

Deputy James hovered over the crime scene.

"Did you call for backup?" asked the sheriff, jumping out of his car. They had ended up on a lonely stretch of road, about halfway between the town and Blaze's house. Some bramble bushes lay off to the side of the road.

"The victim is female and blonde. She's lying on her stomach, no clothes on, a rosary wrapped around her left wrist. There's a note this time."

Blaze preceded the sheriff against his friend's wishes. He had seen enough dead bodies in his lifetime to not be sickened by one more. But whatever he had witnessed before wasn't enough to prepare him for what he saw now.

A strand of blonde hair fell down her back, swirling around the words that were carved into the once-soft skin.

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WHEN
ANGELS
SING

Shelby Patrick

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ISBN 1453864091

Printed in the United States of America

Cover photography provided by Emily Ramm.
Edited by Richard Buchko.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & AUTHOR NOTES

Thanks to my niece, Emily Ramm, for posing as my angel model and for taking time out of her busy school schedule to help me do the photo shoot for the front cover.

Also, thanks go to my other niece, Angela Podgorski, who not only provided the artwork for my other books, but volunteered to be photographed for the front cover, along with her boyfriend, Jacob Zissler (who portrays the hooded stalker).

A special thanks to my editor, Richard Buchko, who always seems to have time to help me out despite juggling a rough job, family, and other responsibilities.

* * *

This story, while fictional, is based on a true story. Like so many other unwary people, I was addicted to the Internet and online gaming. It was in one of these game chat rooms that I met a sweet, charming man. I travelled across country, from Detroit to Montana, to visit him – the same as my main female character, Jenna, will do in this story. I found out the hard way he was not the man I had chatted with and the sweetheart I adored. It's very similar to what Jenna goes through when she first meets the man she thought she had been talking to. I had a rough time in Montana and I portray some of the harsh realities of an outsider

arriving in a small town full of suspicious folks. Fortunately for me, I was not stalked nor hunted by a serial killer, but there are horror stories of Internet relationships taking a turn for the worse. In *When Angels Sing*, I've taken these measures to the extreme and instead of just an Internet buddy being the jerk from Hell, it becomes a fight for survival.

I realize there is a real town of Stevensville in Montana. I've added some of its landmarks and fictionalized the rest.

I hope you enjoy this book and will look forward to my upcoming novels.

Sincerely,

Shelby Patrick

PROLOGUE

Blaze Kerrigan, he always hated that name. It was a stupid name, but one he carried well. Oh, it wasn't a birth name, of course. No, the birth name had been Darren or Donald or something like that. He couldn't remember anymore. It was a name for a weakling, though, and weaklings deserved nothing more than a life of pain. He was good at that, causing pain now. It hadn't always been that way. At one point, he had been a good man, a trusting man, a loving man. Then she came into his life. The perfect angel, Melanie. She had been a beautiful girl, a flaxen-haired goddess. He used to imagine seeing a halo surrounding her head. God had kissed her when she was born and she had been very special to him.

Her voice had called to him many times. He had listened within the shadows as her songs took flight, filling him with a passionate longing to be with her. Sometimes her voice could turn him on more than he liked, but he had held his control, until a young man came along and sapped her energy. She hadn't wanted to sing anymore. He had missed her singing, his sweet Melanie. So he went to her one night. They had argued. He hadn't meant to do it, but before he could stop himself, he had stabbed her over and over. He hadn't

felt the horror he thought he might, instead he felt a wave of pleasure come over him. He had enjoyed drawing her blood.

Just thinking about it now stirred something inside of him and he remembered how he had plunged the knife into her soft abdomen. With every plunge, he felt euphoric and knew he had found his calling. All he had to do now was get that damn name out of his mind: Blaze Kerrigan. It was all he could see, Blaze, Blaze, Blaze! The day he had killed Melanie was the day Darren or Donald had ceased to exist and Blaze had been born.

Time to end it, Blaze old boy.

But first things first. Ever since Melanie, the man had needed more. He couldn't help himself. Those pretty young women all needed to be heard. He would listen and love them and when the time was right, he would kill them, but he wouldn't do it alone. Just as he created Blaze Kerrigan, Blaze Kerrigan had created him. He was killing now for the both of them and neither would get any rest for a long time. It was time to start the game.

He turned his attention to the young woman before him screaming into the phone glued to her ear. He liked that. Her sweet, melodic voice sang to him.

He ducked into a doorway when she turned her head. Her face held the rugged look of a woman who loved the outdoors. A few wrinkles cut across her brow, a long scratch that split her left cheek in half, and a square jaw made her look slightly masculine, but her voice drew him in. It wasn't as soft or as sweet as his dear Melanie, but he loved it just the same. It was time to move on, on to the next perfect little angel, this

waitress that had waited on and flirted with his Blaze creation.

The girl worked out at a karate studio in downtown Manhattan. He had seen her there just moments ago, her long legs flying at imaginary assailants, her nimble hands moving fast against the heavy bags. Very fit and dangerous, that would be something new to him. It was too bad for her, he thought, that the karate school didn't teach her one thing – how to avoid distraction.

He jumped on her trail right after class; she hadn't even noticed. A moment after leaving the school, her cell phone attached itself to her ear, and her mind became preoccupied with yelling at whoever was stuck on the other end. Not very wise on her part, he thought. It would be easy to sneak up behind her and blitz her. He didn't like easy, so he waited, and watched as she let herself into an apartment complex. Apartments meant other people around. Other people meant nosy neighbors. He didn't like that complication.

A light turned on. *Third floor. Her apartment is on the third floor.* He glanced up at the sky; it would be dark soon. If he waited a bit longer, stealing into her apartment would be a breeze. He hoped she would be in the shower, or perhaps sleeping by then. The thought of subduing her made his limbs go weak. The game got better with every angel he hunted. He licked his lips and waited for the cover of darkness so he could fade into the shadows.

Those shadows were his friends, his only friends now. They never lied to him or tried to hurt him. He loved the cover they provided. Once inside them, he could become anyone or anything. No one ever beat the

shadows. They were his dark side and they now beckoned to him.

He smiled, reaching inside his jacket to take out the small camouflaged knife he carried. He headed for the apartment building door.

CHAPTER ONE

This was the worst trip of her life, over 27 hours in a car, and Jenna hadn't even reached her final destination yet. Why did she agree to come out to this God-forsaken land in the first place? She wasn't a country girl, and Montana was a far stretch from her Motown city life -- but Blaze had sounded so sincere when he asked her to come visit. She looked at his photo stuck inside her visor and felt a twitch in her belly. He had wavy, sandy-brown hair, greenish-blue eyes, and the beginnings of a mustache growing. His hair reached down to just below his ears, where it curled up at the nape of his neck. His face was tanned, enhancing his strong cheeks and chin. He looked confident and sexy.

Jenna's stomach trembled at the thought. Three months ago she met him online, in her latest gaming chat room. When she registered for the game, she never imagined picking up a friend there, certainly not one who had such a lasting effect on her. She remembered laughing when he told her his name was Blaze. Nobody would have a name like that, but he told her he picked it up when he was a kid and he used to race hot rods through the streets. It was a silly nickname, but one he got used to as his friends continued to use it.

When she had asked about his real name, he had gotten close-mouthed and told her not to worry about it. No one ever referred to him by that name anymore.

It hadn't taken long before their conversations turned personal. Blaze would recite a poem every now and then, saying she gave him inspiration. He'd tell her of his plans for the future, when he would be able to buy a nice place in the country, near a lake somewhere, and be able to sit outside and enjoy nature, a peaceful life. He told her how much he hated Stevensville and living with sloppy roommates. Although a small, close-knit community, they didn't take to outsiders well, but he needed something from the *real world*, as he called everything outside his town. Shortly after that confession, he asked her to come visit him. And now here she was, in the middle of a cowboy town that looked like something out of an old western movie. So far the townsfolk were horrid! She could easily see why Blaze wanted to leave.

A wide-eyed sheriff and his squinty-eyed deputy stared at her when she marched into their office. At first, the sheriff seemed nice enough, but when she had asked for Blaze, he had practically interrogated her about the nature of her visit. She told him she was there to see Blaze and it was none of his business why. He had glanced over at his deputy, who broke into a wide grin, eyeing her up and down and mouthing off about Blaze finding a right good catch this time.

Ooh, she would have liked to punch that deputy, she thought, treating her like some mail-order bride or something worse. She shuddered at the insinuation and then shook her head, trying to clear those distasteful thoughts. She tried to concentrate on what would happen in just a few minutes when she arrived at

Blaze's house, hoping he would welcome her with open arms. They would probably spend all night talking, like they did online. She couldn't wait to see his face.

After a fifteen minute drive along a dirt road, a small house came into view, filling her stomach with dread. From Blaze's messages, she had assumed he lived in a nice house in town, not way out in the middle of nowhere. This wasn't anything like she expected – a small cabin on the outskirts of town, no neighbors close by, open space all around. The land behind his house seemed to stretch on forever. A few bramble bushes lay scattered across the desolate space. It was open desert terrain, a place where one could easily get lost in. She was afraid she might step out of her car and startle a snake or perhaps step on a scorpion.

The sun was no consolation. It beat down incessantly, turning her car into an oven. Not even her air conditioner seemed to work in this dry heat. A person could die out here, she thought.

Jenna shivered, wondering if she had been the one to make a mistake. Perhaps she should have never agreed to come here. But she remembered how funny and sweet he had been online, so she was sure he would make the trip worthwhile.

She stopped the car a short distance from the cabin. Her stomach did a flip-flop when she reached for the car door. She sighed, taking a last look in the rearview mirror. A few loose strands of blonde hair spilled out of her almost perfect braid. Her make-up looked flawless, but failed to cover up the tired lines around her eyes. She pushed her glasses up.

"You look a sore sight, Jen," she mumbled, wishing she had stopped at the hotel first to freshen up.

Her long jean skirt was wrinkled and her feet were sweating even with her open-toed sandals on.

She closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath, willing her nerves to settle down, and then she got out of the car and walked, slowly but deliberately, to the front door. Heat from the afternoon sun washed over her. She unbuttoned the top button of her blouse, knocked, and waited.

When no one answered the door, she knocked again, louder this time. A muffled bark could be heard on the other side of the door. She didn't remember him mentioning anything about a dog.

She heard movement on the other side of the door, and a man's gruff voice telling the dog to shut up. She took a step backward when the door swung open.

Jenna's mouth fell open when she saw the bare-chested, bare-footed man standing before her. A five o'clock shadow grew on his finely chiseled chin. His midnight blue eyes pierced right through her. His raven hair looked all ruffled, like he had just gotten up from a deep sleep. At first, his eyes widened and he mumbled, "Holy shit, Mel?"

"No, I'm sorry. I..."

He shook his head and took a breath before saying, "No, of course not." A sadness crept over his face for a brief moment and then he smiled. "The boys send you over to keep me company, Sugar?"

She took a step backward.

"You're not normally my type, but I'm sure I could make an exception." He ran a hand through his hair, running it down the back of his neck, smoothing out the silky layers.

Jenna's pulse quickened and her chest constricted. She wasn't sure if it was from the heat or

her rising anger. "I'm looking for Blaze Kerrigan," she managed to get out in a normal tone.

He leaned against the doorjamb, eyeing her up and down. "Oh really? And what business might you have with him?"

"I'm a friend of his. He does live here, right?"

He scratched his stubbled chin. "A friend, huh? Then how come you aren't sure if he lives here?"

She lowered her eyes, focusing on his lower belly, and said in a soft voice, "This is his address."

"You one of his adoring fans?"

She ignored him and asked, "Will he be back soon?"

"Maybe. You're more than welcome to wait." He leaned down and caught her attention. "See something you like down there?"

"Excuse me?" Her head snapped up.

He stood up to his full height, which towered over her by a good few inches. "You just spent the last few minutes looking at my crotch, lady. You got an itch you want me to scratch?"

Her eyes opened wide and she was sure he could see color coming to her cheeks now. "I, uh, was not staring at your crotch."

"Sure, whatever you say."

His tone made her blood pressure rise even more. In this heat, she thought for sure she might die of a heart attack at that moment. Taking a breath, she said, "I say you're a lecherous pig. What is it with the men in this town?"

"Not enough women to go around." He stepped aside for her. "Comin' in, darlin'?"

She shook her head. "Absolutely not! I'll wait for Blaze back at the hotel in town. I sure hope when he

hears how you treated me, he'll have something to say to you. Is it too much to ask you to tell him to meet me in town?"

He shook his head. "No." He drawled the word out like it was new to his vocabulary. "I'll never understand you women. You would much rather go to a hotel than have a nice comfy bed right here?"

"I am not here for sex!" Her fists clenched at her side. She wondered what he would do if she hit him, but then thought better about it. They were miles from the town and anything could happen out here.

"Then why are you here?" he asked, chucking her on the chin. "Apparently, you don't know Blaze as well as I do. He doesn't have non-intimate lady friends. You say no now, but sooner or later, you'll just want to jump his bones, trust me. Why do you think they call him Blaze? Women fawn over him. You'll see." He pushed himself away from the doorjamb. "So who shall I say is waiting for him?"

She still wanted to smack the smile right off the idiot's face. She wanted to hurt him. She wanted to put her boot print on his smug face, but all she could say was, "Jenna Michaels."

"Might be a long wait, Jenny. There's no telling when a wild man like Blaze will return. He's probably out rolling in the hay now with a couple of skirts. Still want him to come?"

She nodded, knowing this jerk couldn't be telling the truth.

"Okay, then, it's been a pleasure, Jenny. If you get tired of Blaze, my bed is feeling mighty cold these days. Sure could use a delectable morsel such as yourself to warm it up."

"My name's Jenna, asshole."

She turned on her heels and raced back to the car, the man's laughter trailing after her. She sped away faster than she would have liked.

Horrible, horrible man. This little adventure was getting worse by the minute. She hoped - no, she knew that Blaze had a better attitude than the rest of the men in this place. She knew Blaze. She had known him for months. Or did she really know him?

* * *

By the time she checked into the hotel and got her room, she was fuming. She threw her suitcase across the room, hearing it land with a crash. Looking over at the fallen item, she saw the nightstand lying on its side, a vase shattered on the floor.

She felt like crying, but knew if she started, she might not stop anytime soon and Blaze couldn't arrive with her eyes all puffed up and bloated.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts.

She smoothed out her blouse and took a deep breath before going to open up the door, expecting to see a nice looking young man there. Instead, an older, obese gentleman carrying a gnarled cane filled her vision.

"Sorry for bothering you, miss, but I'm in the room next door. I heard a noise and wanted to see if everything was okay."

She unclenched the fist she hadn't known had tightened up and she sighed, feeling somewhat relieved that this old man wasn't the charming gentleman of her online adventures. "Oh, sorry about that, mister. I'm just a bit clumsy sometimes. It won't happen again."

"Glad to hear it." He walked away, mumbling something about thinking this was a nice quiet town to visit.

She closed the door and went over to sink down onto the soft bed.

This town was going to make her crazy. Blaze better be worth it, she thought.

She shuddered, remembering the way the man at Blaze's house had eyed her up and down. It wasn't like he could see much with her oversized blouse and long skirt, but she could only imagine what he saw in his mind. She felt dirty somehow. Blaze had mentioned roommates, but never once hinted at how rude they could be. She wondered who the other roommate might be and figured he was probably just as bad since Blaze had suggested living alone in his near future. How he got mixed up with people like that was beyond her.

She dreamed of hitting it off with Blaze. It had been a long time since she had had a real relationship and her and Blaze already had a nice foundation. She wasn't so naïve, though, to think that their online conversations had been completely on the up and up. Blaze could have exaggerated a few things. She had, such as her job. Instead of telling him she worked as a security guard, which she was lousy at and hated every minute of, she had embellished a tale of working downtown at the GM Headquarters, which she had done in her earlier days. This wasn't exactly the proper way to start a relationship, but she had told him this information long before she ever got to know him, and she had never dreamed of coming here to meet him face to face. By that time, it was too late and she was afraid to tell him of her little lie.

Blaze, on the other hand, had never told her what he did. She never pushed the issue, figuring there would be plenty of time later to find out if anything

developed between them. At least they would have something more to talk about now.

Her stomach growled. She glanced over at the clock on the table; it was after 7:00. She realized she hadn't eaten since lunch time, and that it was after 9:00 back home - little late for dinner, and besides, she was sure Blaze would come anytime. She would hate to go out and miss him.

He knew she would be arriving today. His roommate's revelation that Blaze was off with another girl rolled around in her head.

Don't be silly, girl. Blaze wouldn't be off gallivanting around when he should be expecting you.

After a couple hours and no one showed up at her door, she stretched out on the bed. She hadn't meant to fall asleep, but it felt good to be out of that car, and lying comfortable on a soft mattress. When she opened her eyes, the sun was peeking through her window. She jumped up, cursing herself.

Seeing the broken vase on the floor, she remembered the night before. It hadn't been an easy one, but she couldn't take it out on the hotel, so she cleaned up the mess, then threw on a pair of tight jeans and a baby blue oversized t-shirt and went downstairs to the desk clerk. No one had come to ask for her the previous night. *Strange. Why didn't he come? Maybe that low-life hoodlum living with him never gave him the message?* If so, she had a thing or two to say to that man.

As she headed out the door, her stomach growled. Better to face him on a full stomach, she thought, turning to head over to the nearby café.

The place was small and seemed peaceful. She hoped she could get off to a better start today, at least

have a good breakfast before getting back into the car and driving out to that tiny cottage in the wilds.

Two other tables were occupied at this early morning hour. An elderly couple were chatting between sips of coffee and a lone young man was poring over a college text book. He cursed when he dropped a piece of his apple pie onto a page.

A smiling waitress named Tammy showed her to a table in the corner. The menu looked great. She hadn't eaten in almost a day, and her mouth actually watered while she looked at the pictures. Her stomach grumbled again.

When a shadow fell across her, she thought the waitress had returned, but she looked up into the face of a young man.

"Hi, you must be new in town." He extended his hand. "You look like someone I once knew a few years ago, but I suppose you're not. You couldn't possibly be her. Are you staying for awhile? We don't get such pretty ladies visiting, and you sure are pretty. Name's Dyl, Dyl Kerrigan. Dyl is short for Dylan, but everyone just calls me Dyl or D. You can too, if you want."

He said all of that in one breath, like if he stopped for a moment he would forget what to say.

She stared at the man before her. *Kerrigan? Had she just heard right?* She suddenly felt like a little schoolgirl when her insides twisted up. She pushed her glasses up and took a calming breath, and then said, "Hi, are you any relation to Blaze?"

His face fell at the mention of the name and he dropped down into a seat across from her.

"He's my older brother. What did he do this time?"

“Do? What didn’t he do? I came all the way out here to see him and he pulls a disappearing act.” She pried her hand free from the menu she had started to strangle.

“Oh, yeah, he’s famous for that. Blaze likes his alone time. Did he know you were coming?”

“Yes. He’s the one who invited me here.”

“Yep, sounds just like him. He’s very forgetful sometimes. He’s probably out exploring again. You know, our land was home to some pirates a long time ago. Legend has it they buried their stash in some secret places. Blaze has found some cool hiding places near our home, but nothing of any real value yet. He loves an adventure.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, although you wouldn’t know by looking at him, he’s a real romantic at heart. Did you know his birthday is tomorrow?”

She shook her head.

“We’re giving him a party here tonight. The whole town is invited, and since he did ask you to come here, I suppose it wouldn’t be right if I didn’t invite you as well. What do you say?”

She smiled at him. “That would be great, but you wouldn’t happen to know where he is now, would you? I’d really like to meet with him privately.”

He shrugged. “Don’t really know. You could try the house. He might be out exploring though, or at the lake.”

“What lake?”

“A few miles from the house. He likes to go there to be alone. That’s where he writes his poetry crap. Anyways, I have to help Marissa prepare for the birthday bash so I’ll catch you later.”

He left before she could even introduce herself. *Strange man. Brothers! Now why hadn't Blaze mentioned a brother? Was Dylan the other roommate?*

She thought about it as she ordered her food and then ate the delicious waffle. So he hadn't told her a few things. It's not like she had told him everything either, but she planned to remedy that.

The more she thought about it, the more her head hurt. She couldn't wait to find him now, to see what other mysteries he held.

Her stomach churned at the thought and despite lingering hunger, she pushed her half-eaten food away. She should get this over with.

She paid the bill and went out to her car, then tore out of there, headed out to the Kerrigan place again.

* * *

She groaned when she pulled up outside the cottage and saw the bare-chested neanderthal working out. Tai-chi. She recognized the slow, fluid movements and wondered how a big man like that could look so graceful doing it. Then she wondered why she was sitting there watching him. He looked too engrossed to notice her, so now was her chance to sneak on by to the front door.

As she got out of the car, a whirlwind of black fur came hurtling her way, barking and causing a loud ruckus. She braced herself against the car door, afraid if she moved, the dog might charge her.

She heard a soft whistle. The barking stopped, but the dog held its ground, watching her.

"Rufe, that anyway to treat a guest?" The neanderthal was there, patting the dog's head, standing just a breath away from her. He turned his penetrating

stare on her. “Don’t mind old Rufus here. He’s a Belgian Sheepdog – fierce and loyal to their masters, but in all truthfulness, his bark is a lot worse than his bite, which is more than I can say for me. You get tired of good old Blaze already?”

“Yeah, I’m getting tired of getting the run-around. Blaze invited me here and I have yet to see him, so where is he? He in the house?”

His eyebrows raised at her tone. “He invited you here? That’s news to me.”

“He tell you everything?” She snorted. “He’s making things hard for me right now.”

“Hard, huh? I can show you hard, hon.” He winked at her. “So, I take it he never showed up at the hotel? Strange. He got the message loud and clear.” He looked her over. “Maybe he got a good look at you and ran for the hills. Don’t think you’re his type, Doll, but there are plenty of other guys here who would love to take you for a ride.”

She felt her cheeks growing hot. “Is that all you think about?”

He barked a short laugh. “Hell, yeah, me and every other guy in the world. Don’t like it, go join a convent.” He moved closer. “Maybe you already have, or do you just not like sex?”

“I, uh, that’s none of your concern.” She moved away from him. “I came to see Blaze, not you, so where is he? Dylan said he would be here.”

“You met Dylan?” His eyes narrowed. “You stay away from him, you hear?”

“What’s it to you?”

He didn’t like this stranger arriving and pushing her way into his world. He didn’t know why, but she smelled of trouble. It was bad enough she was out here

bothering him, but now she had been using her wiles on Dylan. He was just a kid, a stupid one at that and he didn't like it one bit. It was time to get rid of her. "I'm warning you, lady. Don't push me."

"Is that a threat?"

He grinned, leaning closer to her. "You bet it is. Now, if you don't mind, please leave. You're no longer welcome here, Ms. Michaels. Go back home to mama. If you stay, I can guarantee you won't like what might happen to you."

Without waiting for a reply, he turned and walked away, his dog trailing after him.

* * *

Men! Why she traveled halfway across the country to meet one was beyond her understanding anymore, and he has the gall to pull a disappearing act on her! Then his bullish roommate. She didn't think she could take anymore of his come-ons. A fine start to her vacation, she thought as she marched back into the café, looking for a certain young man. It didn't take long to spot him; he was the one next to the counter flirting with the redhead cutting a piece of pie.

"Excuse me, Dyl?"

He turned her way, frowning, but when he caught sight of her, his eyes lit up. "Hey, Legs, back so soon? Did you see Blaze?"

The nickname surprised her. Instead of answering his question about Blaze, she asked, "Legs?"

He smiled sheepishly and looked down at the floor. "Yeah, well, you sure do have some long legs there. It's kind of hard not to notice." He glanced at her tight jeans. "Nicknames are kind of my thing, sorry. Ris here is commonly referred to as Red." He motioned to the redhead behind the counter. Before she could say

anything more about his name for her, he asked, “So what about Blaze?”

“I don’t know. I have yet to see the man. I just don’t understand how he could forget I was coming.”

She dropped down onto the stool and put her hands on the counter.

“Sorry. My brother can be a real jerk at times, but I know where he’ll be tonight, at least he better show up for his party or I’ll have to hurt him. Want to help us get ready?”

She wasn’t sure if that would be a good idea. Dylan seemed likable and not at all like Blaze’s roommate or the deputy, but what did she know? She thought Blaze would be waiting for her with open arms and that didn’t happen.

Dylan was staring at her, waiting for an answer. It was hard to say no when he looked at her with those brown puppy-dog eyes, so she agreed to help. A while later she thought she might regret it when he put her to work. By the time she finished hours later, her clothes were drenched.

“Hey, Legs, you did a great job. Better go get ready though. You don’t want to miss the birthday boy’s grand entrance.” He scratched his chin, looking her over. “Got anything a little sexier to wear?”

“What?”

“It is his birthday, you know.”

She bristled at the thought. “I don’t intend to be offered as a birthday present! You want to put a cute little bow on my head too?”

He looked shocked. “No, no, it ain’t like that. Just thought you might like to catch his attention.”

“By dressing like a slut?”

“I asked for you to look a bit more feminine, not to dress like a hooker or anything. Geez, Legs.”

The puppy dog eyes looked hurt now. She almost felt bad snapping at him. “I’m sorry. I’m just tired and hot.”

He shrugged her off. “Well, better go shake it off then. I’m heading home to shower, change, and grab the birthday boy. We’ll be back real soon.”

So she did just that, but when she turned to throw on her clothes, Dylan’s words came back to her. *Got anything a bit sexier to wear?* She supposed it couldn’t hurt to wear something a little more revealing. Her figure wasn’t really that bad to look at, plus it was very hot around here.

She rummaged around in her suitcase, finding a skirt and blouse. The navy skirt came to just above her knees and the low-cut peasant blouse hung off her shoulders. Due to the heat, she decided against her typical pair of nylons and threw on her navy pumps over bare feet. Then she turned to face the mirror.

Her face seemed a bit pale, so she added a touch of pink and *voilà!* Then she drew her hair back with a barrette. Her natural waves threatened to curl back down and plaster themselves to her cheek, but they would hold for awhile. She removed her glasses, wiped them clean, then replaced them on her nose. It was time to go meet the birthday boy now.

Her stomach jumped at the thought. She’d been so busy getting ready, she hadn’t thought much about what she was getting ready for! She took a couple of deep breaths, then walked down to the café. Several people were gathered already, but she saw no sign of Dylan yet.

She took the table in the corner, sitting with her back to the wall so she could watch the people come in. Her stomach twisted every time the door opened, and she thought she might be sick before he even got there.

Please, let's get this over with.

She held her breath when she saw Dylan come in, but he was alone. What happened to the birthday boy? Maybe he was having trouble finding him too. *Just great.*

Dylan spotted her and walked over, dropping into the seat across from her as he had done earlier in the day. "Hey, Legs, you look great." His eyes roamed over her, dipping quite frequently to the bare part of her chest that the blouse didn't cover.

For some strange reason, she didn't mind the little nickname he gave her, so she let it pass. "Did you forget someone?" she asked, glancing past him to the door.

"Nah, he's coming. He needed to have a word with the sheriff. He'll be here in a minute. Can't wait until he sees you."

She raised an eyebrow at that. "Oh, and why is that?"

He dropped his eyes to the table. "I don't know, no reason, I guess."

She smiled, having an idea what he was thinking about. "Dyl, there's nothing going on between your brother and me. I'm here as a friend, nothing more." She looked around. Most of the men looked rugged, and the women seemed graceful standing next to them. "Besides, I'm nothing special to look at compared to these ladies here."

He looked up at her. "When's the last time you actually looked in the mirror? You're pretty cute, for a

city gal, and you're different, Legs. You're like a breath of fresh air." He lowered his voice. "You bring news of the outside world. You look like the outside world, not at all like the ladies here that think they can boss around any man they like." He nodded his head at the redhead he had been with earlier. "He will notice you, even sitting way over here in the corner." His lip turned up in a half-smile. "You trying to hide?"

"No, I . . ."

Just then, a loud cheer went through the crowd and two men stepped in to the café. One was the sheriff, the other was the horrible Tai-Chi master from Blaze's house.

"Well, now, there's the birthday boy himself," said Dylan, turning around in his chair to watch the crowd. "Why don't you go say hi to him, Legs?" He winked back at her, a huge grin on his face at the look of shock on hers.