

## CHAPTER 1

Angie stood erect with her feet together. She took a slow deep breath and raised her hands above her head. She held the pose for several seconds and then lowered her arms as she tried to exhale the clutter from her mind.

After several sets, she moved into Warrior II pose, concentrating on the motion of breathing in and out. The exercise was supposed to pull her thoughts from the destiny she faced, but it could not push out the walls that surrounded her or unlock the solid metal door.

She longed for a window and rays of sunlight to break the monotony of the florescent glow that provided dim illumination to her tiny enclosure. That would have to wait thirty-two months and three days until her biological clock ticked her age past thirty. The judge had sentenced her to three years without parole. She was still a newbie—FRESH MEAT with only four months under her belt. She doubted that she would survive the first year.

Her public defender had told her that Orleans Parish Prison was better than most of her other options. She guessed that was true if the alternatives had been in Turkey or Iran. It was not a preferred destination for a girl with blue eyes, a pretty face, and pale white skin.

Angie dropped to her hands and knees and lifted her butt into the air for Svanasana or downward facing dog.

Kaneisha, the muscular black woman who shared the cell, tossed a wet washcloth at her. “Hey, Bambi. You look like a Doberman in heat.”

Angie pushed herself to a sitting position in the corner of the cell and used the projectile to wipe the sweat from her face. The prison walls could not hold back the May humidity and heat of New Orleans. Times like this made her appreciate being alone. “Why do you keep calling me that?”

“Cause I don’t believe for a minute that your real name is Maria. And you look like a Bambi. Us whores need a proper name.”

Angie wondered how Kaneisha saw through her fake identity. It had fooled everybody else for years. Maria Baldini might not have been her real name, but she did not like being called Bambi. “I’m not a prostitute.”

“That’s not what the judge said.”

“I told you—I was framed.”

“Right, me too and everybody else here. If you don’t believe it, just ask us.”

Angie shrugged. She had no more proof of her innocence than any of the other inmates. Court records declared her guilty of prostitution, assault, and battery. Nothing she said was going to change that. “Who says we all aren’t telling the truth?”

“The Man.”

The clicking of boots on the floor caused both women to fall silent. The hallway extended to many cells, but intuition warned Angie that the guard was coming for her. A heavy-set white woman in her thirties stopped in front of the cell. She opened the door, curled her lips, and nodded to Angie. “Let’s go, Buttercup.”

Angie pulled herself to her feet. She wondered what the warden perceived that she had done this time. “Where?”

The scowl on the guard’s face deepened. “Do I look like your travel agent? Get your stuff?”

“Why?”

“Cause I said to.”

Kaneisha filled in the answer for her. “Maybe the warden wants some of your honky ass.”

Angie knew better than to respond in kind. She grabbed her toothbrush and Sandra Brown paperback and followed “Miss Congeniality” down the long corridor to the electronic door. They continued down three more hallways to a conference room with a large table and two chairs.

Angie sat alone staring at the blank walls. She felt her pulse increase and tried to calm herself with slow, deep breaths like her yoga instructor had taught years ago.

A middle-aged, overweight, white woman in a cheap business suit that smelled of weeks-old perspiration entered the room and took the opposing chair. Angie disliked her forced smile and tried to hurry the process along. “Why am I here?”

“I have good news for you, Miss Baldini.”

“Emeril must be taking over as chef for the cafeteria.”

Her attempt at humor fell flat. The bearer of good tidings spoke in a monotone and seemed so uncomfortable with her words that Angie wondered if the news might indeed be favorable. “Your appeal was successful. You are free to go home.”

Angie should have embraced her good fortune, but she knew that luck had nothing to do with her release. Her hands grew numb. She focused on her breathing—trying to slow her breaths. It did no good. “I never filed an appeal.”

“Mr. Moreau filed it for you.”

“Who’s he?”

“Don’t you know your own lawyer?”

“He’s not my lawyer. I’ve never heard of him.”

“Well, he’s heard of you.”

“Who hired him?”

“According to our records, you did.”

Angie thought she knew who had solicited Mr. Moreau. Her father had the money and the means to accomplish almost anything. She just did not know how he found her. Hiding was her special talent—a skill honed over a decade of disguise and subterfuge. She had been careful, but nothing could have kept her picture out of the Times-Picayune or even off the Internet, once the jury convicted her.

She signed the papers that the lady placed into her hands and accepted a basket that contained the few articles she had brought with her when she began her sentence. Her clothes lay neatly folded on top, just as she had left them that day. Her cash and ATM card remained in her purse. She removed the jumpsuit

and changed into the blouse and skirt. They no longer hugged her breasts and hips, but hung loose over her reduced frame.

Much had changed since she had met Michel Bouffard in a bar on Bourbon Street six months ago. She had consumed too many “Hurricanes” that night. That was how she justified her lapse in judgment. He seemed polite and cultured and had a great sense of humor, but that was no reason to go back to his apartment with him. He had expected more than a nightcap, and when she said no, he interpreted that as, “come and get it.” That had been a mistake on his part. She broke his nose and crushed his testicles with her foot.

She returned to her own apartment and went to bed, thinking the incident was behind her. That was her mistake. Two policemen arrived at her door the next morning. Fate was unkind. Mr. Bouffard turned out to be a big-time trial attorney and a friend of the mayor. She did not have money for a lawyer, so the court supplied her with a public defender who barely spoke English.

Angie left the prison and stood on the sidewalk at ten o’clock in the morning. The direct sunlight on her face felt exhilarating. She had no idea what to do or where to go. Her job at the New Orleans Museum of Art that she had held since graduating from Tulane had been filled, and she doubted she would be welcome there anyway after the adverse publicity her indiscretion had caused. Approaching her former friends would also be awkward. Few of them would want to associate with an ex-con.

She had only one acquaintance who would overlook her conviction for prostitution and not think less of her—the woman who had preceded Kaneisha as her roommate at Orleans Parish Prison.

Naomi was a tall, physically fit, black woman, who took a liking to Angie and protected her from the other inmates until she learned to fend for herself. Angie hated to think what would have transpired if not for the sanctuary that Naomi had provided.

Naomi completed her sentence the previous month and settled into an apartment on the second floor above Gaston’s Restaurant on Royal Street. It sat

in the middle of the French Quarter where she met most of her clients—prime real estate for a woman who made her living as a hooker.

Angie felt certain that Naomi would welcome her to stay there until she could get back on her feet. Naomi had sent her a letter the previous week. Angie memorized the address just in case she managed to escape. She could never have imagined winning her case through the judicial system.

She flagged a cab. It smelled of stale cigarette smoke. The driver had dark skin and spoke with a Central American accent. “Where to, *senora*?”

She climbed into the back seat and shut the door. “The French Quarter.”

He started the meter and drove away from the curb. Habit forced Angie to scan the street. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary except for a dark Avalon that pulled into the traffic behind her. She thought little of it, but when the cab reached Canal Street, the Toyota was still there, three car-lengths back.

She tapped on the petition that protected the driver from his passengers. “Take a right here.”

He frowned and pointed in the opposite direction. “But the quarter is to the left.”

“Just turn here and drive around the block.”

He did as instructed. She glanced back. The car was still behind her. She took several deep breaths to settle her nerves. *Why are they following me? What do they want?* Her release had defied reason. This confirmed her suspicion that nothing was as it seemed. She wanted to confront whoever was in the car to find out who they were and why they were interested in her. Fear guided her down a different path. “Take me to the Ritz-Carlton.”

The driver shrugged and skidded back onto Canal Street. He pulled into the entryway, and accepted her cash. A bellman directed Angie into the hotel. She rushed through the lobby and out the side door.

A brisk walk took her to Carondelet Street where she merged with the line of tourists and locals waiting for the streetcar. It arrived five long minutes later. There were no seats so she stood, holding to a leather strap that she shared with a man who had consumed too many beignets during his life and who apparently

had never heard of soap or deodorant. She rode only as far as Poydras Street, where she caught a different cab. It carried her to Gaston's Restaurant.

Raul Laudicino liked his apartment above the warehouse on the Miami marina. He enjoyed the wide-screen TV, the built-in stereo system, and the view of the bay, but mostly he liked the privacy. He was not what you would call a people person, and he didn't want neighbors nosing into his business. After all, he was a businessman—not your run-of-the mill, middle-class, lackey type. He ran an international enterprise. At least that's what it was if you considered Mexico international. That was where his merchandise originated.

He heard the knock on the door and pulled it open. Snow stood on the second floor walkway, looking like she didn't know what to do next. He looked past her at the dark clouds hanging over the choppy water in the bay. They matched his mood. He pulled her into the room and turned the lock.

Her brown eyes and dark skin contradicted her new name. He wondered why she had chosen it. Not that he cared. Her other attributes were what mattered in her line of work. Big tits, a small waist, and a round butt. The only thing she lacked was enthusiasm. She didn't appreciate all that he had done for her. Who else would have stuck their neck out to sneak her into the land of the free? She needed to be taught a little respect.

She looked almost twenty, older than he liked, but Heidi was with a client. He shoved her toward the bed. "What're you waiting for? Get undressed."

She fumbled with the buttons, just like he imagined Angie would. He waited until she was naked before kicking off his shoes and dispensing with his pants.

The phone rang, and the light returned to Snow's eyes as if the interruption were going to bring her a reprieve. Raul jerked the handset off the hook. "Yeah."

Brizio, the man he had sent to New Orleans to fetch Angie, projected his voice across the line. "We lost her."

"What the fuck happened?"

"She just disappeared."

"She better un-disappear before you call back."

Raul slammed the phone down.

## CHAPTER 2

Angie climbed the stairs above the restaurant and knocked on the door. She knocked again. A mosquito buzzed about her ear. She swatted it and waited. The door cracked open. Naomi projected her face through the opening below the security chain. She wore a bathrobe and looked half asleep. “Maria?”

“In the flesh.”

Naomi pulled her into the living room and wrapped her arms around her. “How did you get out?”

“Beats me.” It felt good to have a friend who cared. “I won on appeal.”

“That must have been a cinch with that bastard dead.”

Angie felt herself shudder. “What bastard?”

“The jerk that sicced the cops on you—that Mr. Bouffard. I thought you would have heard. Don’t you read the papers?”

“Not much point in it when you’re locked in the slammer for three years.”

“Do you want some coffee?”

Angie nodded. She needed a stimulant to focus her thoughts. That creep’s death could no more be an accident of fate than her impromptu release from prison. “Do they know who killed him?”

Naomi led her into the kitchen, removed two mugs from the cabinet over the counter, and poured steaming black liquid into them. “What makes you think he was murdered?”

“He wasn’t?”

She diluted the thick mixture of coffee and chicory with warm cream that took some of the bite out of it. “No. He killed himself. Jumped off a twelve-story building. With him and that asshole that prosecuted you dead, getting an acquittal should have been a cakewalk.

Angie realized that the man who had claimed to be her attorney had a lot of help in arranging for her release. “Mr. Thibault is dead too?”

“Yeah. Car accident.”

“Let me guess. A hit and run.”

Naomi’s eyes widened. “How’d you know?”

Angie slumped into the chair at the kitchen table and tasted the coffee. It was hot and strong like she liked it. “Just an educated guess. I never filed for an appeal. Yet here I am, a free woman after only four months.”

“Holy shit. You’ve got some bad-ass friends. That must have been one scared judge that let you out.”

She would have liked to tell Naomi everything—to get some advice on what to do now, but secrecy was the one thing that kept her alive. “He’s lucky to be alive. Can I crash here for a few days?”

“Of course. You can sleep on the couch, or we can share the bed.”

“Thanks. The couch is fine.”

Naomi set her coffee down on the counter. “You feel like celebrating?”

“A pitcher of beer and some gumbo at the Coffee Pot would be nice.”

Naomi laughed. “You really live on the wild side, don’t you?”

Angie shrugged. “I guess I’m a little out of practice.”

Naomi walked to the bedroom. “Give me a minute to get dressed.”

“Can I use your cell? I need to call my brother. He doesn’t know I’m out.”

“It’s in the charger by the toaster. Tell him if he comes to ‘the Big Easy,’ I’ll give him professional courtesy.”

“I could e-mail him your picture. He’d be on the first flight from New York this afternoon.”

“You do that. My computer’s on the desk. I hardly touch it, so you can’t mess anything up.” She disappeared into the bedroom and closed the door.

Angie made the call. The phone ran six times before deferring to the answering machine. “The person you are calling is not available. Please leave your message at the beep.”

Angie didn’t want to talk to a machine. Lenny was the only person in the world who would understand her predicament. She wanted to hear his voice and

to soak up his advice because she had no idea what she should do. That was not an option, so she hung up.

Naomi's laptop booted without a hitch. Angie went to mail2web to reach her e-mail account, clicked NEW MESSAGE, and typed a quick note telling Lenny that she was out of prison and that she was staying with Naomi at her flat over Gaston's Restaurant on Royal Street. She clicked SEND as her friend stepped out of the bedroom.

Angie had never seen Naomi in anything other than prison garb. She looked hot in tight jeans and a burgundy blouse. She crossed the room and opened the door. "Let's go."

Raul stood at the edge of the bed and glared at Snow, who lay on her side, whimpering. "Get up. This ain't no Holiday Inn."

He pulled on his pants and shoes. A knock on the door turned his attention away from the whore. Carmine, one of his "managers," called through the wood paneling, "The car's ready."

Raul slipped his arms into his shirtsleeves. "Get in here."

Carmine stepped into the room. "Yes, sir."

Raul tilted his head toward the bed. "Take care of her."

"Yes, sir." He picked her clothes off the floor and tossed them at her. "Let's go."

She pulled on her blouse and skirt and stumbled after him with her underclothes and shoes in her hand.

Raul secured his pistol and switchblade in his safe and walked down the stairs to the Cadillac Escalade. He did not like going outside without them. It left him feeling naked, but where he was going, they could not go.

He climbed onto the front seat of the SUV beside his driver, who knew better than to speak before spoken to. Orsino, a short, muscular man with black hair and dark eyes sat in the back seat. He was thirty years old, the same as Raul and had been with him since Raul took over the prostitution ring. He was one of the few men that Raul trusted. Orsino had discovered that Angie was in New

Orleans. He had gone there on vacation during the trial and had seen her picture on the front page of the Times Picayune. The name had changed, but the face was unmistakable. "Everything all right?" he said.

"No, goddamn it. Brizio screwed up. When this is over, you're going to take over for him." He thought of the extreme measures he had used to get Angie out of prison and of what he could have been doing tonight if Brizio had brought her to him. "Now we've got to do his work for him."

The back door opened, and Carmine climbed onto the seat beside Orsino. "What'd you do to her? She could hardly walk."

Raul scratched himself and wished he had taken time to shower. "I showed the bitch what it's like to be with a real man. You got a problem with that?"

"No, sir."

Raul turned to the man behind the wheel. "Take us to the airport."

Angie found a table at the Coffee Pot by the window overlooking the tourists milling about on Rue St. Peter. She felt like she had gone to Heaven without having to go through the inconvenience of dying. She lifted her spoon to her mouth and licked her lips. "I love the gumbo here."

Naomi gulped down her Bloody Mary. "You must be an easy date. All a guy has to do to bring you to an orgasm is fill you full of spicy food."

"Just bring me my red beans and rice, and I'll be moaning like Meg Ryan in *When Harry Met Sally*."

"Takes more than that for me."

"I'll bet fifty dollars would do it."

"No way. Two hundred minimum."

A man in a business suit sitting alone at the adjacent table pushed back his chair and addressed Naomi. "Sold to the lady in the red blouse."

She looked at him like he had lost his mind. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I got two hundred dollars if you're got the time."

"Can't you see I'm off the clock? My best friend just got out of the big house."

“Fine. I’ll leave you lesbos to do whatever it is you do together.”

“Just get lost.”

He picked up his check and stormed over to the cashier. Angie suppressed a laugh. “He seemed nice.”

“You can spot the type a mile away. Always make them pay in advance if you don’t want to be stiffed.”

“You ever think of going into another line of work?”

“You find me a job making a grand a day lying flat on my back, and I’ll look into it.”

“You make that kind of money?”

“Maybe during Mardi Gras.”

The waitress came to the table with a fresh pitcher of beer. “That guy bothering you?”

Naomi shook her head. “No. He just had bad timing. Is my catfish po-boy ready yet?”

“I’ll see.” She walked back to the kitchen.

Angie refilled their glasses and lifted hers in the air. “To friendship.”

“No, that’s too lame.” She clinked her glass against Angie’s. “To the untimely demise of Mr. Bouffard, asshole extraordinaire.”

When they got back to the apartment, Naomi headed for the bedroom. “I’m going to get some shuteye.”

Angie kissed her on the cheek. “Thanks for everything.”

“Friends look after each other.”

“It’s three o’clock in the afternoon. You’re wimping out mighty early.”

“You forget that I work a permanent night shift. You look kinda tired yourself. Why don’t you join me? It’s a king bed.”

“That’s not my style. You know that. I’m going to wander around the quarter a bit. Do you have a spare key?”

“It’s in the top drawer in the kitchen. Be careful. There’s lots of perverts out there.”

“Like I’m not used to that.”

“Hey. I take offense at that.”

“I didn’t mean you.”

Naomi closed her door. Angie found the cellphone and called Lenny. Still no answer. She checked the computer. No incoming mail.

The alcohol lay heavy on her stomach, and she felt drowsy. She stretched out on the couch and closed her eyes.