poised. “Yeah?”

“Ah, she’s got... She’s got great teeth.”

“Teeth?” Ry tossed the pen onto the desk. “Well, hell, that makes all the difference in the world. We’ll see her coming, then.”

“I’m out of here.” Blu was on his way up once more.

“Sit down,” Ry growled. “I need some coffee. You want some?”

“No.” Blu watched his brother-in-law stand and head for the coffeepot in the corner. Ry was an inch shorter than Blu’s six-three, and where Blu’s eyes were a deep chocolate, almost black, Ry’s were as blue as the morning sky. His sandy-brown hair was cropped close to his head, and the comfortable jeans and boots he refused to give up after making detective, fit the rugged Texan perfectly.

At thirty-four, Ry’s status with the NOPD had steadily climbed. He was not only considered a fine homicide detective, but the next in line for a promotion. But more importantly was his claim to being the luckiest man alive since he’d married Blu’s sister—a beautiful nightclub singer twelve years younger than him, who kept the Toucan Lounge in the French Quarter packed to full-house capacity three nights a week.

“She gave me another name, too,” Blu drawled. “She asked if I knew a woman by the name of Kristen Harris.”

“And do you?”

“No.”

Ry returned to his chair with a cup of coffee. He jotted the name down beneath Salvador Maland’s. “So how did you and our little nun part company? How did you disarm her? Did you get the gun? We could trace—”

“No gun.” Blu confessed.

Ry eyed the cut and fresh bruise on Blu’s forehead. “What’s that from?”

Blu hadn’t intended to go into the details of how she’d gotten away from him, but if he didn’t... “She, uh, she told me to...”

“She told you to what?” Ry prompted.

“To strip,” Blu confessed grudgingly.

Ry was in the process of taking a sip of his coffee. He promptly choked and messed his shirt. “Dammit.” He eyed the brown stain spreading on his broad chest, then, still scowling, looked back at Blu. “And did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Strip?”

“I took my boots off.” Blu rubbed his temple, remembering the way she’d smashed the heel into his head. “I toppled her before I lost my pants. But then she hit me over the head with my boot.”

While Ry laughed, and patted dry the stain on his shirt, Blu climbed out of the chair, jammed his hand into his jeans’ pocket and paced back to the window. “It wasn’t that damn funny.”

“Normally I’d agree if it had happened to someone else. But you’ve got to admit it’s not every day a nun asks the Blu Devil to strip at gunpoint, then knocks him out. With his own boot, no less.”

When Blu only grunted, Ry sobered—a little. “Okay, let me run these names through the computer and give Jackson a call. When he finds out something he’ll be in touch.”

Before Blu could agree, his sister opened the door and stuck her head inside. Surprise filled Margo’s eyes when she saw who stood in her husband’s office. “Blu? What are you doing here?” When she spied the cut on her brother’s head, she gasped. “Oh, my God! What happened?”

Blu touched his temple. “It’s not worth mentioning, so don’t ask.” He shot Ry a look that told him to keep his mouth shut. His sister was as protective as a mama bear over a newborn cub. If she thought Blu needed her, she would likely cancel her trip to Texas.

Margo frowned at him, then glanced at Ry. “Is he telling the truth or is he hiding something?”

When Ry hesitated, Margo faced Blu, her hands landing on her trim waist. Her dark eyes—a matched pair to her brother’s—narrowed with suspicion. “All right, let’s hear it. You promised me and Mama that you were done working for Patch Pollaro.”

“I am,” Blu insisted.

“Then what’s this?” She gestured to the cut on his head. “And why are you here? I can count on one hand how many times you’ve willingly set foot in this office.”

“Margo.” It was Ry’s voice that brought her up short. “You promised you would back off and give it a rest. Harping ain’t pretty, baby.”

“Harping? I don’t harp. It’s called, I’m-your-sister-and-I-have-a-right-to-be-concerned.” In a visible huff, she planted her butt in the chair opposite her husband and crossed her long legs.

Blu gestured toward Ry. “I was hoping once you married him, Chili, he’d take up all your worrying time.”

His pet nickname for his sister didn’t soften her. “I have plenty of ‘worrying time’ for all of my family. But in your case—”

“Easy, baby,” Ry warned.

Margo brushed her black hair off her shoulders, her gaze locked on Blu as she talked to her husband. “I can’t help it, Ry. He promised me he would take better care of himself after nearly getting killed last year. And as far as I can see, he doesn’t look like he’s keeping his promise. I’ll just bet Patch Pollaro is behind this.”

“I told you, I quit him. Go down to the Red Lizard and ask Patch if he’s seen me lately. He’ll tell you he hasn’t laid eyes on me in a year. I’m officially retired. I’m no longer breaking arms or fingers at a hundred dollars a pop.”

Blu watched his sister squeeze her eyes shut in disgust.

“Don’t talk about it.”

“You brought it up.”

“Then let’s drop it.”

Blu was about to agree when his stomach growled.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t eaten yet today? A shrimper who goes hungry.” Margo shook her head. “Honestly, Blu, it’s not like food is hard to come by. You just throw the nets out and—”

Blu threw up his hands and looked to Ry for help. “Now she’s attacking the way I eat. And this is the woman you chose to wake up next to for the rest of your life?”

“And they say men don’t whine.” Margo stood and gave Ry her full attention. “I guess I’m off to feed him. Do you want— What’s that on your shirt, honey?”

“Coffee.”

“Coffee? Ry, coffee stains. I just bought you that shirt. Last night it was butter. This morning it’s coffee. Do you think I should make an eye appointment for you?”

Ry scowled at his wife. “Because your old man’s eyesight is failing?”

The mischief in Margo duFray ran deep. And, like her brother, if she chose to remain stone sober a crow-bar couldn’t make her crack a smile. “It’s not my fault you’re cresting the hill, honey. If you need glasses—”

“I can still pick a lock, can’t I?”

“Yes. Last night you actually—”

“This is sweet,” Blu interjected, “but could we—”

Margo rounded on her brother. “How would you know anything about sweet? Who have you been practicing on lately?”

“No one. I don’t date, remember?”

“No, but you should. There’s this new waitress at the Toucan who—”

“Is very nice,” Blu finished. “Forget it.”

“What’s wrong with nice?”

“Nothing.”

“So you never plan on bringing anyone to Sunday dinner? Never?”

“Never isn’t a word I feel comfortable using, but it probably fits in this instance.”

Blu knew Margo's concern for him was genuine. She had sacrificed a great deal for him last year. She'd taken a bullet in her arm, a bullet that had been meant for him. She'd survived the ordeal, and now that she'd been reunited with the only man she'd ever loved, her current mission was to find her outlaw brother a nice wife.

Blu's stomach growled again.

"I heard that. Come on. While I'm feeding you, I'll tell you about Sharon."

"Sharon?"

"The nice girl at the Toucan."

As Margo passed through the door, Blu hung back. "Thanks for your time, Ry. Tell Jackson I'll be anxious to hear anything he finds out. Oh, and make sure you take care of my sister in Texas. She's hard to live with most days, but I wouldn't want to have to try living without her."

The devil's lair was a pigsty. Kristen crept inside the desecrated apartment, her eyes wide with disbelief. How could anyone live in such a depressing place, she thought, as she scaled the stairs and entered the apartment at the top of the landing.

The air smelled old and damp, and she wrinkled her nose, unconsciously wiped her hands on her jeans-clad thighs. There was no place to cook a meal, no chairs or table. Nothing but an old mattress lay in the far corner.

The bathroom—Kristen stuck her head inside a small archway and found a dingy yellowed sink, a toilet in worse condition, and a shower stall rimmed on all sides with rust. Suddenly she felt lucky that she had found the women's shelter on Carmel Avenue. She couldn't afford to stay in a motel, and an apartment such as this would have been no place for Amanda. The shelter was clean, and the food tasty and regular. And there was this wonderful nun named Sister Marian who had befriended them. That's who had lent her the black habit yesterday, and who had agreed to baby-sit Amanda today while she was out.

Kristen released a defeated sigh. Yesterday she had hoped that the Blu Devil would recognize her, and when he hadn't... Well, maybe he didn't know her, but he certainly knew Salva. That's why she was in his apartment—to find evidence he had lied. Evidence that might give her another clue as to who she was and where she belonged.

She had stared at his photo a number of times on the sailboat, then on the airplane. As wary as she was of the man and his possible connection to Salva, she'd started hoping he was her brother, or maybe a mean cousin who valued family. She'd imagined him seeing through her nun's disguise and telling her that he was thrilled she was alive and well. Then he'd call her by name and take her home to meet the rest of her family—all ten brothers who looked as tough and solid as he did.

Fairy-tale garbage, is what it all was. The Blu Devil couldn't possibly be related to her. Kristen glanced around the room and shuddered. No, she couldn't be related to anyone who lived like this.

Exhausted, she admitted her bravado was slipping. She was confused and afraid. She wanted to go home, but the only home she remembered was the one on the island and she didn't intend to go back there. Not ever.

Salva would be searching for her by now, and just thinking about how he would punish her if he ever found her made her sick to her stomach. He had contacts all over the country. Once he'd turned Belize upside down, she was sure he would dissect the coastal towns one by one.

She would have gone to the police if she hadn't been so afraid that Salva was telling the truth about her fugitive status. She didn't feel like a criminal, but she couldn't take the chance. Not with Amanda's future hanging in the balance.

But all was not lost. At least, not yet anyway. Yesterday when she'd asked to see the Blu Devil's hand and it was free of Salva's mark, she had actually felt momentarily dizzy with relief. The Blu Devil was not one of them—he didn't carry the Maland dagger insignia tattooed into the palm of his left hand. And if he wasn't one of them, then it was quite possible he was Salva's enemy. That would

explain the picture—her husband was big on vendettas. Once he'd had a statue constructed in a man's likeness just so he could destroy it piece by piece over a week's time.

Kristen had watched the Blu Devil for three days before she'd approached him. What she'd learned wasn't anything concrete, but she had come to realize that, physically, he was an iron man. That his fleet of shrimpers docked full daily, and that he was always the last man to leave the wharf at the end of the day.

In the midst of her musing, Kristen heard footsteps on the stairs. Jerked back to the present, she sucked in her breath. Was it him? Had the Blu Devil come home? No, it couldn't be him. What would he be doing here at this time of day?

She glanced around, knowing there was no place to hide—she couldn't even crawl under the bed.

Filled with a sudden urgency, Kristen dashed for the door and flung it open. Bolting into the hall, she knew she had only a few seconds before whoever was climbing the stairs reached the landing. With no time to lose, she grabbed for the first doorknob she came to and nearly stumbled over her own feet to get inside. Heart pounding, she eased the door closed, hoping she hadn't made too much noise. Her gaze took in the room in one quick glance. The rundown apartment was no better than the one she'd just vacated. In fact, it was exactly the same—bare of furniture, with only a mattress in the corner.

She glanced at the wall that separated the two rooms and to her horror realized that the shell of a wall was missing large pieces of plaster. In some places she could actually see into the next room through the narrow cracks. At that moment it occurred to her that maybe she'd been wrong, maybe this wasn't the Blu Devil's home, after all. But she'd followed him here yesterday after he'd pulled himself to his feet in the alley, and the day before that.

Oh, God, what if it had all been a trap? What if he had known she'd been following him? What if he'd gambled on her coming back?

Worse, what if it wasn't the Blu Devil at all? What if Salva had been on her trail from the moment she'd left the island?

Chapter 4

It was him. It was the Blu Devil.

Kristen covered her mouth as she peered through the crack in the wall, another dose of fear lodging in her throat. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to think of a way out of the building without being seen. At the very least, heard.

As scared as she was, she felt an overwhelming amount of relief that it wasn't Salva.

It was strange to fear the Blu Devil and at the same time want him to be her savior. His wild hair was so black it looked almost blue, she thought, squinting through the crack. It appeared stubborn, too, as stubborn as his ruggedly built jaw. His good looks were understated by his fierce, dark eyes and serious, hard mouth. It gave the impression he had never smiled a day in his life. His broad shoulders were as intimidating as his long muscular legs and the size of his hands.

Kristen didn't like big men, didn't like their forceful natures. She knew her fear was irrational; not every man enjoyed dominating a woman with force, but she had suffered so much at the hands of a big man over the past three years that she'd become jaded. And, she reminded herself, she'd seen this man in action—the Blu Devil wasn't just strong, he was as quick as a bolt of lightning. Not even his limp seemed to slow him down.

He peeled off his white sleeveless T-shirt in one complete motion and tossed it onto the mattress in the far corner. He was beautifully put together—bodywise there would be few men who could equal him. Even Salva didn't compare, Kristen decided as she examined every exposed muscle in the Blu Devil's broad back.

She continued to stare through the crack, determined to find something about this man that might spark her memory. But she found herself again distracted by the sight of him—afraid one minute, in awe the next.

He rolled his head side to side. Stretched. When he reached for the zipper on his jeans, Kristen sucked in her breath and held it. Suddenly his hands stilled. A second later, he lifted his head and slowly turned to stare at the wall she was hiding behind. The crack she was peering through was tiny. He couldn't possibly know she was there. Still, Kristen jerked her head back and flattened herself against the wall. Surely he hadn't sensed she was watching him, not unless he had the predatory instincts of a wild animal.

A long minute passed. Then another. More minutes came and went. Kristen took several calming breaths, and shook off her paranoia. Still, she needed to get out of there. It was going to be tricky, but she was going to have to try.

She was still debating her dilemma when something hit the wall with such hellish force it literally bounced her into the middle of the room—something hellish, like an angry oversize fist.

Oh, God! Kristen let out a wild cry, then scrambled for the door. As she thrust it open, she came face-to-face with the Blu Devil. She screamed and slammed the door shut, at least she tried to—the door flew back open, nearly shearing off her nose. She turned to run, her gaze darting around for an alternate escape route. But she already knew there was none, not unless she dove out the second-story window.

She hadn't made it halfway back into the room before a powerful arm curled around her waist and hauled her off her feet. It happened so fast she was left peddling air.

The power that snaked around her and reeled her in was double that of Salva's. The realization that he was ten times stronger than her husband, sent total terror flooding through Kristen's veins. She'd suspected he was strong—but...my God!

She swung her arms and flayed her legs, relieved when a solid kick netted a grunt of displeasure. Encouraged, she remembered his limp and swung her fist in the direction she hoped his thigh would be. The second swing hit its mark. He swore crudely and loosened his hold on her for a split second.

Kristen spun around and kicked in the direction of his groin. Anticipating her move, he jerked sideways.

A second later he charged her.

She shrieked as he drove her backward. Following her down, she ended up sprawled on the smelly mattress in the corner with the Blu Devil on top of her.

Momentarily dazed, Kristen blinked, then focused on a pair of fierce dark eyes studying her long and hard. A minute passed then he said, "I think we've already had this dance, fille. Oui, now I remember." And to prove that he did, his hand reached up to touch the cut on his temple.

Blu could feel her frail yet shapely body beneath him—feel every inch of her. And whether he wanted it to or not, the perfection that had been hidden by the black robe yesterday put a new slant on everything; his little nun had enough curves to sober a career drunk.

A perfect package, he mused—beautiful eyes, a sexy mouth, angel hair and a killer body.

Killer?

"Where is it?" Blu demanded, quickly coming to his senses.

"Where's what?"

"The gun, dammit?"

"I didn't bring it with me."

"Sure you did." Blu shifted his weight and ran his hand over her left hip. He felt her body tense.

"Please," she pleaded, "don't hurt me."

Blu ignored her plea, reminded of how easy it had been for her to aim that .22 at him yesterday. Determined it wouldn't happen again, his hand kept moving as he watched her. Her eyes were wide, her fear stealing her air. "Breathe, dammit, or you're going to pass out," he warned. "If that happens, you'll wake up not knowing what I did to you."

His words made her cry out, and the air rushed back into her lungs.

"The gun," Blu insisted. "I want it."

"Please! I—"

Blu got to his knees and flipped her over so quickly she didn't have time to fight him. And that's when he saw the bruises covering the backs of her arms. He'd seen hundreds of bruises, in all shapes and sizes; had been responsible for more than he cared to remember. Good at his past job, he knew just how much pressure to inflict to cause a man's skin to discolor, and to what degree. There was no question about it, his little nun had been manhandled, and it had been fairly recent.

The small bulge in her back pocket caught his attention, and he shoved his hand inside and retrieved the derringer. Confident she would have better manners now that he had disarmed her, Blu shoved to his feet.

"Get up."

She rolled over, scrambled to her feet and took several steps back. With shaky hands, she shoved her sleeveless blue blouse back into the waistband of her jeans, then brushed the length of her hair away from her face.

Blu watched as her fairy-tale hair drifted over her shoulders, then past her arms, then past her waist. Hell, he'd never seen hair that long or that satin-smooth in his life.

Yesterday, dressed in nun's clothes, she'd pulled a gun on him and given him one huge headache. Today, dressed in street clothes, he'd caught her spying on him like a little pervert. What the hell was she after?

Blu waved the gun at her. "So we've established you're not a nun. And you like skin."

"Skin?"

"Yesterday you were ordering me to get naked." Blu motioned to the wall. "Now I catch you copping a peek through a crack in my wall."

Her cheeks heated. "You have it all wrong."

"Then set it right."

"I told you yesterday why I wanted your jeans. You couldn't answer my questions, and I couldn't trust you to just let me walk away. Today I wasn't watching you. Well, I was, but I didn't come here to do that. You were supposed to be at work."

"And?"

"And I thought you were lying about knowing Salva. I came to see if I could find some proof." She paused. "But when I got to your house—"

"This isn't where I live. It's just a place I own."

"Oh..."

Blu gauged her expression. She looked genuinely surprised. "I told you the truth yesterday. I don't know your friend. I've never heard of the Harris woman, either."

"You have to know Salva."

"What I know is, you're beginning to annoy me." Blu aimed the gun at her. "And just so you know how it feels to be on the receiving end, get naked."

"What?"

"You heard me. Forget the shoes. Start with the blouse."

Her big brown eyes turned huge. She shook her head. "Yesterday I was desperate," she pleaded.

"Desperation has its price," Blu countered. "Let's see some skin."

"No!"

Five feet, four and a half, Blu decided. She was a half inch taller than he'd told Ry. But he was right about her being young. Suddenly his curiosity made him ask, "How old are you?"

She jutted her chin. "Twenty-four."

Blu pulled back the hammer as she'd done to him yesterday. "Let's try that again. How old are you?"

"If you don't like twenty-four, pick your own number."

What he liked was her spunk. Hell, the whole package was a five-star winner. Her legs were slight, her breasts small but clearly visible. And all that damn hair was making him think of fairy princesses and peach-scented skin.

"My money's on eighteen," Blu offered. "Okay, Angel, come clean. Why are you stalking me?"

"I told you why already. I'm looking for information on Salvador Maland. Because you know him, I thought you would share what you know. Since you weren't willing to cooperate yesterday, and you're usually at work this time of day, I came to see what I could find out on my own."

That she knew his schedule meant she'd been spying on him long enough to know his pattern. Why? Was she telling him the truth? He saw her glance at the open door, then back at him. He shook his head. "You won't make it. Even with this limp, I'll catch you."

"Maybe not."

Blu was staring at her mouth, recycling Maland's name through his memory bank another time when she decided to bolt. Swearing, he raced after her, determined to stop her before she made it out the door. Too late, she was in the hall racing for the stairs before he knew it. Her hair was flying behind her like a wild mane, and he reached out to snare a hunk. Netting nothing but air, he swore again, then watched her leap onto the banister sidesaddle and slide to the bottom. Shocked, Blu roared out his protest, knowing that he'd seen the last of her.

She swung open the door and started through it. A moment later she darted back inside, slamming the door shut behind her. When she turned to face him, her cheeks were chalk-white and her brown eyes had grown to the size of silver dollars. "Please," she pleaded, "you've got to hide me. Please, you can't let him take me!"

She started to shake. Then she wrapped her arms around herself in an attempt to control her growing panic—at least that's what it looked like to Blu. Her eyes pleaded with him for understanding, but that was the problem; he didn't understand. But he damn well would, he vowed, as soon as he got rid of whoever was at the door.

He headed down the stairs and brushed past her to peer out the narrow window that aligned the door. Seeing Jackson Ward strolling up the sidewalk, Blu pulled back, shoved the derringer into his waistband, and reached for the doorknob.

“Please.” She gripped his arm. “He might be looking for me. Please don’t open that door.”

Her words painted a little clearer picture, but not nearly enough. He said, “Jackson’s a detective at the NOPD. He’s here to see me, not you.”

“The police!”

Instead of setting her mind at ease, she looked as if she was about to faint. “Oh, God! Oh-hh...!”

Blu glanced down to where her small hand clutched his forearm. Her tiny fingers were so small, her wrist as fragile as a twig.

The knock on the door gave her a jolt and she nearly jumped into his arms.

“I’ll do anything.” She was almost in tears. “Please, I promise. Just don’t mention me to him. Please!”

Blu reached out, wrapped his arm around her waist and hauled her up against him. “I’m not sure what’s going on, Angel, but until I get some answers, I don’t plan on sharing you with Jackson or anybody else. So as soon as I get rid of him, you better be prepared to carry through on that promise you just made.” That said, and ignoring how tense her body was in his arms, Blu lifted her off her feet and tucked her beneath the stairs. “Don’t move. Not an inch.”

In the middle of the second knock, Blu opened the door and faced Jackson Ward. “You look like hell.”

“So does this place,” Jackson answered back. “Still haven’t started to fix it up yet, I see.”

“No. But my excuse is money. What’s yours?”

Jackson flicked his cigarette to the step, then ground it beneath his shoe. “The chief just told me Ry is six months away from a promotion. If he takes the desk job, I’ll be looking for a new partner.”

Ry had been the only partner Jackson had been able to keep in the three years he’d worked for the NOPD. It wouldn’t be easy to find another, maybe impossible. Blu was sympathetic, and still had his head on another matter. He looked out the door and saw Jackson’s aging green pickup sitting on the street. He checked to make sure no one else was hanging around, then took a step back to let his brother-in-law’s partner inside.

Jackson stepped through the door and glanced around the old foyer. “This place looks like the last gang hideout I busted.”

Blu eyed the peeling wallpaper climbing the wall along the stairway. “She looks tough,” he agreed. “But she’s solid brick on the outside, worth the investment once I fix her up.”

The two men stood side by side. Both tall and dark, they could have easily been mistaken for brothers, except for the fact that Jackson had cat-green eyes and a Chicago accent. But they were perfectly matched at six feet, three inches, both quick thinkers with rebellious natures, and enough nerve and grit to carry through on anything they felt was worth the trouble.

“So you’re serious about moving in here?”

“Eventually. Margo says I’ve been portable long enough.”

Jackson leaned against the door jamb and shoved his hand into the back pocket of his jeans. “A permanent home wouldn’t be so bad if you had someone to share it with.”

“Still looking for a wife?” Blu chuckled.

“Or a dog,” Jackson joked, “that might be easier to live with. I talked to Ry after you left the precinct this morning. Ran those names for you.”

“And?”

“And nothing. Want me to keep digging?”

It was clear his little nun was on the run—the look on her face when Blu had mentioned Jackson was a cop had confirmed that much. Questioning his next move, he gestured to the cut on his temple.

“I woke up with a headache this morning. Before I cooled down, I went to see Ry. The more I think about it, the fille must have mistaken me for someone else.”

“You think?”

“Yeah, I think. No sense you wasting your time on a dead end.”

Blu opened the door and followed Jackson outside. Over the hood of the pickup, Jackson hollered, “Let me know when you want to start cleaning this place up. I’ll give you a hand. I used to work construction for a few years back in Chicago before I turned stupid and decided to be a cop.”

Once Jackson had driven off, Blu headed back inside. He’d barely gotten the door closed when he came face-to-face with his little nun. “You went to the police about me? Why?”

“Why? You pulled a gun on me yesterday,” Blu pointed out. “Damn near put my boot through my skull. My brother-in-law’s a cop. I asked him to run those two names you gave me through the computer to see what he could find out. But as I’m sure you heard, they weren’t able to get anything on either name.”

“Why didn’t you turn me in? As you said, I pulled a gun on you yesterday.”

“Want me to call Jackson back?”

“No!”

“Then start talking,” Blu demanded, leaning against the wall and blocking the only exit available to her. “I think being up all night with a headache entitles me to an explanation.”

“I’m sorry,” she repented. “I—I’m Kristen Harris... That is, I think I’m Kristen Harris.”

“You think?” Blu frowned. “What the hell does that mean?”

She jutted her chin out stubbornly. “It means that I think it’s my name, but I’m not sure. I’ve lost track of some time.”

“Just how much time are we talking?”

Blu watched as she sat down on the stairs. She ran her hands through her endless hair, then settled them in her lap. “Everything up until three years ago. I’d like to go home, but...” She looked up, her brown eyes searching his face. “I was hoping you could tell me where that might be. Only it looks like that’s not going to happen.”

“Why me?”

“I found the photo, and I— This is going to sound weird, but I knew just by looking at you that you were a fisherman.” She paused. “And...and I knew it was a hydraulic winch.”

“What?”

“In the picture you’re repairing a hydraulic winch. I don’t know how I know that, I just do. I thought it could be a clue to who I was.”

She was right—it sounded crazy to know something but not why or how she knew it. But there might be something to it. A hydraulic winch wasn’t the kind of thing a woman would pay much attention to. “You think you belong here? Belong here with...me?”

The question caused her cheeks to turn pink. She lowered her head again and stared at her hands. “You don’t recognize me. No, I no longer think you and I have a connection, but I still think there is a strong possibility that you know Salva, even though you say no. Why else would he have your picture on his wall?” She sighed again, then stood. Brushing her hair away from her small face, she locked gazes with him once more. “I’m sorry for cracking you in the head yesterday, and for causing you more trouble today. I just wanted a clue so badly that I— Well, I’m sorry.”

When she started past him, Blu reached out and locked his hand around her tiny wrist. “Not so fast.”

“What now? I said I’m sorry. What more can I say?”

Blu jerked her arm up in the air. “You can explain these.”

Her face paled and she tried to pull away. “Let go.”

“These bruises are recent,” Blu insisted. “Don’t pretend you don’t remember who gave them to you or why. Is Salvador Maland your boyfriend? Did he rough you up? Are you on the run? Will he follow, or is he already close behind? Is he dangerous, or just a jealous hothead?”

“Stop it!” Suddenly she wedged her hand between them and pulled the derringer from Blu’s waistband. Jabbing it into his belly, she said, “Back off. I’ve had enough of big men thinking they have the right to man-handle me.”

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