



STALKED AND ALONE
AND WITH NOWHERE TO HIDE

KATHRYN J. BAIN
BREATHLESS

{FEAR IS NO LONGER AN OPTION}

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Dedication

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1

The police finally left and neighbors returned to their own lives. Only Lydia Frederickson remained. Discomfort crawled into her. Why did she call over such a trivial thing as a prank phone call? But when the voice described what she was wearing, she allowed her fear to rule. She pulled her knees to her chest as she sat in the plush chair next to the window. Lydia couldn't get his unsettling words from his mind.

"I want you. I need you," he'd taunted, his breathing loud and quick. "I can feel you near me in that pretty pink gown. Soft, silky, so nice to touch. I bet you're nice to touch, too."

The last two evenings, it had only been dead air. Tonight he said disturbing things.

She glanced at the notepad. "Phone with caller ID, also feature that blocks calls without identifying numbers," it read. Deputy Green had made the suggestions, telling her it might end the calls. She prayed he was right.

Her queen-sized bed welcomed her as she coiled into the safety of the blankets. The house had an eerie silence she hadn't noticed before. She longed for Justin's reassurance as she scooted closer to the center. Her hand jutted out to reach for him, but the pillow on the other side lay bare. As empty and lonely as when her husband died almost two years ago. Sadness

overwhelmed her as she fought to hold the tears in. She missed the comfort and safety of him next to her.

What was that? Lydia bolted upright. Was it her imagination or was the caller in the house? Deputy Green said he checked, but the creep could have been hiding. He might be downstairs. Her heart stuck in her throat as she listened for any sound indicating his presence. She raced to the bedroom door and clicked the lock. The cold wood door added to her shivers as she pressed her ear to it.

Nothing.

She recalled checking all the locks downstairs after Deputy Green left. Even with that reassurance, her pulse continued to race in her ears.

“How did he know what I had on?” Lydia whispered. The beige walls held no answers. The pink gown lay in the middle of the bathroom floor. A pair of shorts and a t-shirt now covered her.

Why now? Why so near the anniversary of Justin’s death? While seated on the edge of the bed, she grasped the picture frame. It held a smiling Justin on their wedding day, his arms surrounding her. She raced to the closet and swung open the door. His suits and shirts neatly hung on his side. She found the purple long-sleeved shirt and pulled it into her chest. It’s fabric as soft as when he wore it last. The warmth of his aroma cradled her.

She returned to the bed and moved closer to Justin’s side, clutching both the photograph and the shirt to her. This time nothing kept the tears from falling.

A cat screeched outside startling her from her sobs. She tightened the covers and shoved hair from her dampened face.

“God,” she pleaded to the ceiling. “Please help me through the next few days.”

Matthew Winters revved the Harley Davidson Ultra Classic motorcycle. He’d searched a long time for the ultimate ride. When he saw the two-tone, black and smoke gold color, it summoned him as if hypnotized. The Classics were popular so he snatched it up the day he came across it without quibbling over price. He had more than enough saved to pay cash.

The sun had risen about an hour earlier this Saturday morning to combine with a light cool breeze that made him glad he wore his FXRG leather jacket. Dampness covered the ground from the sprinkling of rain that had fallen before dawn.

He grinned wondering what waited for him at his new job. According to his friend, Riley Owens, most of the citizens held a somewhat conservative view of things. Did that mean more than just their political opinions? Keeping people on their toes. It’s what he did best. There might be shock from his appearance, long hair, muscular body, but it would be the tattoos, especially the one on his arm, that would stun the most. His smile widened.

Two days ago he had pulled into Lincolnville, Georgia. Riley had set him up in a two-room apartment at Anna’s Boarding House on the east side, seven miles from the west side. The whole town consisted of less than fifteen thousand inhabitants.

As he passed what the locals called the strip mall, he almost laughed outright. No large chain stores as anchors. If you wanted a loaf of bread or gallon of

milk, you had only Lou's Grocery to go to. If a hammer was your desire, no decision between Lowe's and Home Depot need be made. You wandered over to The Hardware Hutch. For a sit down meal you chose Fred's Diner, the local greasy spoon. The closest fast food was Betty's Bakery, where you'd grab a quick bite and a cup of coffee.

Today, Matthew rode over for breakfast at Fred's. The advertisement of blueberry pancakes on the window had caught his eye the day before.

He eased the bike into an open space near the entrance. When he slid his helmet off, his hair fell to the middle of his back. He climbed the steps and inhaled the balmy air. The double front doors had two signs. The left read "Open," the other "Please Use the Other Door." Matthew did as instructed.

The smell of grease hit him like a frying pan to the skull. Smoke from the grill made the air heavy. The A/C did little to aid in dispersing the thickness as sweat drops burst onto his forehead. The backwash of noise faded to a murmur as he entered.

"You can sit where you like," a wrinkle-faced man said.

Matthew nodded and took a step toward the back. Curious onlookers watched as he advanced.

Red vinyl stools lined the counter to his left. Booths swathed in the same red vinyl lined the opposite wall reminding him of diners he'd seen in older television shows. He made his way through the narrow passage, giving a slight nod to those who met his glance. Most turned as he approached.

A table against the rear wall sat empty, making him feel more at ease. Something he brought with him from his undercover days. The farthest seat was the

best vantage point—you could catch trouble as it entered, usually through the front.

In his printed t-shirt and faded jeans, he felt out of place compared to the neatly dressed patrons. When he removed his coat before sliding in, the whispering started. He knew the top portion of the snake tattoo was visible on his neck.

“Coffee, sir?” A small brunette waitress stopped beside the table. Her hair was tucked into a bun on the top of her head. The red apron surrounding her waist showed signs of a busy morning. Her nametag read Dolly.

“I’d prefer a glass of orange juice and a stack of those blueberry pancakes you have advertised, Dolly.” He pointed toward the large block letters in the display.

“I’ll bring that right out to you.” She quickly retreated.

He continued to scan the patrons. Most wrenched their necks, trying not to appear obvious with their stares. All except one woman. He wasn’t sure if he considered her appealing because of her looks or because she returned his gaze. He gauged her to be in her early thirties and her mood as troubled, if the frown of her mouth and the dark circles under the blue-purple eyes were any indication. Even with the shadows encircling the almond-shaped eyes, she captivated him. He had to fight to pull his attention from her.

As he waited for his food, he observed kids stuffing pancakes into their mouths faster almost than they got them on their fork. An indication as to how good they might taste, he hoped.

Families filled most of the booths. Older men with

a scattering of older women sat on the stools at the counter. The one thing they all had in common, the designer jeans they wore either in dark navy or black. There wasn't one faded, oversized pair among the group. You wouldn't chance upon anyone with their backsides hanging out in this crowd. Even the teenagers' seemed well-fitted. Matthew hoped he hadn't fallen into some sort of Stepford society where all the children were perfect.

Dolly returned with five pancakes and a tray that held jars of strawberry and grape jam and a bottle of maple syrup. Matthew glanced over the jellies but chose to go with the syrup for his topping. He paused after his first bite. The food proved as tasty as the gulping children indicated.

After finishing his breakfast, he stood to leave. The smell of flowers swept over him. He stopped, taking in the aroma.

"Excuse me, please," said a feminine voice with an irritated overtone.

Matthew twisted, coming face to face with the woman who held his attention earlier. A lump rose in his throat, causing him to lose any other thoughts he might have had. He sized her up, noticing the rings on her left hand. For some unknown reason, disappointment flushed over him.

"Do you plan to stand there staring all day, or can I get through?" She placed a hand on her hip.

She knew the effect she had on a man. He tugged his jacket on, making her wait a moment longer than necessary because of the irritation he sensed from her attitude. It wasn't a very Christian thing to do, but God was still working on him with some things.

"Be my guest." He finally moved aside, allowing

her through the double doors heading into the restroom area. Too bad most beautiful women had the ego to go with it. More than likely, she married the local football hero, and they were extremely happy.

Outside, the breeze had lessened making the weather humid. The weatherman had given a forecast of scattered showers. He'd kept his word thus far.

Once on the bike, Matthew glanced over his shoulder toward the window and saw people's heads spinning so he wouldn't be aware they'd been scrutinizing him. Everyone except her. The woman had returned to her seat and made no attempt to hide the fact she watched him. For some reason, she unnerved him. He couldn't recall feeling as insecure as he did at that second. Her stare burned into him as he drove off.

He hoped she wouldn't be anywhere near for his first official day tomorrow. Her presence would only add to the anxiety he already felt.

Goose bumps remained on Lydia's arms. The loud motorcycle caused everyone to take notice, but she by no means expected someone so attractive to step from it. Her pulse stopped when he walked through the door. She wasn't shocked by his long hair, but she thought he'd have stubble covering his chin. However, the view alarmed her. His facial features, clean shaven, had the most ideal attributes she'd ever seen. Everything appeared flawless, including his pointed nose and raised cheekbones, right down to his full lips. She could only describe him as thoroughly gorgeous.

He sat in the rear, scrutinizing the crowd. Most patrons crooked their heads so fast when he glanced at

them she was surprised they didn't suffer whiplash. However, when it came to directing herself away, she couldn't. He had somehow captured her attention, and she discovered it hard to turn loose. If he hadn't broken away first, they'd likely still be staring at each other.

"Who do you suppose that was?" Warren Anniston jabbed his thumb toward the back table.

"I heard someone new was staying at Anna's." Sheryl Coufield blew into her coffee. "Maybe that's him. He's definitely nice to look at, isn't he?"

"With the leather jacket, it looks like he belongs in jail, not out here with decent people," Warren argued. "Did you notice that tattoo sticking out over his t-shirt?"

"It only added to his machismo," Sheryl said. "Even Lydia stared."

"It's because I'm not used to seeing men like that in Lincolnville." Lydia popped the last strawberry in her mouth. Of course, his penetrating blue eyes helped, she admitted to herself.

"I wonder who he's visiting. It'd be nice to take another peak before he leaves like all the other single guys." Sheryl's lips formed a pout.

Lydia knew Sheryl's desire to have a family. She continually hunted for someone to be a good fit. The stranger appeared unlikely to be that special person she deserved. He was conceited with his loud ride that shouted, "Hey, everyone. Look at me!" And blocking the aisle, confirmed it more. It didn't bypass Lydia that he had taken his time putting on his coat before moving. The thought of shoving him aside brought a quick smile. She could almost hear the gasps from the other customers if she had.

“You’ve been awful quiet.” Sheryl tossed a ten on the table to cover her share of the check.

“I’m tired. I got another call last night.” Lydia prayed they would soon stop. “Warren and I are going shopping to find a system that’ll block them.”

The three met for breakfast every Saturday. Normally they would have eaten in Chattanooga, but this week was Warren’s choice. Because Sheryl remarked a day or two earlier about him balding on top, and Sheryl hated greasy food, Warren chose Fred’s as a way of punishing her. It would have been punishment for Lydia also if it weren’t for their fruit dish.

Of course, this morning, Fred’s did offer the added floor show of the attractive man on the motorcycle.

2

The rain had finally let up as Lydia maneuvered into a parking spot behind Warren's blue Ford Taurus sedan. She had deliberated not coming, but forced herself out of bed. It was even harder to convince herself to dress. What would it hurt if she missed one Sunday? Another prank call awakened her last night causing sleeplessness and a tear stained pillow. The new telephone system hadn't worked yet to keep the intruder out.

Warren stepped from his car when she arrived. He wore a water-stained tan suit, yellow shirt, and in his right hand he carried a dark green umbrella. She knew he waited to escort her. He always did.

"You're running a bit late." He tightened the indigo tie stuffed under his neck. He combed his hair to the side in an attempt to hide the partial balding Sheryl had mentioned days before.

Lydia clutched her Bible in her right hand and her Gucci purse with the other. "I received another call. The Caller ID gave some 800 number. When I dialed it back, a recording said it was disconnected

"I'm sorry to hear that." Warren offered her his elbow, which she accepted. "I would have come over if you'd let me know." I was absorbed in a wonderful book and couldn't seem to put it down. I would have come over and stayed with you."

Both stopped as a loud roar sounded to their left. Lydia stared as the same onyx and gold motorcycle from yesterday pulled into the lot. The noise from the bike caught anyone's attention within earshot. Lydia's heart bounced into her throat. How could she be excited at the likes of this man?

"You'd think we were starting a biker gang," Warren said.

"I hope he's here to be saved and not cause trouble." Lydia stifled a yawn. She gave a final glance toward the bike before proceeding toward the church for the ten o'clock service. "Have you heard anything about the new pastor?"

"No." Warren swerved to avoid a puddle. "Sheryl doesn't have any information either. The committee kept everything hush-hush. They're likely afraid if we discovered they picked some old geezer, nobody would show up."

"Finally." Sheryl pushed her thick blonde curls to the side as she greeted the two. "I wasn't sure you were going to make it. If I hadn't saved you a seat, you'd have to stand."

"It looks like all the neighboring towns have come out," Warren said.

Sheryl grabbed hold of Warren's other arm and dragged them to the second row. "I bet that's what the committee had in mind when they kept everything so quiet. People would come just to scrutinize who they chose."

"I hope it's not someone dull who'll put me to sleep." Warren shrugged off his jacket. "It'd be nice to have somebody who would wake up this sleepy town."

"Whoever he is, as long as God brought him here,

he'll do fine." Lydia tried being the voice of reason even though she wished the same thing. A fire and brimstone sermon would certainly keep her from dozing off.

She'd been raised in this old church. Her grandfather had been its first preacher. It always made her secure whenever she walked in. After all these years, as she entered the sanctuary, the full beauty still captured her breath. Large chandeliers spread over each section of oak pillars, suspended from amber-colored wrought iron. The hand-blown glass florets had been specifically created for the worship area. The pulpit sat on a raised stage below a large arch. Above the podium hung a wooden cross Lydia's father brought home from Jerusalem and presented as a gift to the congregation.

However, lately church had lost its luster for Lydia. She wondered if it was because her husband no longer sat beside her. She fought a tear slipping from her eye.

"Are you okay?" Sheryl's hand on hers stirred Lydia from her painful memories.

"A memory of Justin rushed in."

"Why are we in the second pew?" Warren interrupted. "You must have found out he's single and wanted a closer view."

"That's not why. I'm making sure we can hear everything clearly. That's all." Sheryl shook from anticipation. "Did you say he was single?"

Warren and Lydia chuckled.

Lydia glanced through the crowd, waving as others looked her way. Not since Justin's funeral had such a crowd gathered. As that thought rushed over her, she wished she had stayed in bed. She had gone

through her wedding album after she'd been awakened by the caller. It only depressed her more.

James Newman, III, one of the church deacons, walked to the pulpit and said a quick prayer. Lydia got the sense of anger from the darkness in his eyes. Could he be that upset about the committee's choice? After two songs from the praise and worship group, James returned to the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen." He leaned into the microphone at the lectern. His white hair was more pronounced because of the dark suit he wore. "We spent a great deal of time trying to find the best person to lead our flock. We hope he meets with your approval. We decided to go with someone younger. After all, it's the next generation that will be in charge of our community soon." James shifted from one foot to the other.

"I hear the choice made him mad," Sheryl whispered. "He had nominated Old Man Nesmith, and the committee said they wanted an outsider. They figured some new blood might attract younger couples from the surrounding towns."

"Probably why he wore black," Warren added. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was in mourning."

"Without further delay," James continued, "please welcome Matthew Winters."

The clapping slowed as Matthew took the stage. Jaws dropped throughout the room. Even Lydia's mouth hung wide as the motorcyclist strolled to the podium. His long, brown hair, pulled back, fell below his shoulders. A deep blue shirt was partially hidden under a black leather jacket. A dark pair of jeans led to ebony pointed cowboy boots. Below the left side of his strong jaw sat the tattoo of a snake ready to strike. His

tall frame and broad shoulders reeked of masculinity, even with the ponytail.

“The committee has lost its mind.” Warren spoke loud enough to cause a snicker in the crowd.

A warm smile appeared on the stranger’s face, softening his features. Lydia’s pulse beat faster. Who could blame her? God designed great masterpieces.

“Give him a chance. You could actually like him.” Sheryl sat straighter in the pew. “Besides, he’s good looking. And if I’m not mistaken, there’s not a wedding band.” She practically sang the last part.

The minister’s gaze skimmed the crowd. Lydia became very aware of the fact his focus rested on her. She could feel her body warm as she forced her breathing to stay even. He must have recalled their encounter at the diner. She wasn’t exactly friendly, but then, neither was he. Those sapphire blues made her feel he could gaze into her inner core and see every emotion she experienced. After giving attention to a wrinkle in her skirt, she was able to compose herself. She hoped the heat that had rushed through her remained hidden from the others.

He preached for less than an hour on a topic she believed he chose carefully—not judging a book by its cover. His sermon contained humorous anecdotes along with a serious message. While he spoke, no one left their seat. The whole congregation seemed to enjoy him. Everyone but James Newman, III, whose jaw clenched throughout the entire service. With every “Amen” from the crowd, his teeth tightened. Lydia thought she heard them grinding from the other side of the aisle.

“I swear James is about to have a heart attack,” Warren whispered once the sermon was complete.

"From how red his face is, I think he's going to explode."

"James isn't used to being told no," Lydia said. "But he'll adjust. He always does."

Matthew Winters wound his way to the doorway to greet parishioners as they left. Six-foot-three or four, and powerfully built. His jeans gave a hint as to his masculine legs. Lydia jerked her head away to keep from staring. No matter how nice, it had to be disrespectful to stare at a minister like that, particularly standing in a church. Her grandfather's church at that. Praying for forgiveness, she grabbed her purse from the pew.

"Lydia, my dear." James tugged her into a hug. "How are you today?"

"I'm doing well. How are you and Melanie?" Garlic emanated from his breath. She ran her hand discreetly across her nose.

"We're fine." James shook hands with Warren and pecked Sheryl's cheek. "What did you three think of Mr. Winters?"

"I liked him. I believe he'll do wonderful," Warren said with more enthusiasm than he should have. "On the other hand, Sheryl considers him dreamy."

"Very funny, Warren." Sheryl nudged him with her elbow.

"She apparently isn't alone." James flashed a glance in Matthew's direction.

Three single women giggled around him. A wave of jealousy crossed over Lydia, taking her by surprise.

"I suggest you hurry, the masses are already gathering." Warren poked Sheryl in the ribs.

"Lydia, how about you drop by for lunch?" James held Lydia by the wrist. "Melanie would love to visit