

*Don't bother hiding,
he's going to find you...*

Exposure

New York Times Bestselling Author

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ANDERSEN

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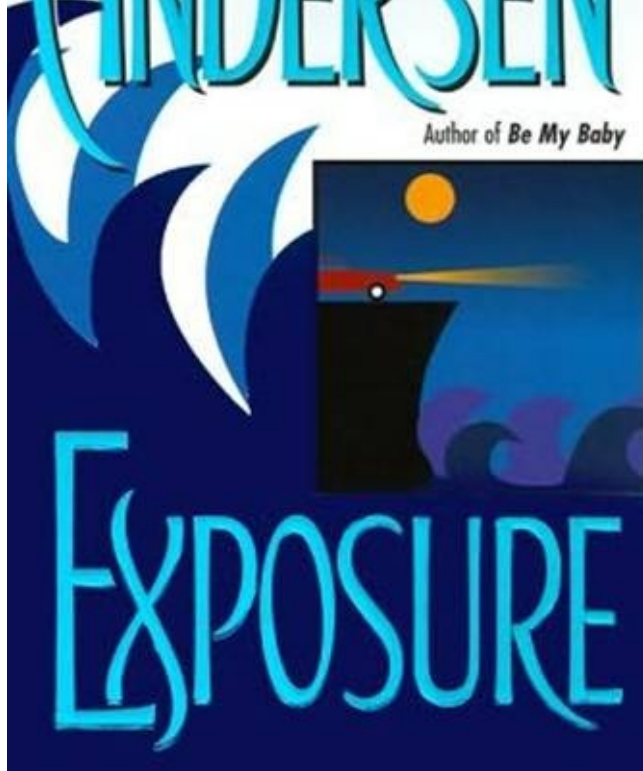


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~~This one is for friends both old and new Dedicated, with affection, to:~~

Kathie Tagart

Who knew me before I was born

Jen Heaton and TeresaDesJardien

For conversations after midnight

Kimberly Deloach

Who has the most toys

Teresa Salgado, For strokes, books, and photographs

And

Expert Readers Lara, Andrea, and Char

Who took the time to hand sell when nobody knew my name

Prologue

"Mr. Woodard?" The intercom on the desk was the best that money could buy, its tonal quality clear as a mountain brook. Grant Woodard glanced up at the sound of his secretary's voice. "There's a Mrs. Muldoon here to see you, sir. She doesn't have an appointment—"

"That's all right, Rosa. Send her in." Grant took his finger off the intercom button and sat back in his chair, tugging lightly at his lapels to adjust the hang of his suit jacket. When the door opened and his secretary ushered in a plump, middle-aged woman, he rose to his feet. "Margo," he said genially, coming around the desk to greet her. "How nice to see you. Please, have a seat."

Margo Muldoon settled herself and refused the secretary's offer of coffee. She knew Grant Woodard's cordiality was a surface thing, primarily for show; and sitting with her knees pressed tightly together and her hands clasped anxiously over the voluminous handbag in her lap, she strove to contain her nervousness until the young woman had finally left the room, softly closing the door behind her. Then, leaning forward, she promptly got to her reason for being there. "Miss Emma is gone, sir."

"What do you mean, she's gone?" Grant snapped erect, all pretense of good humor eradicated from his expression. "I pay you good money to keep an eye on her, Muldoon."

"I know you do, sir, but I thought she was with you. She left me a note on Friday morning, saying she would be."

"Exactly what did this note say?"

"That she and Miss Gracie were spending Memorial Day weekend in the country with you. It didn't occur to me to question it until she failed to arrive back home this morning. And then I merely thought you must have returned late last night and she and the baby had spent the night in your guest room." She wrung her hands. "But when I called, your housekeeper told me neither Miss Emma nor Miss Gracie had been around for over a week, and the last time Miss Emma had been by to visit, she'd waited over an hour for you in the library before she finally had to give up and go home without seeing you."

Grant felt a chill crawl down his spine. Emma had spent an hour in the library waiting for him? Why the hell hadn't he heard of this occurrence before now? Goddam incompetent help—I pay them top wages, and still I can't count on them not to screw up the simplest duties. "Did you bring me this week's tape?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Woodard." Margo Muldoon opened her purse, and when she didn't produce the article as quickly as Grant deemed suitable, he peremptorily snapped his fingers at her to hurry along the process. That merely added to her nervousness and she fumbled in her bag trying to extract the video tape. Finally, she got a grip on it and handed it across the desk. Grant immediately dismissed her with a curt nod and a shooing flip of his hand.

The moment the door had closed behind her, he stabbed the intercom button. "Rosa, something ha

come up. Clear my calendar for the afternoon." He'd started to lift his finger off the button when he was struck by another thought. "Oh, and locate Hackett. Tell him to meet me at the house."

"Right away, Mr. Woodard."

* * * * *

Twenty minutes later he walked into the library of his home. Crossing the room he went straight to the locked mahogany cabinet that held his library of tapes and retrieved the key from behind the decorative molding that ran along the top edge. He unlocked the cabinet's glass doors.

Everything seemed to be in order and Grant smiled, feeling foolish for his momentary lack of faith. Of course Emma hadn't gone through his archives; what possible reason would she have to do so? He poured himself a drink, put the newest tape he'd received from Mrs. Muldoon into the VCR, and sat down with the remote control. He smiled as he watched the scenes unfurl.

Suddenly, his smile congealed. Backing up the tape, he froze it and sat staring at the stack of tapes on the bed next to the suitcase Emma was packing.

Cold anger churning in the pit of his stomach, he crossed over to the cabinet once again. Grabbing a box at random, he ripped it open. The tape was there. He grabbed another and opened it. There. Yet another.

This one was empty.

Tossing aside the box, he went into a frenzy, grabbing box after box, slamming the full cassettes back on the shelf in roughly the same place from which he'd taken them and tossing aside the empties. When he was through, he had six neatly dated, empty tape boxes strewn around the room.

"That bitch!"

There was a rap at the door. Ramming his fingers through his steel gray hair, Grant looked at the mess he'd made and then shrugged. That was what hired help was for. Crossing the room, he yanked the door open.

"Hiya, boss." Hackett strolled into the room. "Rosa said you wanted to see me?"

"Sit down." Grant went over to the wall safe and positioned himself to block the other man's view as he worked the combination. From the safe's depths he extracted a stack of bills bound together by narrow paper wrapper. Using his thumb to riffle them like a deck of cards, he watched for a moment as the denominations flashed past in a blur before returning to the desk where he slapped the packet down in front of Hackett and took his seat behind the huge mahogany expanse.

"Emma has taken off and she's got some property of mine with her." His eyes were frigid as a winter pond and harder than carbide steel as they bored into Hackett's. "That's for expenses," he said, indicating the money. Then he looked up again and met his employee's eyes, freezing Hackett to his seat with the intensity of his gaze. "I want her found," he said and there wasn't a speck of equivocation

in his tone.

"Yesterday, Hackett, if not sooner."

Emma swore softly. Wonderful. She couldn't have found a lousier place for the car to begin acting up if she'd tried. She'd just driven off the Washington State ferry ten minutes ago, and following a mix-up at the terminal, she'd disembarked on an island instead of the mainland destination one stop farther on. She didn't know if this small island even boasted a real town, let alone a garage with a certified mechanic.

The engine noise grew louder and Emma feared they wouldn't make it over the next rise.

"McDonald's?" Gracie requested hopefully from the car seat next to her. She appeared oblivious to the horrendous racket the car was making.

"I don't imagine they have a McDonald's here, angel pie," Emma replied. She reached over and stroked a gentle finger down her daughter's cheek, giving her a soft smile. "I'll find us some place to eat, though." Or so she fervently hoped.

What she found was a picturesque town called Port Flannery, built on two levels around a harbor and attractive even in the gray light cast by a low ceiling of clouds that looked ready to open up and dump their contents at any moment. The tide was low and down on the bay was a boathouse and dock, a gas station, general store, several specialty shops, and a tavern. Up above was a town square, around which was built a town hall and the rest of the business section, including, thank goodness, Bill's Garage. Emma coasted the Chevrolet to a halt in front of the garage doors.

"So you say she's been runnin' rough, huh?" a man in greasy overalls with Bill embroidered above the chest pocket asked her a few moments later. He wiped his hands on an oily rag and then leaned over the engine once again.

"Running very rough," Emma confirmed. "And the engine's making a lot of noise. I think there's ___"

"Now, don't you worry your pretty little head about it," he interrupted in a condescending tone that made the short hairs on the back of Emma's neck stand on end. She opened her mouth to cut him off at the knees but Gracie chose that moment to start squirming in her arms.

"Hungwy, Maman," she insisted querulously and drummed her feet against Emma's thigh.

Bill raised his eyes as far as Emma's breasts. "There's a cafe across the square," he informed them helpfully. "You go get your little girl something to eat and I'll have a better idea what's wrong with your car by the time you get back."

Emma gritted her teeth. She was tempted to impart a few home truths guaranteed to make Bill's ears ring, but Gracie was wriggling and demanding to be let down, and her own stomach was growling so, swallowing a sigh, she let it pass. She set Gracie on her feet and took her hand. Moments later they were crossing the grassy square and climbing the porch steps of a large clapboard establishment. Red neon script above the navy-checked cafe curtains in the front window spelled out Ruby's Cafe.

By the time they walked out again, Emma was feeling a hundred percent better. Amazing, she marveled, ~~what a hot meal could do for a woman.~~ But it wasn't merely that; in addition to filling up on food that tasted like honest-to-goodness home cooking, she and Gracie now had a place to stay. Ruby was a boarding house as well as a cafe, with big, spacious rooms to let upstairs. Emma had rented one overlooking the square.

The shortest lease Ruby was willing to accept for one of her rooms was a nonnegotiable week—cash in advance—but that was all right with Emma. She was tired of being on the run and she was sick to death of living out of suitcases. It would be a luxury to be able to unpack and stay put for a few days. Sooner or later she had to stop somewhere anyhow, didn't she? Not to mention that with breakfast and dinner included in the rent, this was definitely cheaper than paying by the day at a motel, even cut-rate motels. So what the heck—why not here? It was an excellent, well-thought-out decision.

And one that, not five minutes later, she had cause to regret.

* * * * *

Sandy, the dispatcher, stuck her head into the sheriff's office. "Elvis, you better get on over to Bill's Garage," she said. "Some off-islander with an old car is over there raising Cain, and she's drawin' a crowd."

Elvis swore under his breath and headed for the door. Damn that Bill; he'd warned him before about his habit of padding the bill.

Sandy hadn't exaggerated; there was a small crowd bunched up in the doorway that separated the office from the garage bay. Most moved aside without speaking to him when Elvis appeared, but his friend Sam was there and he turned and gave him a grin. "Almost hate to see you break it up, Donnelly," he said. "This woman's good. Worth the admission at twice the price."

The car was the first thing Elvis noticed and he nearly choked. Jesus, Sandy, he thought, an old car? It was a classic '57 Chevy in mint condition, and Elvis would have happily ignored the argument raging over by the pit in favor of going over the thing from stem to stern with a fine-tooth comb . . . except by then he'd seen the woman, and both she and her argument were impossible to ignore.

His first impression was of a big blonde with a voice like molasses and a body built to stop traffic. Looking more closely, he realized she wasn't actually a true blonde. Her hair was more caramel colored, kind of a warm goldy-brown, but it had dozens of flaxen streaks that gave it the blond appearance. Elvis' massive shoulders twitched. Hell, close enough. If it walked like a blonde and talked like a blonde . . .

And the body was still built to stop traffic. She had a little girl riding her Levi's-clad hip, and he didn't think he was the only man in that garage who couldn't quite tear his eyes away from the chubby little dimpled hand that moved up and down the T-shirt covered, centerfold thrust of her mother's breast. "Itsy, bitsy spidoo," the child sang beneath her mother's harangue, little fingers pressing into the fullness. "Went up the water spout."

Jesus.

"... lowlife, cheatin' thief," the woman was saying when he tore his attention back to the business hand, and even in the midst of reaming Bill out, he noticed, her voice evoked images of sultry, magnolia scented, Southern nights. "Where'd you get your license, cher—from a Cracker Jack box?"

"Listen, you bitch," Bill snarled back with his usual inimitable charm, and Elvis' eyebrows snapped together.

He stepped forward. "What's goin' on, here?"

Emma's head swung around and she found herself gaping speechlessly for an instant. Standing in the doorway, a small island of space separating him from the rest of the gawkers, stood one of the largest men she'd ever seen in her life. He must have been six feet, six inches tall and probably weighed somewhere in the neighborhood of two hundred thirty pounds, all of it solid, khaki- and levi's-covered muscle. But it wasn't simply his size that caused her to stare. It was the sternness of his expression. It was the fact that his left arm ended in an artificial limb with a metal clip-style hook where his hand should have been, and that a wicked raised scar zigzagged across his left cheek like an inch-and-a-half-long lightning bolt, pointing to his full lower lip where it ended at the outside corner.

She grew aware of Gracie growing quiet against her. The child's head lowered to nestle against Emma's breast and her thumb crept into her mouth. Emma glanced down and saw her daughter staring wide-eyed at the unsmiling man across the room, big brown eyes fastened on the angry red scar on his face. "Owie," she whispered around her thumb. It shook Emma from her reverie and she smiled slightly, pressing a kiss against her daughter's soft curls.

"I'll tell you what's goin' on," she said firmly and crossed the garage to stand directly in front of the gigantic man. Her head tilted back so she might look directly in his startling blue eyes. "I'm pretty sure I had a piece of carbon break loose and start hittin' the top of the piston," she said. "So I came in here to get it flushed out. But did this idiot—" She gestured expressively at Bill Gertz. "—squirt a bit of water in the cylinders or give it a bit of combustion cleaner to eat it up? Oh no, cher." Her brown eyes flashed fire, and Elvis found himself taking a step closer. "No, he decides a rod bearing has come loose. A rod bearing! He can't show me this loose rod bearing, you understand, but I'm not supposed to worry my pretty little head about it!" She all but spat those last words out. "But, no. I mustn't do that. We're only talkin' about hundreds of dollars difference in the damn bill."

"Where did you learn so much about cars, miss?" Elvis inquired curiously, for it was clear that Bill had made a major miscalculation with this one. She knew exactly what she was talking about.

She met his eyes dead on. "From my brother, cher. Big Eddy Robescheaux ran the slickest chop shop in all of N'Awlins, maybe in all of Lou'siana. He and I—well, we were all the other had for years and years. I grew up in that shop. I could hardly help but pick up some pointers."

"Chop shops are illegal, Miss Robescheaux."

"Sands," she corrected him. "Robescheaux was my maiden name."

Elvis, aware of a fierce disappointment, gave himself a sharp mental shake. As if a babe like this one would ever give an ugly sonofabitch like him a second glance anyway.

"And I know they're illegal, cher," she continued softly, a sadness creeping into her eyes. "They closed Big Eddy down, and he died in prison just before he was slated to be released." She sucked on her full bottom lip for a moment, then slowly let it slide through her teeth. That period of time surrounding Eddy's incarceration and death tied together with the beginning of her association with Grant Woodard. . . but that was another story and not something this man needed to know.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Sands."

"Oh, call me Emma, cher. And you are . . . ?"

"Sheriff Donnelly."

"Hey, do the two of you friggin' well mind? " Bill interrupted in disgust. "What is this, the Sunday fuckin' social? Don't be taken in by a sweet pair of tits, Elvis."

"Elvis?" Emma questioned, blinking up at him. Gracie yawned around her thumb and started finger-walking her free hand up and down her mother's breast again. "Itsy, bitsy spidoo . . ."

Elvis shrugged his massive shoulders uncomfortably. "My mother's a big fan of the King," he explained. Then, his expression hardening, he turned to Bill. "I'll tell you what, Bill, why don't you leave the lady's anatomy out of it and just flush out her cylinders like she wants."

"The hell you say! It's a friggin' rod bearing, I'm tellin' ya!"

"Then you have nothing to worry about, do you? Of course, if the problem clears up the way Mrs. Sands here seems to think it will, she'll have to make a decision about pressing charges against you for fraud. If you prove correct, however, I'm sure she'll give you a nice, big, public apology."

"Oh, on my knees, cher," Emma assured the enraged mechanic.

"Yeah? Well, while you're down there why don't you suck my big red di—"

Never in her life had Emma seen a man so large move so fast. Before the mechanic could complete his indecent suggestion, Elvis Donnelly was across the space separating them and his hook had flashed out to open and then close around the button placket at the collar of the man's greasy striped overalls. It lifted, bringing Bill up onto his toes.

"This isn't the first complaint I've had about the way you run this business," Donnelly said in a low intense voice, bending his head to bring his face close to the mechanic's. "But it damn well better be the last, Gertz, or I'm going to shut your operation down so fast it'll make your head spin. Now, I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head until your business is concluded. Get your mind out of the gutter and your butt in gear." Straightening, he allowed the hook to open up, releasing the fabric, and permitting Bill to settle back onto his heels.

Straightening his collar, Gertz stretched his neck first to the left and then to the right. "Well, big surprise that you'd take the side of a whore, Donnelly," he spat out, but took a hasty step backward at the look in the sheriff's blue eyes.

"Excuse me?" Insulted right down to her fingertips, Emma stepped without thought in front of the big law officer. It never occurred to her to let him handle the slur to her name; she was accustomed to fighting her own battles. Drawing up to her full height of five feet, nine and three-quarter inches, Emma faced the mechanic squarely.

"How would you like to find your scraggly little rear end in a court of law defendin' against a slander suit?" she demanded in a low but combative voice. Her brown eyes, boring into his, burned with outrage. "I've been in this town less than two hours and y'all don't know me from Adam, sir, so where do you get off castin' aspersions on my virtue?" Taking a deep breath, Emma felt her shoulders brush against the sheriff's chest, and she was curiously tempted for about two seconds to lean back and let it support her weight.

How ridiculous. She stood taller, blowing out an impatient little breath. "Legally, you're already treadin' a thin line here with my car," she informed Gertz coolly and then warned the belligerent mechanic, "I'd take heed if I were you, Mistah Bill Whoever-the-devil-you-are, because I'm tellin' you right now as clearly as I possibly can. If I hear one more obscenity uttered in front of my baby, we won't be talkin' a nickel-dime-let's-settle-out-of-court lawsuit. I'll go out and hire myself the biggest legal gun this side of the Mississippi Rivah and y'all can bank on the fact that we won't rest until this sorry little garage is mine!" She gave her surroundings a disparaging glance, then met the mechanic's eyes levelly once again. "The place is obviously in need of somebody who knows how to run it right."

That's when she ran out of steam. Yeah, sure, Em, she thought with derision. Big Talk. As if she'd dare do anything that would draw attention to her and Gracie's whereabouts. But she neither blinked nor looked away from Bill Gertz's stare. She'd learned to bluff at a tender age and no crooked little backwater mechanic was going to jerk Emma Robescheaux Sands around. Or call her slanderous names in front of her child.

"Maman?" Gracie tugged on her mother's hair to get her attention. When Emma looked down, her daughter asked uncertainly, "We go bye-bye now?"

"Soon, angel pie." Emma dipped her head to kiss the child's chubby neck. Rubbing her hand gently through Gracie's curls, she raised cold and level eyes to meet the mechanic's gaze once again. "So, what's it gonna be, Mistah Gertz?"

Believing every word she'd said, he looked around, wishing to hell he'd never started this whole sorry mess. But who the hell woulda expected a woman—especially a woman who looked like this or—to know so much about cars? Conning unattached females had always worked just fine for him in the past.

Gauging the mood of the crowd, he could see there would be no help for him there. Most of those gathered might have little use for Elvis Donnelly socially, but they did respect him professionally. And Bill could see it had been a tactical error on his part to make crude remarks to a young woman

who held a dimpled little angel in her arms. Shit. There was no help for it.

"I'll flush your damn cylinders," he muttered ungraciously. What the hell; he'd bluff his way out of this, then the woman would probably hit the highway and he'd never have to see her again. By this time next week no one would even remember he'd tried to cheat her. Except maybe Elvis Donnelly.

And who the hell cared about him?

* * * * *

Emma was wrung out by the time her car was once again in her possession and she'd driven it around the square to the small parking lot behind Ruby's boarding house. After spearing the mechanic with a contemptuous gaze one final time and garnering that unsmiling nod in exchange for the thank you she'd given the big sheriff for his assistance, she would have loved nothing better than to clear out of town. Unfortunately, she couldn't afford to do that.

She'd cleaned out her savings account when she'd left St. Louis and it had consisted of exactly one thousand, four hundred, thirty-six dollars and seventeen cents. She'd maxed out her Visa and Mastercharge by taking cash advances of four thousand dollars each on the cards Grant had insisted on paying for her. That gave her a grand total of nine thousand, four hundred and thirty-six dollars and seventeen cents. It seemed like a lot of money to someone who hadn't had to pay her own bills in years. But when she considered it was all that stood between Gracie and the streets, and as an annual income went was right about poverty level, the cushion it provided became pretty thin. She had already used five hundred, ninety-seven dollars and change getting this far, and she sure as heck couldn't afford to throw away a week's room and board in a fit of pique.

Like it or not, she was stuck in unfriendly little Port Flannery for the next seven days.

Chapter 2

The town perhaps wasn't as unfriendly as she'd first believed. That night in the cafe, Ruby herself came over to deliver Emma's and Gracie's dinners. Sliding the fruit-garnished plate of macaroni and cheese in front of Grade, she looked across the table at Emma. "I heard about your run-in with Bill this afternoon," she said, and Emma regarded her warily, unable to tell from the other woman's expression or tone what her opinion of the afternoon's debacle might be.

"I imagine it's the talk of the town," she replied noncommittally.

"Oh, that it is. Kind of gives you an idea of the entertainment potential in a town this size, doesn't it?" Ruby deftly slid Emma's bowl of soup and plate of salad in front of her. Then she stood back and regarded her. "There's been many a time I was positive he was cheating me, too, but what I know about cars you could print on the head of a pin in big, block letters, so I've never had the nerve to call him on it." Smoothing the pink cotton of her uniform over her sleek hips, she gave Emma an amused smile. "Honey, it did this old girl's heart a world of good to hear a woman caused him to back down." Pushing a stray tendril of hennaed hair back into her coiffure with the eraser end of her order pencil, she regarded Emma quietly for an instant. "You really know as much about cars as folks are saying you do?" she finally asked.

"I know quite a bit," Emma admitted with a shrug. "I was probably the biggest tomboy in all of N'Awlins when I was a kid. My motto was 'Anything a boy can do, I can do better.'" She gave the other woman a wryly self-deprecatory smile and shrugged again. "For a lot of years it was just my big brother and me, and chere, from the time I was nine until I was fourteen years old I spent about every wakin' hour in his shop."

"Would you be interested in giving my car a tune-up?"

Emma's mouth dropped open, and she quickly snapped it shut. "Please," she said, waving a hand at the chair opposite her, "won't you sit down a moment? I'm getting a crick in my neck looking up at you."

Ruby grinned and pulled out the chair. Sitting down, she commanded, "Eat your soup before it gets cold." When Emma obediently picked up her spoon and began eating, Ruby leaned back in her chair. "Bonnie!" she called out in the general direction of the counter. "Bring me over a cup of coffee, will ya, doll?"

"Sure thing, Ruby." the waitress called back, and Ruby straightened, turning her attention to the little girl seated on her left in order to allow the child's mother a few moments to finish her soup. "So your name is Gracie, right?"

Gracie looked up. There was melted cheese ringed her mouth, but she was oblivious as she gave the red-headed woman a big, warm smile. "Wight! I'm fwee." Dropping her fork on her plate, she then bent in her little finger and held it down with her thumb, presenting the three remaining fingers in a crooked display for the woman to count.

"Three years old," Ruby marveled. "That's a big girl."

"Big girl," Gracie agreed. Always thrilled to entertain, and seeing this as an ideal time to show off some of her tricks, she splatted her hands in the casserole on her plate and grinned at her new friend. As she chanted loudly in time to her movements, "Patty cake, patty cake, bakeos man!"

"Grace Melina!" Spoon clattering to the tabletop, Emma reached across the table to grasp her daughter's wrists. She pulled the little hands away from the plate and admonished her sternly, "Big girls do not play in their food, cherie; you know that." Deftly, she dipped her napkin in her water glass and wiped the child's sticky fingers free of macaroni and cheese. "You use your fork now or you can just kiss your dessert good-bye." Looking up at Ruby, she grimaced with rueful apology. "I'm sorry about that. Sometimes her manners leave a little somethin' to be desired."

"Don't worry about it; I've got two kids of my own. They're both in their teens now, but kids are kids."

"I know how it goes." She accepted her cup of coffee from the waitress with a smile and then sat back. After taking a sip, she put down the cup and, nodding toward Gracie, said, "She's a friendly little thing, isn't she?"

"Too friendly at times," Emma agreed. "Gracie subscribes to the Will Rogers school of friendship—don'tcha, angel? She's never met a man—or a woman, for that matter—she doesn't like. It scares me to death sometimes, because no matter how many times I've lectured her about not talking to strangers, I'm not one hundred percent certain she won't go waltzing off with the first one to present her with a persuasive enough story."

"Gwacie'd say no," Gracie insisted, digging tracks through her macaroni with her fork tines.

"I know you would, angel pie," Emma retorted, but she raised a skeptical eyebrow at Ruby and changed the subject. "About your car," she said.

"I'm not asking you to do anything fancy," Ruby interrupted. "It's due for its oil change and—you know—that other stuff that usually goes along with a tune-up." She waved her hand in vague illustration, and Emma gave her a lopsided smile.

"Points and plugs, oil change, battery check, and a new filter?" From the way Ruby spoke Emma assumed she did not have a late model car that was electronically regulated.

"Yeah." Ruby smiled. "That stuff. How much would you charge me to do that?"

"I don't know. Is there a car parts store around here?"

"Mackey's, the general store down on the quay, has a parts department"

"In that case"—Emma quoted a price—"plus whatever the parts come to. For all I know island prices could be twice what they'd charge on the mainland," she warned. "So before you make up your mind maybe you'd better let me look into it. I'll drop by the store first thing tomorrow. Once we know

more you can tell me if it sounds reasonable to you."

"Sure," Ruby agreed and then shrugged. "But I imagine it'll be fine. Bill usually charges three times that."

In a tone sweeter than sorghum and melodious as a soft, Southern breeze, Emma stated her opinion of Bill and his practices, and Ruby laughed. Emma then proceeded to garner all the pertinent details on the make, model, and year of Ruby's car before the older woman excused herself and pushed back from the table. As Gracie finished her dinner and ate her dessert, her mother hugged to her breast the potential she'd just been given to supplement her cache of traveler's checks. She felt like dancing by the time she let Gracie and herself into their newly rented room.

She didn't dare apply for a regular job; the moment her social security number went onto a paycheck, one of Grant's minions or a private detective was sure to be hot on her trail. It was a threat whose validity she didn't doubt for an instant.

And the good Lord knew the actualization of it was something she must avoid.

But tuning up Ruby's car . . . Oh Gawd, it was so perfect. No W2 to lead Grant to her and the opportunity to replace a little bit of what she'd already spent. Emma picked up Gracie and whirled her around, hugging her close and laughing.

The action sent Gracie a little out of control. She twirled in circles the moment Emma set her on her feet, spinning and laughing loudly. Grimacing over the tactical error she'd made in allowing her daughter to get so worked up, Emma went to collect the child's pajamas, not noticing when Gracie opened the door to their room.

Gracie danced out into the hallway; then twirled back in, slapping her feet against the hardwood floor as hard as she could, staring down at her little sneakers with their orange and yellow hand-painted fish. The door behind her didn't quite close.

Elvis, climbing the stairs, saw the little girl twirl like a top out into the hall, cheeks blazing and blond curls flying, and then stomp like a Charlie Chaplin wannabe back into the room. He hesitated at the top of the stairs before making his way quietly down the hallway.

He was surprised to see them still in town. Once Emma Sands and her little moppet had collected their great car in the wake of the brouhaha at Bill's that afternoon, he hadn't expected to see them again. The last thing he'd anticipated was coming home to hear the little girl screeching like a banshee just three doors down from his own room.

Hesitating at the side of the door, he looked into their room. Emma Sands was straightening from a crouch in front of the chest of drawers. She pressed a long-fingered hand into the small of her back and arched, stretching that long spine out. "That's enough, Gracie," she commanded quietly in the soft accented contralto he remembered from that afternoon. "You're actin' like a monkey girl."

Elvis eyed that body, listened to that luscious Southern drawl, and wondered where in hell the husband was. He was amazed at how curious he was to know her story. Usually he didn't give a rip.

The hand that had been blown off by a car bomb commenced to itch like crazy, and he rubbed his forearm, where it attached to the prosthesis, gently against the seam of his Levi's. It was a conditioned reflex, an attempt to alleviate the genuine torment of a phantom limb. With an automatic eye for detail he simultaneously perused the room, taking a comprehensive inventory of the contents.

She wasn't simply on vacation; that was his first conclusion. Not with that small television set and VCR she'd set up on the dresser. People didn't drag shit like that along with them for a week in the country. Then, his massive shoulders twitched in a shrug. So, big deal, what the hell. Maybe she was moving.

But he had a cop's instinct that didn't think so.

Gracie was bobbing in place, scratching herself, and making monkey noises that were growing progressively louder. Finally, Emma tossed aside the pajamas she was holding and snatched her daughter to her. She wrapped both arms around Gracie's chubby little body, pinning the child's arms to her sides.

"That is enough, s'il vous plait," she said sternly, but then kissed her daughter's scarlet cheek and flopped down onto the bed on her back, holding the little girl to her chest. Gracie wriggled her arms free and wrapped them around her mother's neck. Rubbing her cheek against Emma's full breasts, she brought down one hand to slide her thumb into her mouth.

"There are other people up here," Emma continued admonishing her in a soft voice, smoothing tangled curls away from her daughter's flushed cheeks. "And, angel pie, somehow I doubt very much that they appreciate hearing you yell and scream while they're tryin' to watch TV or read their books."

"Gwacie's Monkey Girl."

"Oui, I know. And because I also know you're tired and because I'm the one who got you so wound up in the first place, I'm trying to make allowances. But no more noises, or Maman's gonna quit talking and take action. And Gracie honey, I don't think you wanna find out what that action's goin' to be."

Gracie yawned. " 'Kay," she said around her thumb.

"You want to take a bath tonight, sugar? There's a big ol' tub down the hall, and we've still got some of that bubble bath left that y'all like so much."

"Wanna call Gwandpapa."

Emma stiffened, but then immediately forced herself to relax. "Um, Grandpapa's out of town," she said with strained casualness. "I'm afraid we can't get ahold of him 'til he gets back. Want to read a book?"

Elvis abruptly straightened. He'd been admiring the way Emma handled her daughter, but the cop in him shifted to red alert at her words. He recognized a lie when he heard one and wondered what she was hiding. Then he frowned. What the hell, she hadn't broken any laws in his town. His curiosity about this woman was a radical departure from his usual attitude, and he wasn't sure he liked it.

He was nevertheless curious.

Unfortunately, the uncharacteristic interest she sparked in him also made him careless. He moved too abruptly and it drew her attention.

Emma, having discerned motion from the corner of her eye, whipped her head around in its direction.

Her door was open a crack and a huge shadow out in the hallway absorbed the light in the space to the side of the doorway. Heart knocking up against her rib cage, arms tightening protectively around her child, she scooted back on the bed, struggling to sit up.

Elvis saw the alarm on her face and stepped in front of the opening, pushing it a little wider with his hand and bringing himself into the light. "Good evening, Mrs. Sands," he greeted her soberly.

"Sheriff Donnelly," she retorted stiffly. She hesitated then demanded, "Did you open my door?"

"No, ma'am. It was open when I came down the hall."

He could hardly say her daughter had done it without admitting he'd been standing out here in the hallway watching them like some lowlife Peeping Tom. But his eyes dropped to study her baby's face.

The little girl nestled her cheek into her mother's breast and solemnly returned his look for several seconds. Then her lips pursed and she sucked hard on her thumb. Her index finger curled around her button of a nose.

Emma tucked her chin into her neck to look down also. "Gracie?" she questioned.

Gracie slowly raised guilty eyes to meet her mother's.

"Did you open the door?"

Gracie took several comforting pulls on her thumb and then let her lips go slack. "Uh huh."

"And did you leave the room?"

Gracie opened her mouth to deny it, figuring she'd already had more than her fair share of trouble that day and sure didn't need any more. But the Big Bird-large man with the owie on his face was watching her and she knew he could read her mind like Santa Claus. "Uh huh."

"Grace Melina Sands," Emma said with stern displeasure, "what have I told you about opening hotel-room doors or running out of them without me?"

"Woon't no caws or twucks, Mommy." Big tears rose in her eyes, and her bottom lip started to tremble. She dug her head harder into her mother's breast.

Elvis watched in horror. Jesus. He hadn't meant to get the kid in trouble. "This is a real safe place Mrs. Sands," he hastened to assure Emma, his gaze bouncing from the child's miserable expression to

Emma's face. A fat tear rolled down the baby's face as he shifted uncomfortably. Oh, God. He couldn't stand this. "~~She'd never come to any harm out in the hall—hell, no one here would dream of hurting her.~~"

Gracie blinked at him in wonder, her tears instantly drying up. She might be too young to articulate the concept, but she recognized being defended when she heard it.

Emma considered him also. Privately, she was rather amused by the panic one little girl's tears could cause in such a huge, stern man. Clearly this guy was not a father. "Do you live here, Sheriff?"

"Yes, ma'am. Across the hall and down a couple in G." It was convenient to work and saved him the hassle of having to cook for himself or keep up a house and yard.

Emma decided to let them both off the hook. "Well, I suppose the situation here is a little different from some of the motels we've stayed at," she allowed. "And since we're going to be staying for at least a week . . ." She looked down at Gracie again. "We'll discuss the new rules in the morning, Miss Sands."

Sitting up straighter, she rolled her daughter off her torso and onto the mattress next to her. "I think we might as well put off your bath until then, too. It's been a long day. Meanwhile, why don't you go pick out your bedtime story. It's time to get you into your jammies."

Gracie scrambled off the bed and trotted over to the stack of books on the wide sill of the window that overlooked the town square. Out in the hallway Elvis shifted to his other foot. "Well, uh, I'll just close this and be on my way," he said. He started to do that, then hesitated for an instant, giving Emma an intent, unsmiling stare. "Good night, Mrs. Sands."

"Good night, Sheriff."

The door closed softly.

Gracie was back in moments, leaving a messy pile of discarded books on the floor beneath the window sill. Her gaze went expectantly to the doorway, and she stopped in her tracks when she saw the closed portal. She turned disappointed eyes on her mother. "Where'd man go, Maman? "

"Sheriff Donnelly went to his own room, angel. Come on over here. Let's get your jammies on."

Gracie obediently climbed up onto the bed, and Emma began removing her clothes. "But doesn't he wanna wead Pokey Puppy?"

"I don't think he knows too much about reading to little girls," Emma said as she set aside Gracie's shoes and socks and unhooked her OshKosh overall straps, then peeled the bib down. She whipped the little ruffled-neck T-shirt over Gracie's head. "You have to go potty, sweetie?"

"Uh huh."

Emma had to wrestle the temptation to take over as she watched her daughter pull the Barney

pajamas up her sturdy little body. For she did it slowly. Soooo slowly. "Okay, then," she said, rubbing her itchy palms against the seat of her pants. "Whataya say we collect your toothbrush and toothpaste and do this all in one trip."

* * * * *

As usual, since the day almost two weeks ago when she'd grabbed Gracie and run, Emma managed to hold it together as long as her daughter was awake to command all her attention. It was in the quiet hours when Gracie slept that she invariably fell apart.

She stood at the second-story window, arms wrapped around herself as she stared down at the dimly lighted square. Like most small towns, Port Flannery seemed to roll up its sidewalks shortly after nightfall. Oh, she imagined the tavern she'd seen down on the harbor was probably still doing a booming business, but up here it was quiet and still. The only sign of movement down on the shadowed grass common was a mongrel dog sniffing around the gazebo. As she watched he lifted his leg and anointed a patch of flowers that fronted the latticework. Emma pulled the shade and turned away from the window.

She was trying so hard to ignore the stack of videos in the bag on the shelf in the closet that it was self-defeating. The videos drew her, just as they'd done that day in Grant's library while she'd waited for him to arrive home. The day they had turned her entire life inside out.

She hadn't set out to invade his privacy that day. Ah, Dieu, Emma thought, trying to control a little bubble of hysteria, his privacy. Exhaling a bitter little breath, she hugged herself against a pervasive chill. There was an irony for you.

The fact remained, however, that she had merely been killing time that afternoon, not looking to pry into areas she had no business intruding upon. She'd seen Grant retrieve and replace the key to the cabinet a dozen times; but she had always assumed the tapes were records of business transactions and had respected the fact that they were kept behind lock and key for a purpose. That afternoon she had simply been passing the time by reading the dates on the video box spines. March 14, 1982 had naturally drawn her attention.

That was the day she had met the man who would become the closest thing she'd ever known to a father. The day she'd tried to steal Grant Woodard's Silver Cloud Rolls-Royce.

* * * * *

She wasn't supposed to have been involved. Big Eddy let her hang around the shop pestering him, the other mechanic, and the two auto-body men, but he was adamant about keeping her on the sidelines when it came to actually stealing the cars they chopped. He always said he might be nothing but a car thief, but he was damned if she was going to become one as well.

Eddy was funny that way. He made her go to school, made her brush her teeth morning and night, didn't let the other men in the shop talk too dirty around her. He taught her to drive a car before she was twelve, showed her how to break down an engine, pound out dents, and paint an automobile. But he kept her apart from the real meat and potatoes of the operation. He wouldn't let her do any of the

fun stuff at all.

So she decided to heist this one on her own.

They'd seen the car often on the fringes of the Garden District, and because her brother and the men who worked with him raved about it every time they saw it, Emma just naturally assumed it would be a car they'd chose to steal. She wanted to beat them to the punch, to present it to them as a *fait accompli*, an acquisition she could point to as proof positive that she could handle this aspect of the job as well as any guy could.

Carefully obeying all speed limits, she was driving it back to Big Eddy's shop when a large black sedan forced her to the side of the road. She hadn't been in the car five minutes.

Before she had time to react, two very large men with thick necks and flat, cold eyes climbed out of the sedan and crossed over to rip open the driver's door. One of them stood to one side, his back to the car, his eyes scanning the area while the other leaned into the automobile. He stared at her without expression for a moment, then reached in and removed the keys from the ignition. "Get outta the car, sister."

They bundled her into the sedan and drove without speaking for several miles, eventually parking in the underground garage of a modern downtown office building. The two men then escorted her to an elevator and rode with her in silence to the seventeenth floor. After a delay in the reception area that lasted only the time it took to mutter a few low-voiced words into a telephone on the mahogany desk she was ushered into an inner sanctum. When the door closed behind her, her guards remained on the other side of it.

Emma twitched her shoulders and straightened her clothing, swiping at streaky blond bangs with the back of her hand as she looked around the plush office and then out the floor-to-ceiling windows across the room to the spectacular view beyond. Huh. She wasn't scared.

Her heart slammed up against the wall of her chest when the high-backed forest green leather chair suddenly swiveled around to face her. A middle-aged man, distinguished and rich looking, regarded her soberly. Emma knuckled her hair away from her eyes again, raised her chin, and stared back at him.

"So," he finally said conversationally, "this is what a car thief looks like."

Considering how badly she'd wanted to do everything the men in Eddy's shop did, the depth of her hatred for the appellation surprised Emma. But she sucked on her lower lip to disguise its sudden trembling and swaggered around the room, picking up and discarding objets d'art that even she could tell were priceless. Turning one over in her hands, she examined it with the same lack of awe she'd display for a dime-store figurine before finally placing it back on the shelf where she'd found it. She glanced over her shoulder at the man across the room. "I prefer to call it auto liberation."

"Call it what you like, child," he said mildly. "It still carries five to ten in the penitentiary."

She had to squeeze hard to prevent her bladder from emptying itself where she stood. But she

hadn't played poker with Big Eddy and his cronies for the past couple of years for nothing. She turned to face her adversary fully. "Get serious, cher," she managed to scoff with credible scorn. "I'm fourteen years old, and that makes me a minor. Juvie's don't go to the pen, least not unless they murder someone."

"I see." The man picked up his desk phone and turned it around to face her. Tapping the receiver with expensively manicured fingertips, he suggested coolly, "In that case I suggest you place a call to your lawyer."

"Huh?"

"A big-time professional auto liberator such as yourself surely has a high-dollar mouthpiece on retainer. Don't you?"

She didn't reply. She simply stared at him with her brave belligerent eyes and trembling lower lip and he heaved a sigh. "Call your parents," he suggested in a resigned voice.

She shuffled her feet and rolled her shoulders. "Don't have any," she muttered sulkily.

"Do you have a guardian?"

Emma picked up the phone and punched out the numbers to Eddy's garage.

An hour later a white-faced Eddy was hustling her out of Grant Woodard's office. His grip had her up on her toes and trotting alongside him in order to prevent her arm from being wrenched from its shoulder socket. When the elevator doors slid open Eddy hurled her inside with such force she cannoned into the mirrored back wall. "Hey," she exclaimed indignantly, grabbing at the handrail to keep her balance. Rubbing her bruised arm, she turned to face her brother.

"A Rolls-Royce," he snarled. He was across the elevator in a flash, looming over her. As the doors swooshed closed he was already bending down to thrust his face aggressively close to hers. "Against everything I've ever wished for you, Emma Terese Robescheaux, you went out and thugged a car."

And not just a regular, easily turned around Camaro or Jeep, oh no." He swore with creative fluency in Cajun French. "No, you gotta heist yourself a Silver Cloud, Rolls-fuckin'-Royce!"

"Well y'all always raved on about it so," she yelled back at him, but she was savagely interrupted when he grabbed her shoulders and shook her hard once. And then again. Soon her head was flopping

"Hell, yeah, I raved on," he agreed between tightly clenched teeth. "It's probably one of the best-made automobiles in the world, But just how the hell did you think we'd get rid of it? Mon Dieu!" he growled impatiently. "That's not even the point. I've told you and I've told you, Emma: you're bettah than a common car thief. By God, I oughtta turn you over my knee and blistah your butt!" Instead he jerked her into his arms and held her so tightly she could barely breath. "Jesus, Em."

The pounding of his heart beneath her ear gave Emma the courage to admit, "I was scared, Eddy. I was so scared." His arms tightened even more. "I'm sorry he yelled at you," she whispered. "That

wasn't fair."

Mr. Woodard had been so low-key with her that it had caught her by surprise to hear him light into Eddy the moment her brother had arrived. He'd dressed him down for a solid forty-five minutes before he'd finally let both of them go.

To her surprise, however, Eddy pulled back and looked down into her face. "No," he disagreed. "I deserved everything he said. And we got off light, sugah. That man could have made a whole lotta trouble for the two of us."

Watching her fourteen-year-old self now on the VCR, seeing the vulnerability and the fear so obvious behind the bravado and knowing that her entire life had been violated by hidden cameras, Emma had to wonder just how much trouble Grant actually had made for them.

It made her go cold, because even now, knowing what she did, suspecting other things, she still couldn't begin to estimate the damage he might have wrought. She thought she knew the worst.

But, ah, bon Dieu, what if she didn't?

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