

Prologue

It didn't seem real, couldn't be real... She choked back a sob and covered her eyes with a hand roped in blood. His blood, her blood, dog blood; she didn't know or care. She hugged a dead cocker spaniel against her chest and struggled to focus.

Strangers in uniform asked questions, but the answers lodged unspoken in her throat. Static filled her brain. She rocked back and forth as if a pendulum had replaced her spine.

The front door stood open, allowing a view of the driveway. Police cars, two ambulances and an increasing amount of media cluttered the lawn. Red lights danced through the night. She stared at their reflection against the hardwood floor at her feet and shuddered. Coldness assaulted her bones like a million daggers.

“Instead of reporting the news,” she heard someone whisper, “Lauren Biltmore will be the lead story, eh, Joe?”

Tears distorted her vision, yet she blinked them away. She had ignored the threatening letters and phone calls...had imagined herself untouchable. A shiver quaked through her veins.

“My fault,” she whispered, the words squeezing through the rawness of her throat. “All of this is my fault.”

A petite brunette dropped to her knees in front of her. “Lauren, honey, please look at me.” The woman shook her head. “Do you hear me? Can you understand?”

She focused on the woman holding her hand. Recognition burrowed through the static to pierce her consciousness. Janet, her news director and best friend.

“I killed him,” she said.

“I know.” Janet frowned. “I know you did.”

“He tried to kill me. He killed Pete.” Her fingers burrowed into puppy fur.

“I’m sorry, baby.”

“Kevin. All along it’d been Kevin.”

“You couldn’t have known. None of us—”

“He’s dead.”

“It’s going to be okay now. It will. I—”

“No. Nothing can be okay.” She squeezed her eyes closed and willed the numbness to return. “It’s all over now, all over, all over...”

Janet lifted a strand of golden hair away from Lauren's eyes and winced at the blood staining her fingertips. "My God, Lauren, what did he do to you?"

"He's dead." She struggled to concentrate on Janet's face as it blurred and shimmered in front of her eyes. All the voices in the room faded away. "I'm dead."

"No." Janet smoothed more hair from her face and leaned close. "You're alive. You survived."

"Dead."

"Ms. Biltmore, we need to get you into the ambulance," a paramedic said.

Burying her face into Pete's fur, she hummed a melody remembered from childhood, one that had once chased away the nightmares. And she rocked and rocked and rocked...the nightmare remained.

"I'll take care of Pete. You're hurt." Janet pried the dog from her arms. "You need to go with them."

Too weak to protest, she surrendered to the paramedics who lifted her onto the stretcher. Strangers' hands examined her body. An oxygen mask covered her mouth and nose. She stared at the flashing lights and felt nothing.

Dizziness rolled through her like ocean swells. Ice replaced blood. Teeth chattered.

Police cars parked on the grass of her front yard. An ambulance backed toward the front door. Several familiar reporters froze at the sight of her. A helicopter with a spotlight flew low over the house.

What are they looking for? Kevin Lahey is dead.

Spasms rattled through her muscles. A paramedic loomed above her in the confines of the ambulance. Again he asked her...something. His mouth moved in slow motion. Words echoed and whispered in her mind. Distant. Garbled. Panic shuddered in her heart. She fought against the darkness that narrowed her vision.

“It’s all over now. All over...” Words faded with her strength.

Darkness triumphed.

* * *

Chapter One

Water sprayed her face as she steered the Jet Ski into a sharp turn on the Caribbean Sea. Arm muscles quaked on the handles as she drove full-throttle over the waves. Wet hair smacked against her face and neck. She tasted salt on her lips. Sun burned against her bare skin. Legs held firm as the Jet Ski went airborne before smacking hard against the surface.

She couldn't go fast enough to drown out the doubts that screeched in her brain. Every instinct screamed mistake. Taking a leave of absence after the attack had made sense---but now no matter how she looked at it, being on Grand Cayman equaled running away.

She hated thinking of herself as someone who ran away.

Shaking her head to silence the thoughts that refused to shut-up, she aimed the jet ski back toward Seven Mile Beach where her brother's bar, The Barefoot Lady Bar and Grill, sat between two hotels.

A lone snorkeler caught her attention, but not until she had almost run the fool over. Well beyond the reef, the man was in dangerous territory. Idiot. She shot him a look over her shoulder as he raised his head from the water, spitting out his snorkel to shout something at her that was lost in the wind. Moron.

Beaching the Jet Ski on the white sand, she waved toward the attendant to retrieve her things. Her entire body shook from exertion. She had needed that after her plane ride to the island. With a nod toward the attendant, she pushed her damp hair from face and twisted it into a tight knot at the base of her neck.

Lost in her own thoughts, she didn't hear what the man said in way of small talk and didn't much care. She pulled a sundress over her head to cover up the black one-piece swimsuit. Bikinis had once been her preferred swimwear choice, but this provided the logical solution to conceal the evidence of violence.

Fingertips briefly touched the hidden jagged scar that branded her from beneath her left breast across the abdomen to her right pelvic bone. A half an inch deeper and she would have died. Too much activity still aggravated the wounded muscles; another fact she had grown to accept like one might an old knee injury or migraines.

She hated remembering, hated feeling as if the word "victim" had been tattooed on her forehead. Shaking off the feeling, she put one foot in front of another and marched through the sand.

She tugged at the hem of her linen dress, peripheral vision taking in the flip-flop wearing customers lounging around the weather-beaten deck of her brother's pride and joy: The Barefoot Lady Bar and Grill. Not making eye contact with anyone, she found an empty stool and looked for her brother, Austin.

They had stopped here on the way from the airport because he had had to take care of business. The impromptu Jet Ski ride had been her way of passing time while his "one minute to check on something" had turned into an hour.

She folded her hands on the surface of the bar and coached herself to relax. Unwanted images slammed through her brain. Blood roped her skin. Blood striped the tile beneath bare feet. She shook her head again to stop the onslaught and pressed her fingers against the bridge of her nose.

She craved distraction. She needed to stay busy. Inactivity brought back too many memories she did not want to remember.

"Did you enjoy your suicide ride through the waves?" Austin asked. "I couldn't help but notice you weren't exactly taking it easy out there."

She flinched at the sound of her brother's voice but covered it up with a forced grin. "Maybe I'm sick of taking it easy."

"What do you think of my bar?" Austin squeezed her shoulder before sliding onto the stool next to her. White-blond hair fell against his tanned forehead and into slate-blue eyes.

“I like it. Good crowd.” Any more small talk and she would snap the head off all the tropical flowers within reach.

A man with a guitar set up under the shade of the thatched roof. More swimsuit clad customers roamed up from the beach. The smell of hamburgers meshed with ocean and flowers. Palm trees stirred with the breeze. Moist air licked her skin.

“You probably want to get unpacked, take a shower and get settled. We’ll head to my condo in a few minutes.” He waved at a customer.

“No worries. It’s not like I’m in a hurry.” She shifted on the stool, unable to get comfortable, and looked beyond the thatched roof to the ocean.

Damn, this had been a mistake. She could not stay here.

The tip of her tongue absently traced the curve of teeth beneath her lips. Once perfect teeth now misshapen from where a fist had smashed against her jaw. Lauren wondered if anyone would notice the indented smile, right of center. She wondered why she cared if they did; hated that she did care.

He stretched his arm along the bar behind her back and studied her profile.

“Relax, Lauren. It’s okay to do nothing, to not have an agenda for a few months. You’ll be back to your old self in no time.”

Her old self. The grin slipped from her lips. “Austin, I’m not sure what you expect from me here but...”

“You’ve been through a lot and Grand Cayman is the perfect place to heal, Lauren. No one expects anything from you.” He shrugged, eyes seeing too much. “Let me grab you a drink. Sangria still your favorite?”

She nodded and once again scanned the tourists lounging and laughing on the deck. Everyone seemed at ease and carefree. She envied them.

“Here you go.” He set a glass of sangria in front of her. “Chill, sis, you look like you’re about to leap from the stool and swim out to sea.”

She blinked at the drink loaded down with cherries and an orange slice. Breath caught in her throat and weighted the words she spoke. “This is a great place, Austin. The Barefoot Lady Bar and Grill...I like it. Mom and Dad would be proud.”

She meant every word, no faking it this time. At least she hoped she meant it...she wanted to mean it. Six weeks spent in a hospital with people hovering around and poking and prodding and asking questions and observing and judging and talking about her instead of to her and she had developed a knack for saying what they expected. She had become an expert liar.

“I like to think that they would have been proud. I didn’t exactly follow dad’s footsteps into the insurance business.” Blue eyes similar to hers studied her face. “I miss them. I’ve missed you.”

All that remained of the Biltmore family now sat here on these stools, just the two of them. Until he had picked her up at the airport waving like a fool, she hadn’t realized

how much she had missed the family connection, the bond that couldn't be broken by time or distance.

“They'd be proud of you, too, you know,” he said. “Big shot anchor woman.”

“Would have been proud. Now...not so much.” She rested her back against the bar and stretched her legs out in front of her as she faced the sea.

“Self-pity isn't your style, sis. What happened, happened. It's not your fault. You'll bounce back because you always do.”

She could not explain that what she felt was far from self-pity; it was some strange concoction of confusion, fear, anger and grief. Hope battled hopelessness minute by minute.

“Can we pretend that I'm just another tourist?” she asked.

“But you're not another tourist. You're my sister and I am not about to let you—”

“I came here to escape all of the well-meaning people who want me talk about my feelings,” she said between clenched teeth.

“You need—”

“A distraction, a diversion, not serious discussions or worried looks. You promised to let me do this...this...recovery...in my own time, remember?”

She hated the word recovery. She now had a long list of words she hated. Post-traumatic stress disorder topped the list, followed closely by stalker, time, healing...the list kept growing.

“It’s okay to let people help you.”

“Stop watching me like I’m about to break into a million pieces.” A glance at her too-white legs stretching out from the hem of the dress did little for her ego. All of the exhaustion and frustration she had felt for months escaped on a sigh. “Look, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be bitchy.”

“When was the last time you took a vacation?”

“I can work for you a few hours a day. Keep myself busy. I was a bartender in college, remember? I could—”

“Stop it, sis. You’re here to take a break from busy. One of these days you’re going to have to face what happened to you. You’re safe here.” He nudged her shoulder with his. “Trust that.”

“I know; I know...I need to lighten up, drink sangria and...whatever else it is people do in paradise. Island mode, right? I’m trying. I’ll get there.” A headache rolled from the back of her neck and throbbed behind her eyes. She smiled anyway. “Stop hovering over me. I’m fine. Really.”

“You’re fine, hm?” His grin returned. “I suppose you want me to believe you and drop the subject?”

“You always were quick to pick up on subtle hints.” Her lips trembled from the effort of being sociable.

“Okay, I get it. I’ll back off,” he said. “I really am glad you decided to take me up on my offer. It’ll be good to have you around again.”

“You say that now...give me a few hours to get on your nerves like I did when we were kids.”

“Oh, you’ve already gotten on my nerves, I’ve just matured enough not to let you know it.” His infectious grin got the best of her.

She exhaled all of the apprehension gripping her lungs and breathed in the island air. Relax, breathe, relax, breathe, she silently repeated the words like a mantra.

“One week from now you won’t even care what time it is. Trust me.” He stood abruptly. “We’ll leave after you finish your drink. Just give me a few more minutes.”

“Do what you have to do.” She poked a cherry with her straw, watched it battle with an ice cube.

Sangria cooled her throat, lightened the fog in her mind and brought her breathing into a normal rhythm. Sighing, she stared at the waves lapping against the sand no more than twenty feet from where she sat.

“Island mode,” she muttered beneath her breath. Briefly, she considered adding that phrase to her list of hated words and phrases.

A man rising from the sea to the beach snapped her from self-absorption. She edged forward on the stool, back straight, glass gripped between the palms of her hands.

Interest pricked the numbness in her mind.

The word gorgeous failed to describe him. Transfixed, she watched his legs dragging through the pull of the waves. Soggy, orange swim trunks molded his thighs. Swim fins dangled from the fingers of his left hand. Sand and salt clung to sculpted calves like sugar on cinnamon.

Seawater shook from black hair as he pulled the snorkel mask from his head and tossed it to the sand. With another shake of his head, he grabbed a frayed towel. Unhurried, he moved it across his chest and turned his back toward her. The towel descended over hips hugged with orange fabric before working up his back to rest across his shoulders.

She envied that towel.

Awareness rippled over her skin. A smile, maybe the first authentic one in months, began deep inside her chest, spread outward and upward until finding its way to her lips. She wondered if he had a wife, a girlfriend...or a boyfriend for that matter. He looked too good to be unattached, too delicious not to be savored.

Hmmm...she began to understand the term island mode.

Austin blocked her view to introduce his manager, Erin. His words were lost on her. Thoughts were rattled from the man with the orange swim trunks, the ebony hair and—oh, God—those legs.

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Noah glanced over his shoulder toward the beach bar. Cold beer and easy conversation sounded like the perfect distraction for an otherwise frustrating afternoon. Snorkeling usually cleared his mind, but not today with maniac tourists nearly murdering him with a jetski.

Restlessness gnawed at him, nibbled at his nervous system to move, to act, to do more than this. The fact that some quack had decided to taunt him with his past sure as hell didn't help. He raked sandy fingers through his hair and watched the breakers crashing against the reef off shore.

Months of writers' block had finally given way to a flood of words about a stalker's decent into madness. Every word flowed perfectly onto the page. What should be a good thing felt like a bad thing because he wondered how his inspiration would handle her story being his motivation.

This week sucked, no question. Between the creep harassing him, maniac tourists and guilt over his newfound writing mojo, he couldn't catch a break.

“Hey, Noah, I’ve been looking all over the island for you.” A shorter man knelt next to him, shaking hair from his face. “Up for a night dive? I booked a private charter and Gill can’t work it.”

He squinted at the man—a muscle builder gone beach boy—his gaze shifting to the beads braided through a section of brown hair. Those were new. “What’s up with the beads, Larry?”

“Like ‘em?”

“Oh, yeah, they’re cute, make you look...um...special.” He laughed before pulling the t-shirt over his head. “No afternoon dive today?”

“It’s Wednesday, remember? We don’t book on Wednesdays, our day to have the boat to ourselves, not that it mattered since you blew me off this morning.”

“I forgot. Sorry.” Again he glanced toward the bar and frowned. “I’ve been distracted.”

“No problem.” Larry followed his gaze. “Austin should be back from the airport with his basket-case sister by now.”

“You’re such a sensitive guy.” He jumped to his feet, dragging the beach towel with him.

“Oh, c’mon, let’s be real.” Larry continued to look at the bar. “She’s got to be messed up, don’t ya think? I bet she’s scared of her own shadow.”

“Who isn’t a little messed up? You? Me? We’re not exactly people to judge, are we?”

Larry snapped his head around and pushed the sunglasses higher up on his nose.

“Nope. Guess we’re not. You comin’ aboard tonight or what?”

He busied himself with shaking out the towel before shoving it into the snorkel bag. “Why did you quit the business, Lar?”

“You mean the screenwriting business?” Larry kicked his bare toes in the sand.

“Are you kidding me? Have you forgotten that I couldn’t get a damn thing produced?

Reason number one—no money. What’s up? Still not writing?”

“I’m writing.”

“Well, then, what’s the problem?” Larry stretched his arms behind his back.

“You comin’ aboard tonight or what? If you’re not, I need to start calling around to find another dive master.”

“I’ll take care of it, don’t worry.” He adjusted the bag over his shoulder. “Have a beer with me. I’m buying.”

“You’re going to the bar? To meet Austin’s sister?”

“They serve beer there, remember? And I need one.” He stepped in that direction.

“Why do you want to meet her so soon? You don’t need her drama.”

“She’s Austin’s sister. We are Austin’s friends. Simple. No drama involved. Let’s go have a beer, be sociable, you know...do the right thing.”

“The right thing, hm?” Larry propped his hands on his hips. “Austin asked us all to give her time to settle in before bugging her...his words. Remember? Last night on your deck...we had a conversation...any of this coming back to you?”

Oh, he remembered the conversation word for word, but his curiosity overpowered willpower. “Like I said, I really need a cold beer. Are you coming?”

“From what Austin says, it sounds like she had a breakdown in Atlanta, refuses to talk about what happened, wouldn’t leave the house at night, wouldn’t go anywhere alone.” Larry circled his finger over his ear.

“She traveled here alone.” He couldn’t believe this guy had been his friend for a decade, more like a brother than a friend if he really wanted to be honest about it. “Why are you being so hard on a woman you haven’t even met? You of all people should know what it’s like to have a sister in trouble.”

“Yeah, well, some people can’t let stuff go, know what I mean? Shake it off, get on with life. What’s the big deal? She’s alive, she should be thankful and suck it up.”

“Suck it up? Really? A man she knew and trusted turned out to be the stalker who killed her friend and nearly killed her in her own home. You think she can just shake that off? Just like that?”

“You sure know a lot of details.”

“Austin—”

“And your writers’ block is broken, right?” Beads bobbed against his face as he nodded. “I get it. You’re doin’ some research, meeting the subject—”

His fingers curled around the strap of his bag. “It’s not like what you’re thinking.”

“I know you too well.” A too-satisfied-I-know-all smile spread across Larry’s face. “Let me guess. Changed the names and places—probably even the perspective, right? I’d bet anything you—”

“Her story intrigues me, that’s all. Austin’s one of my best friends. I’m not going to hurt his sister.” He stepped toward the bar and away from his friend. “Believe me, it’s not like it sounds.”

“Sure it is, but whatever. None of my business.” Larry shrugged, his expression lost behind the sunglasses. “Don’t you ever get tired of it?”

“Tired of what?”

“Finding excuses to focus on anything but the reason you’re really down here. First, you buy the dive boat and start us up in a charter business. Second, you rip apart your house with the excuse of renovations—”

“What are you doing? Keeping track of my every move?”

“Now you’re writing about—”

“Back off, Larry. You don’t know me as well as you think.” He turned to leave.

“None of this is going to bring Alicia back, you know. It’s been over two years, man.”

Alicia. The name of his dead fiancée stopped him in mid-step.

“You have no idea what I’m thinking so let it go,” he said with as much calm as he could fake.

“Fine. Here’s me letting it go.” Larry stepped backward with an elaborate swing of his arms. “Speaking of Alicia, David Wells called this morning.”

“David Wells?” He frowned at the name of his former nemesis from Los Angeles. “What’s he calling you for?”

“He wanted to catch up...asked about our dive business...if we do private charters.”

“You told him no, right? The last thing we need is that old crowd coming to the Caymans.”

“No, I did not tell him no. He’s coming down here—”

“Damn it, Lar.”

“—in a few weeks to scout movie locations. I emailed him the information on the Angelfish and—”

“Tell me you didn’t.”

“—and he said he’d like to throw some of the studio’s money our way. The last time I checked, we were in business to make a profit, Noah. Get over it.”

“David Wells and his crowd are the last people I want to do business with here on Cayman or back in LA.” Aware of his low tolerance for anything and everyone today, he rolled back his shoulders in an attempt to loosen the knots locked behind his neck.

“Eventually, you’re gonna have to face the old crowd, Noah.”

“I expect that back in the States, not here.” He shifted the weight of the snorkel bag to his other shoulder and shook his head. “I need that beer. Are you coming?”

“You definitely need something to take the edge off.” Grin long gone, Larry studied him before glancing toward the bar. “Say hi to Austin’s sister for me.”

Without saying another word, Larry weaved through swimsuit-clad tourists until disappearing around a curve on the beach.

Sighing, he looked at the beach bar. He could see Austin’s back, assumed he talked to his sister, considered going home and avoiding people in general, but walked toward the stairs anyway.

There she sat, live and in person, Lauren Biltmore. Pale skin reminded him of moonlight on sand and contrasted sharply with the tanned people surrounding her. Sunlight filtering in through tiny breaks of the thatched roof shimmered against her platinum hair.

He had seen pictures of her, sure, but the reality stunned him. No picture had captured the essence of her that screamed stay away. And that was exactly what he should do; stay away.

Never one to do as he should, he maneuvered around the tables toward her side.

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