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A JAKE LONGLY THRILLER

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To my late father, Victor Wilson Lyle, who taught me everything. But most importantly—work first, play second, always. And he truly loved New Orleans. A day doesn't go by that you are not greatly missed.

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A-LIST

CHAPTER ONE

I LIKE A lot of things. My 1965 Mustang. Burgundy with black Pony interior. Captain Rocky's Surf and Turf, my bar/restaurant that squats on the sand in Gulf Shores. Living on the Gulf Coast, where I've been most of my life. That's pretty cool, too. And then there are memories of a few epic games during my career as a major-league pitcher for the Texas Rangers. That was me. Jake Longly. Baseball stud. Ninety-plus mile-an-hour fastballs with just enough tail to make batters whiff, corkscrewing themselves into the ground. But that was another life, long gone, blown away on a cold Cleveland night by a ripped rotator cuff. Few pitchers recover from that. I surely didn't.

But right there at the top of my "like" list would be watching a gorgeous, nearly naked woman roll around on the floor. Well, not exactly rolling around. More like twisting, flexing, and stretching in a Pilates or yoga or some such fashion. I never could keep all those straight. But whatever you call it, it surely looks better than six-count burpees.

The woman in question was Nicole Jamison. My latest girlfriend. I guess that's what she was. Though we'd only known each other a few weeks, it seemed longer. Like we'd always been together. Sort of scary. Definitely not my norm, which was more or less hit and run. Yeah, I know, piggish, but at least I'm honest about it.

Anyone could see why I hung around with her. I mean, stunning didn't quite cover it. That blond hair, that perfect smile, and those eyes. Oh yeah. Bluer than blue. Deep, lively, and intelligent. And, of course, that body. Oh my.

Why she tolerated me was a whole different story. I could be a little difficult. According to her, anyway. My ex-wife, Tammy, would agree wholeheartedly, while adding a string of well-chosen expletives. Not undeserved, of course, but our experiment in marital harmony collapsed years ago. You'd think she would've mellowed by now, but Tammy doesn't do mellow.

I should probably be down there on the carpet with Nicole going through the same routine, but no way I could contort my body into some of the positions she adopted. Not now. Not even back when I was a young stud baseball player.

Clad in a form-fit peach sports bra and black shorts that must have been electroplated on her firm hips, she made it all seem so easy. Easy on the eye anyway. My, my.

Instead of risking a permanent back injury and a visit to an orthopedic surgeon, I lounged on her sofa, sipping coffee and pretending to read the newspaper, but in fact watching her every move.

"Stop oogling me," Nicole said.

"Oogling?"

"Okay, drooling." She rolled up onto her shoulder blades and bicycled her legs at a pace that would make those Tour de France dudes jealous. A patina of perspiration frosted her perfect face.

“I would never do that.”

She smiled. “That’s not what you said last night.”

She had a point. Last night had spilled well into the new day. Two a.m. or so, if I remembered correctly. Of course, my memory of last night was suspect at best. We had started with rum at Captain Rocky’s, moved on to tequila at her place, in the hot tub, and then smoked a blunt in bed. Followed by all that sex, which, with Nicole, was an athletic event. More or less turned my brain into oatmeal. She could do that. Add all that up and it explains why I was having trouble getting my motor started this early.

I folded the paper, laid it on the coffee table, and massaged one shoulder.

“Still stiff?” she asked.

“A little.”

We were only a week removed from a thirty-foot, middle-of-the-night jump from the stern of the *Sea Witch*, the 100-foot mega yacht owned by the late Victor Borkov. Right into the cold, dark, storm-churned waters of the Gulf. We didn’t make the leap by choice, mind you. But it was either that or be tossed in while chained to a massive iron ring that would have planted us in the silt that collected several hundred feet below any fresh air. Apparently Borkov’s preferred method for flushing those who opposed, or even simply displeased, him. Like the Wilbanks brothers. Our ride to the Gulf floor would have been courtesy of Borkov’s hit men, Joe Zuma and Frank Boyd. They, too, could be filed in the “late” category, the trio now the property of the Escambia County Coroner’s Office over on 9th Avenue in Pensacola.

Hitting angry water from thirty feet is not a pleasant event. I wrenched a shoulder and tweaked my back; Nicole torqued her hip and sprained her neck. We hadn’t known it at the time, adrenaline

forcing our brains to focus on other things like survival, the pain not appearing until the next day. But all in all, we survived, so there was that.

“That’s why you should be down here stretching with me,” she said. “Work out those kinks.”

“With you in that outfit, that might lead to something else altogether.”

She rocked into a sitting position and mopped her face with a towel. “Time for a shower.” She stood. “Join me and we’ll see if something else altogether happens.”

Even at seven thirty in the morning, that sounded like a plan. My brain might be oatmeal, but the rest of me was good to go.

Never happened though. Her cell chimed. She picked it up from the kitchen counter and answered.

“Uncle Charles?” She frowned. “I can barely hear you. Hold on a sec.” She crossed the living room and pushed through the French doors, stepping out on the deck.

Uncle Charles would be her uncle Charles Balfour. Big-time movie producer, director, and everything else A-list. A full-house backfield of Oscars and an army of other awards.

“That’s better,” she said as she kicked the door closed.

I walked to the kitchen, refilled my coffee cup, leaned against the counter, and watched her pace, phone to one ear, a finger in the other.

This house belonged to Uncle Charles. A massive stilted construction on the sand in The Point, a high-dollar enclave in Perdido Beach on Alabama’s Gulf Coast. I knew he was in some remote location in Europe, shooting a big-budget film. I figured that explained why she couldn’t hear him well.

For the next ten minutes, I watched her pace, her expression and body language bouncing between concern and shock. Had something happened to him?

When she stepped back inside, she simply said, “Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“To see Ray.”

Ray would be Ray Longly. My father. Longly Investigations. The PI firm Ray ran from his home down in Gulf Shores. Not far from Captain Rocky’s and my own house.

“Why?”

“I have a job for us,” Nicole said.

“A job? For us?”

“Well, technically for Ray. But, yeah, us.”

“We don’t work for Ray,” I said.

“Sure we do. I still have my ID card Pancake made for me. That makes me official.”

Good grief.

“Okay, Mata Hari, what is this job?” I asked.

“Kirk Ford.”

“The actor?”

“That would be the mega-buck, A-list, franchise actor to you.”

“What did old Kirk do?”

“Got himself arrested for murder. It seems some local girl was found strangled in his bed this morning.”

“I really hate it when that happens.”

“Don’t be a smart-ass—and get a move on.”

CHAPTER TWO

THE SHOWER WASN'T nearly as much fun as it could have been. I was hoping for "something else altogether" but instead Nicole was all business. Slapped my hands away more than once. At least she let me wash her back.

So, we dressed, climbed in her new Mercedes SL, and were on the way. For Nicole, on the way meant warp speed out of the neighborhood and onto the highway, much to the consternation of other drivers. Blowing horns and extended fingers fell in our wake.

Her old SL, the one Victor Borkov's thugs Zuma and Boyd trashed with the massive bumper of their even more massive SUV, had been red; this one, the replacement coughed up by her insurance company, was white with a sedate light gray interior. I hoped the less aggressive coloring might slow her down. That was a dream doomed to failure. Nicole only had one speed.

Regardless, we survived the trip.

Ray ran his business from his home, a stilted, two-story affair on the sand in Gulf Shores. As we pulled in, I saw Ray's black dually pickup nestled among the support pylons. Nicole parked. We climbed the outside stairs to the first floor. As usual, Ray sat at his teak, umbrella-shaded deck table, laptop, phone, and a Mountain Dew in easy reach.

“What brings you guys by so early?” he asked.

“I have a case for us,” Nicole said.

“Us?” Ray asked.

“You know—you, me, Jake.”

“Oh, that us.” Ray looked at me and then back to Nicole. “So, you guys still work for Longly Investigations?”

Nicole: “Yes.”

Me: “No.”

Nicole ignored me. “Yes, we do. I even have my ID card.” She pulled it from the back pocket of her jeans and held it up.

“Hard to argue with that,” Ray said.

No, it wasn’t, I thought. And was going to say exactly that, but Ray moved on.

He leaned back in his chair and looked toward me. “You on board with that?”

“Yes, he is,” Nicole said.

I guessed I didn’t have a speaking role in this family scene.

“He’ll go wherever I go,” Nicole added.

I would? Of course, I would.

Ray laughed. “I suspect that’s true.”

I tried to come up with a witty response but found none.

“So, what is it?” Ray asked. “Did you lose your purse?”

She glared at him and then me.

Me? I didn’t say anything. And since Ray and I rarely got along, it couldn’t be guilt by association. Could it?

Apparently so. Nicole shook her head. “Apple—tree. You two are both asses.”

Ray laughed. “Sorry. Couldn’t resist.” He took a slug of Dew. “So, tell me.”

Nicole sat in the chair opposite Ray. “Kirk Ford was arrested for murder this morning.”

“The actor?”

She nodded. “He’s in New Orleans shooting his latest *Space Quest* movie. My uncle, Charles Balfour, is one of the executive producers for the franchise. He called and asked me to look into it.” She shrugged her shoulder. “Actually asked me if I’d ask you to look into it.”

Ray stared at her a beat. “How does he know me?”

“I told him,” she said. “About that whole Borkov thing and how you saved us from the Gulf.”

“I thought that was me,” I said.

She smiled and patted my arm. “You, too.”

“Why isn’t he, your uncle, doing it himself?” Ray asked.

“He’s still in Europe. Just outside Paris. Shooting another movie.”

Ray spread his hands on the table. “What do you know so far?”

“It looks like Kirk hooked up with a local girl. This morning she turned up dead in his bed. Uncle Charles said the police believe she had been strangled.”

“Does he make a habit of that?”

Nicole stared at him. “What? Strangling women?”

“No,” Ray said. “Picking up local girls when he’s on location?”

“He’s an actor. It’s what they do.”

“So I see in the tabloids at the grocery store.” Ray drained and crushed the Dew can, dropping it in the nearby wastebasket. “But Kirk? Is this something he does often?”

Nicole nodded. “He’s a player, as they say. He leaves a lot of broken hearts in his wake.”

“I take it you know him?”

“For many years.”

“And?”

“He’s actually a nice guy. He screws around, no doubt there, but he’s not malicious about it. At least that’s how I see it.”

Ray asked, "Any other details?"

She shook her head. "That's all I know."

"I take it, it's your uncle who wants to hire us?"

Nicole nodded.

"Aren't the police on the case?"

"Uncle Charles doesn't trust them. At least not to do a quick and thorough investigation. Quick being the operative word." She brushed her hair back over one shoulder. "Location shooting can burn through millions very quickly. If Kirk is locked up, the production will have to be shut down until he's out."

"Your Uncle Charles? He's aware of our fees?"

"He is. He said he'd triple it. More if necessary."

"I like the sound of that." Ray raised an eyebrow. "But isn't he overreacting a bit?"

Nicole rested her elbows on the table. "Do you know who Kirk Ford is?"

"Yeah, he's an actor who makes some goofy space movies."

She shook her head. "Goofy? The *Space Quest* franchise has raked in nearly two billion dollars so far."

Ray whistled. "That's adult money."

"This is the sixth episode. Supposed to be the biggest and best yet. But if Kirk's taken out of the picture—no pun intended—the entire thing collapses."

Ray massaged his neck. "Okay, why don't you two head over to New Orleans. See what the story is. I'll round up Pancake, and we'll start digging around."

She stood. "We're on it."

On it? She even sounded like a PI.

Ray looked at me. "Want to fly or drive?"

Fly popped in my head, but before I could say it, Nicole piped up.

“Drive,” Nicole said. “We can get there faster.”

Oh, Lord. I saw speed and fear in my future. Maybe a cardiac arrest. Which brought up another point. Why did I continually subject myself to her driving? I looked at her. Tight jeans, halter top, wonderfully toned abs. Well, there was all that.

“I’ll call and get you a room somewhere,” Ray said.

“Already done. Uncle Charles called Marty Ebersole. He’s the director. We have a suite at the Monteleone. And Uncle Charles is leaving and headed there as soon as he can grab a flight.”

Ray picked up the phone. “You guys get rolling. I’ll track down Pancake.”

“You got it,” she said.

“And be careful,” Ray added. “I saw on the Weather Channel site that there’s a storm in New Orleans and it’s headed this way.”

Great. Wet roads, Nicole in hot-rod mode.

CHAPTER THREE

IT TOOK US the better part of two hours to get out of Gulf Shores.

First stop was Captain Rocky's. I checked in with Carla Martinez, my manager, to let her know I'd be away a few days and that she was in charge.

Her response: "I'm always in charge. You just own the joint."

And that was true. She did run the day-to-day business, but if need be, I could do it myself. But that would cut into my playtime. And playtime was important. Of course, Ray didn't see it that way. To him, playtime was wasted time. He even considered that my owning a bar was foolish. Felt I should throw in with him and work as a PI. Yeah, like that was going to happen.

But, while Carla was giving me the thumbnail of last week's receipts, expenses, and pending liquor and food inventory orders, and while I nodded as if I were truly listening, it dawned on me that once again Ray had pulled me into his orbit. Here I was, headed to New Orleans. To work for Ray. How the hell did that happen?

Then I glanced toward Nicole. Through the windows. She was on the deck, leaning on the rail, gazing out over the Gulf. That crystallized it. I mean, just look at her.

I had the kitchen whip up a pair of breakfast burritos and a thermos of coffee for us, and we headed to my place and then Nicole's to

pack a few things. Took me twenty minutes; Nicole ten. Never seen a woman pack so quickly and efficiently.

We spun out of The Point, and twenty minutes later were soaring west on I-10. Warp Factor 4. Nicole had the 429 horses under the hood in full stride. I held on and shut up.

For a while, anyway.

“What’s the story on Kirk Ford?” I asked, as we rolled through rural farmland. It had begun to sprinkle, and the horizon ahead looked dark and menacing. Great.

“Just what I said. He’s a big deal. Pulls in a ton of cash for the studio.”

“Thus, the franchise moniker.”

“You got it. His *Space Quest* series began with *Hidden World*. It was about some cloaked planet that waged war against a neighbor.”

“I hate it when that happens.”

“It grossed over three hundred million.”

“I guess there’s big money in conquering cloaked planets.”

“Kirk and crew swooped in and saved the day in that one. All the other episodes, too.” She blew past a convoy of five semis.

“Somehow, I missed seeing them,” I said.

“You’re not his demographic anyway. He’s big with the high school and college crowd. Very loyal fan base.”

“This could put a dent in that. Whether he’s guilty or not.”

“That, of course, is Uncle Charles’ concern. He has big money riding on this.”

“What is this one?” I asked. “Little green men attacking Commander’s Palace?”

She laughed. “No. It’s called *Swamp Wars*. That’s why they chose New Orleans. Lots of swamps to choose from.”

“So, exactly how well do you know him? Kirk Ford?”

“We went out a couple of times.”

“And?”

“And what?” She glanced at me.

“Were you two an item?”

She laughed. “No way. Of course, the tabloids tried to make it so. Even *People* magazine had a red-carpet pic of us together.”

“The Oscars?”

“No, some minor award thing. I forget which one.” She raised an eyebrow. “You jealous?”

“He is a hunky superstar.”

“So are you.” She laughed.

“I still hate him.”

“You don’t even know him.”

“So? I can still hate him. It’s a free country.”

She rolled her eyes. I wished she wouldn’t do that at eighty-five miles an hour on a slick highway.

“Truth is we had no chemistry,” she said. “He’s a nice guy but too pretty.”

“Pretty? Not sure that’s a term for a guy.”

“It is for him. He’s more pretty than handsome.” She swerved around another eighteen-wheeler. “And no girl wants to be around a guy who’s prettier than she is.”

“Not possible in your case.”

“You trying to garner points for the suite later?”

“Never hurts to plan ahead.”

“You’re such a good Boy Scout.”

“That’s what I was going for.”

She shook her head. “In case you forgot, I’m easy.”

“I’m going to hold you to that.”

“Of course you are.” In rapid succession, she dropped a Corvette, a Lexus, and a jacked-up SUV in her wake.

“You said Ford is a nice guy?”

“Yes. He is.”

“Nice enough not to kill a lover?”

“Not the Kirk I know.” She sighed. “I can’t imagine he did this.”

“Love and sex make folks do some awful stuff.”

She nodded. “True.”

I somehow missed Mississippi. The entire state. Seemed like it only took a couple of heartbeats, or in my case a couple of million, to cross the state and power into Louisiana. As we blew past the Slidell exit and charged headlong into the storm, Nicole kept her horses running. Soon we were out over Lake Pontchartrain, where the wind whipped the water into foam and some of the waves looked as if they might wash over the road. Sheets of rain battered the windshield at a low angle, the wipers barely able to keep up.

Didn’t bother Nicole. She drove with one hand, the other twisting a strand of hair near her left ear. I would’ve preferred she used both hands, at the ten-and-two positions of course, but was smart enough to stay silent on that point.

The storm was powerful but short-lived. By the time we exited into the French Quarter, the rain had settled into a drizzle. I could even see patches of blue sky to the west.

A few twists and turns, and angry drivers, and Nicole slid to a stop in front of the Monteleone. White with gold trim and little curly things all over the front. Very French. Very wedding-cakey. Is that a word? Regardless, it’s a good description.

A valet and two crisply attired bellmen appeared. The valet climbed in the Mercedes and whipped it around the corner toward the parking garage while our luggage rode a rolling cart through the front door. We followed.

Inside, the wedding cake was pretty cool, too. The Monteleone’s lobby looked more like a palace on the Cote d’Azur. Vaulted ceilings, chandeliers, and a parquet floor. Behind the reception desk stood

an attractive young lady whose name tag indicated she was Katrina. Nothing like the hurricane, nothing wind-blown or out of place, she was also crisply dressed, and offered a welcoming smile.

Took her all of a minute to tell us our suite was ready and another five minutes before a bellman opened the door to our room. It, too, belonged in a French palace. Uncle Charles did good. Very good.

While we unpacked, Nicole called Marty Ebersole. He said he'd meet us in the bar in thirty minutes. Not long enough for a nap, a shower, or "something else all together," so we decided a trip downstairs to the bar was in order. A drink or two could only help. Right?