

Prologue

Talia breathed a sigh a relief as she walked home from school. The day hadn't been quite as bad as it could have been. Only a few girls had made fun of her clothes. No one had mentioned Monette. She clenched her teeth and hugged the tattered book sack to her worn pink shirt. There was always tomorrow. Each day was an obstacle course. No different from all the days she'd experienced in her fourteen years.

A lanky boy the color of nutmeg strolled out of a trash strewn dirt alley and onto the cracked sidewalk. Derrick Guillory wore a blue t-shirt under a denim jacket and a pair of faded blue jeans. He folded his arms across his chest. At fifteen, his body showed signs of developing into a well-muscled adult male.

"Hey, wait up."

Talia stopped and turned around. Derrick and she had been buddies since elementary school. She'd been with her second foster family at the time. Now that she was back with her mother again, the last thing she needed was for him to follow her home. There was no telling what she would find. Monette might be high again, hanging out with her no good friends or in one of her paranoid fits.

"I've got to get home fast." Talia tried to go around him, but he blocked her path.

He grinned at her. His topaz eyes sparkled with mischief. "No problem. I'm on the track team, remember?"

"Sure, you braggin' every chance you get. Now go home." Talia covered her anxiety with sarcasm. She prayed he'd get insulted and leave.

His dark eyes narrowed for an instant in anger. He studied her for a second until his expression changed into one of concern. "What's wrong? I better go with you."

"You bein' real dumb today, ain't ya? Okay, I'll spell it out. Leave me alone." Talia glared at him with her chin up. She whirled around and hurried off. Please don't follow me.

"Sure. I'll see you later," he called after her.

Talia did not answer him. She ran around a corner and down Laroux Lane, a fancy name that did not fit the dusty road. She climbed up the steps of the house. A couple of cheap chairs from a discarded dinette set sat on either end of the back porch. She was grateful none of her mother's so-called friends were perched on them today.

"I'm home." Talia let go of the broken strap and dropped the book sack down on the breakfast table.

When there was no answer, she swore softly. Once again Monette had walked off leaving the door open. They had

little to steal, but Monette's no-good pals would take anything not nailed down. Still Talia felt relief mixed with anger. At least she might actually get homework done. Then she heard a thump.

"Monette?"

She went through the kitchen and into the living room. Talia was halfway across the room when the man stood up from the sofa. She spun around then froze. Earl Glasper leered at her. He'd been her mother's lover off and on for the last three years and he was trouble. Dressed in Tommy Hilfiger jeans and white shirt, he still had the look of a street thug in expensive clothes.

"Your mama stepped out a minute." Earl walked toward her. The chunky gold bracelet on his nut-brown wrist and matching necklace flashed as he moved. "Sit down. I was just gonna watch some television."

"I'm going to spend the night with a friend." Talia back up. "Just tell her I'll call later."

Earl nodded slowly. His gaze swept her from head to toe. "Got you a boyfriend already, huh? Ain't surprised. You one fine little lady."

Talia tugged at the short plaid skirt she wore. Earl always had a way of making her feel exposed. "See ya."

Earl's slow easy manner vanished. He crossed the space between them in two long strides and caught her wrist. "Why you runnin' off? I got more than any kid can give you."

"Let go of me!" Talia tried to yank free, but his grip tightened. She gasped when his free hand rubbed her thigh and went up her skirt.

"You a younger, sweeter version of your mama." Earl pulled her against his chest. "I've seen you hangin' 'round that little chump Derrick. You ready for a man, baby."

Talia struggled to get free. Earl only seemed amused by her attempts. When he pressed his wet lips against her neck Talia shrieked. The hand he stuck under her skirt fingered the fabric of her panties.

"What the hell goin' on here?"

Monette stood in the door leading to the kitchen with one hand on her hip. She wore a dark red knit dress that clung to her voluptuous figure. Her long auburn hair was swept up.

Earl let go of Talia abruptly causing her to stumble. "Hey, girl. I was just—"

Talia sank to the floor and covered her ears with both hands, trying to block out the ugliness. She wanted it all to simply go away. Monette and Earl took no notice her of muted sobs as she huddled in a corner.

"Don't bother lyin'." Monette took a small gun from her purse. "Now I got another reason to shoot your ass."

"What you talkin' 'bout, baby. Stop actin' crazy." Earl backed away with both hands raised. "I was just playin' with the kid."

"Uh-huh. Like I believe that." Monette pointed the gun at him and walked closer.

"Look, she's almost grown and knows how to tease a dude. What you expect? You was the same way at her age." Earl lifted a shoulder. He smiled at Monette. "Now come on, sugar. Don't be like that."

"I got your sugar right here, you bastard. I know you been sellin' folks out, Earl." Monette glared at him.

"What?" Earl blinked hard at her.

"Yeah, I found out." Monette spat out the words.

"Stop talkin' crazy. I ain't done nuthin' like that." His chest rose and fell faster as he spoke. Yet he continued to gaze at her as though they were having a simple chat.

"Maybe I'll just tell Carlo and the other dudes on the street. Let them handle your ass."

"You don't know what you sayin', girl." Earl didn't lose the smile but it seemed to stretch tight across his broad features.

"You ain't dealin' coke to get those fancy clothes and gold chains." Monette panted, her face twisted with anger. "You the reason I spent eighteen months in parish prison."

"Don't be stupid. Somebody been lyin' on me." Earl's hand shot out and he grabbed for the gun.

"Get off me!" Monette tried to jerk back, but Earl clamped a beefy hand around her wrist. She screamed when he slammed his fist against her head with his other hand.

"You got nerve pullin' a gun on me," he said through clenched teeth.

Monette raked her long acrylic nails down his neck. Earl howled in rage. The two twirled around in a circle fighting for control of the gun. Talia shrank against the wall, her eyes wide with horror. She jumped when the gun went off. Earl yelled a profanity and punched Monette again. A second shot sounded, this time muffled. Both of them seemed suspended for a second. Then in what seemed like slow motion Earl fell to his knees. He bent double until his forehead touched the hardwood floor.

They both stared at the motionless figure. The violent man now looked like a helpless child. His blood formed an oval shape that grew by the second. Talia knew the rough times she'd been through already were nothing compared to what would come. Monette and Talia started when the front door flew open. Derrick looked at them then Earl.

"I heard the shot. Lemme help," he said.

Monette scooped up her purse where it had fallen on the floor during the struggle. She stuffed the gun inside it. "You saw anybody else out there?"

"No, but—"

"Get her down to Miz Rose's house on Kingfish Street. You know where I'm talkin' 'bout?" Monette said to Derrick.

"Yeah."

"Then get back here. I can't move him by myself," she ordered.

Derrick rubbed his hands together. "But—"

"Get goin' before somebody show up, boy!" Monette barked.

He led Talia out of the house murmuring reassurances to her. Neither of them looked at Earl as they left. The fifteen-minute walk to her former foster mother's home seemed to take forever. Talia trembled each time a car approached sure the police had tracked them down. Derrick squeezed Talia's hand hard at the sight of Miss Rose's cheery yellow wood frame house. She came to the door wiping her hands on a dishtowel. When she saw Talia's expression Miss Rose unlatched the screen door fast.

"My Lord, child. What's happened now?"

"Miss Monette ain't feelin' too good," Derrick said.

"Can Talia—"

"Come on in here, baby. I got some clothes that oughta fit you. Doggone shame the way that woman lives," Miss Rose muttered to herself. She started toward a back bedroom.

"Wait!" Talia called out as Derrick started to leave. She followed him onto the front porch, glancing over her shoulder to make sure they were alone. "What's going to happen?"

"Don't worry," he said quietly. "I'll take care of it."

"But what if—"

"Just go on and let Miz Rose get you somethin' to eat." Derrick took off his jacket and put it around her shoulders. "It's gonna be alright."

Talia shivered, but not because of the brisk fall evening. Derrick gave a quick nod of encouragement before he strode off into the gathering dusk. They had shared many secrets since childhood. They would never dare to whisper this secret again. Not even to each other.

Chapter 1

"I have an appointment with Senator Collins," Talia said crisply.

"I'll let him know you're here, Ms. Marchand," the young blonde secretary said with a professional smile.

Talia did not sit down. She waited another twenty minutes before she was shown into his office. With no trace of the irritation she felt in her expression, Talia extended a hand to him and smiled widely. Senator Collins stood tall with silvery gray hair. The senior senator was known to be ultra-conservative. He was also famous for his acerbic wit, mainly aimed at feminist and minorities. Both in private circles of course. She had her work cut out for her, but Talia was ready. Half the battle was knowing your opponent much better than he suspected. Though leaning toward the right on a number of issues, Talia found him hard to stomach.

"Senator, I very much appreciate your taking time to see me," Talia said.

"Nonsense. I'm here to serve the people of my district, Ms. Marchand. Sit down, please. Drink?" Senator Collins nodded to his chief aide. Felicity Allgood stood at attention waiting to do his bidding.

"Bottled water is fine. Thanks." Talia accepted the bottle of Kentwood Spring Water Felicity handed her.

"Congratulations on getting funds highway project." Pork barrel project was a more accurate description.

"Thank you. I'm very pleased that my esteemed colleagues saw the light." Senator Collins wore a crooked grin. They both knew he'd called in political to get what he wanted.

She smiled back at him. "Yes. Which of course means much needed jobs."

"Non-union jobs so hard working people can feed their children," he replied in his best politician's tone.

"Exactly. Putting children first is the reason we need child welfare reform. A substantial percentage of juvenile and adult offenders are products of a flawed foster care system." Talia performed a neat segue into the reason for her visit.

"The government interferes in family life too much, Ms. Marchand. Speeding up the process of separating biological parents from their children—"

"Parents who have consistently shown an inability or unwillingness to make a safe home for their children, Senator. We're not talking about railroading parents," Talia cut in smoothly.

"Throwing money at the problem is a liberal failing. I would have thought your outfit wouldn't advocate such an approach." Senator Collins took a sip of pineapple juice from the bottle Felicity provided.

"The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges address that issue as well." Talia nodded. She gave a concise summary of costs as calculated by a council task force.

I see." Senator Collins waved a hand at his aide when the young woman pointed to her wristwatch. "I'm sure you brought a report for me."

Talia took out a blue folder with the Council's justice scales logo on it. "Yes. Please don't hesitate to give me a call if you have questions."

In short order she made one last pitch, inquired about his wife and kids then made her exit. She took out her cell phone from the leather briefcase. Talia glanced around. She found a spot away from a clump of people.

"Hi, I just left his office. Pompous as usual "Yes, call the good senator and remind him he needs help on the farm subsidy bill. Thanks."

She flipped the tiny phone closed and put it away. Talia smiled to herself as she proceeded on her way. Lobbying congress for non-profit advocacy organizations was part of her atonement. She made a substantial salary as a

highly paid political consultant for three large insurance and pharmaceutical companies. Not that she was ashamed of her work for them at all. Still taking on the cause of foster care reform had hit close to home. She'd shunned any kind of social work or services profession. Instead she'd taken business and public policy courses in college. Talia had always meant to follow the money. Yet influence and control were just as important to her. As she walked purposefully down the halls of the Capitol Complex, she mentally ran through her list of appointments for the day. As usual she made time to schmooze with congressional staffers along the way. A tall man the color of mahogany waved to her. Jarrod Thompson worked in the Department of Justice, one of a legion of sharp young lawyers. He was ahead of the pack since he had an MBA and spoke four languages. All her friends said they were the perfect power couple.

"Hello, Ms. Get-things-done. Got time for me?"

"Sure, I've always got time for you." Talia beamed at him. Jarrod had helped her out more than once.

"I'm talking purely social. No pumping me for inside tidbits to help your clients." Jarrod wagged a long forefinger at her.

"Agreed. Besides I don't need anything right now," Talia added with an impish grin.

"Sure, sure. You only lust after my mind," Jarrod quipped.

"Don't forget those killer contacts," Talia shot back.

Jarrold put a hand on her elbow as they exited one crowded hallway into another. "So how has your day been so far?"

"Packed, but I'm on schedule." Talia glanced at her Seiko sterling silver watch. "I've got a two o'clock with Representative Westin. The honorable house member from Montana is being difficult."

"I'm sure you'll handle him. What about B. Smith's?"

"Perfect. I—" Talia stopped short. "It can't be," she murmured.

A tall, imposing figure rose head and shoulders above the crowd around him. His smoky topaz eyes gazed straight into hers. With at least twenty feet between them, she felt the impact of his presence. She hadn't seen him in at least five years. Distance in neither space nor time had lessened his effect on her. Six feet four inches tall, Derrick Guillory radiated power. His hair was longer than she'd ever seen it before. The tight dark bronze curls lay in waves combed back from his face. He wore a light tan suit and crisp white shirt with a silk tie the color of burgundy wine. The fabric stretched across a broad chest and shoulders. Derrick stood against the wall allowing the flow

of humanity to pass him by. More than a few women turned to give him a second look. Derrick caused a stir without noticing. His electric gaze never left Talia's face.

"Whoa, what's up with this?" Jarrod stared at her then followed her gaze. "Talia, you look like a ghost just popped up in the crowd."

"He's real enough," she whispered.

Talia could have added an unwelcome one. Except that the tingle spreading up her spine felt pleasant. Derrick brought the good and the bad with him, as always.

"What?" Jarrod looked at her.

"Nothing," Talia mumbled low. She brushed a hand across her brow.

Jarrod frowned as he continued to scan the crowd. He moved closer to her protectively. "If it's someone you don't want to see then let's get out of here."

As if he sensed what was about to happen, Derrick strode forward. He moved with the grace of a seasoned running back, easily shortening the distance between them. Jarrod caught sight of Derrick seconds later and walked in front of Talia.

"Okay, this brother obviously doesn't see me. I'll make sure he does," Jarrod said.

"Wait I know—" Talia tried to moved around him, but a large woman bumped into her.

"Hello." Derrick's basso voice rolled out like quiet thunder. He stuck out a large hand that Jarrod took with reluctance. "Talía," he said simply.

Talía stepped from behind Jarrod a bit breathless, but not from being jarred by the solid, fleshy woman. "Hello, Derrick."

"You know each other?" Jarrod said in a flat voice.

"From home, in Louisiana," she said slowly. "Derrick Guillory, this is Jarrod Cooper."

Talía stared at Derrick. The strong line of his jaw made him look like a man both dangerous and exciting. The muscular frame encased in expensive fabric made him look like a beautiful African warrior prince dressed in western clothes.

"Hi." Jarrod did not look please, but he stuck out his hand anyway.

"Hello." Derrick shook it briefly. Both men seemed eager to break contact.

"An old friend from home, huh?" Jarrod

Derrick looked Jarrod straight in the eyes. A slow, easy smile spread across his face. "We go back a long, long way."

"Is that right?" Jarrod tightened his hold on Talía's arm. "What brings you to the big city?"

"Business," Derrick said shortly then glanced at Talia. "Your office said you'd be with Senator Collins. I took a chance I would catch you before you left."

"Oh." Talia could not stop looking into his eyes.

"We're on our way to another meeting," Jarrod put in.

Talia snapped out of her reverie. "Let me catch up with you later, Jarrod."

"But you know these folks don't like to be kept waiting," Jarrod said with an edge to his tone.

"I'm sure you can answer all their questions. I'll call you," Talia said pointedly.

"Fine, I'll call you later. Tonight. Remember we have plans later this week." Jarrod strode away looking back over his shoulder at them.

Talia watched him leave through narrowed eyes. His possessiveness rubbed her last nerve. She'd get him straight soon enough. "Right," she tossed after him.

"I get the feeling your friend was talking about more than a meeting," Derrick rumbled. He wore an impassive expression.

Talia faced him. "How did you find me so easily?" She swept a hand out. "This place is like a maze."

"I'm an investigator. I'm good at finding people." He smiled revealing dazzling white teeth against his smooth brown skin.

The effect of such a stunning contrast made Talia gasp. She looked away from his face to recover. "I see."

She didn't really see at all. Talia struggled with conflicted emotions. Part of her wanted to ask more about him and why he had made it a point to find her. At the same time she didn't want to know. She'd run from him and Louisiana years ago. Yet no one had made her feel safe and cared for the way Derrick could. The only exception had been Mama Rose. Between the two of them they'd brought her through a dark and scary period in her life.

"I talked to Miss Rose last week. I'm glad she's doing better."

Talia looked at him sharply. She trembled from the chill that spread through her. Like Mama Rose, he could read her.

"I'm sorry I didn't get to see you when you visited three months ago," Derrick added when Talia didn't speak.

"I was really busy." She looked away from his gaze. They both knew she'd had no intention of looking him up.

"I need to talk to you," Derrick said and closed a large hand over her wrist.

Talia looked down at the way his long fingers wrapped around her flesh. His touch sent heat up her arm and into her heart. Memories rushed in on her.

"Please," she murmured, her thoughts far from talking with him. "Not here."

"Of course not here, Talia," Derrick replied. "Come on. We can go to B. Smith's." He pulled her gently, yet firmly along with him.

"No, I—" Talia stammered, her voice barely audible to her own ears above the noisy crowd.

She didn't want him bringing Rougon or the past into her life in Washington D.C. Yet his hold on her was more than physical. She'd avoided him for years for this very reason. Now Talia realized how foolish she'd been in her confidence. She'd convinced herself her adolescent need for protection and love explained his potent affect on her. After all these years she wanted to lay him down, burned to feel his lean, hard body stretched atop hers. Once they were outside, Derrick hailed a taxi. They were inside and pulling away from the curb before she knew it.

"I hear you've practically conquered this city. At least that's what Miss Rose says." Derrick stretched one arm across the seat behind her.

Talia cleared her throat. She resisted the urge to snuggle in the shelter of his embrace. "Well, you know Mama Rose likes drama."

"She's just proud of her baby girl, and with good reason. You've got a great reputation. My boss kept hearing your name in meetings."

"Really?" Talia inched away from him to further clear her head. "What are you doing here anyway?"

"We—" Derrick broke off when the taxi came to a stop. "Here you go, keep the change." He handed the fare to the driver.

Talia followed him inside the elegant restaurant. A handsome young man greeted them with a big smile.

"Hello. Table for two?"

"Yes," Derrick replied.

He led them through the large dining room to a smaller, more intimate section. They were seated at a table with fresh Louisiana irises. B. Smith's boasted the finest nouveau soul cuisine in the city and featured Louisiana inspired entrees.

"Tony will be your waiter. I'll give you time to look over the menu. What would you like to drink?"

Talia ordered diet soda and Derrick ordered sweetened iced tea. "You're still hooked on sugar."

"Yeah, I guess I should cut back in my old age."

Derrick grinned as he opened his suit jacket. He patted his flat stomach. "Gotta keep fit."

Talia took in outline of his hard body beneath the fine cotton shirt. "I don't think you have to worry just yet."

Tony appeared with their drinks. Talia felt absurdly grateful for the interruption. She gulped down the cold soda hoping it would cool her off. Okay, try to remember you're not a horny sixteen-year old now. After they ordered, Derrick blasted her attempts by turning on the full strength of his presence. He gazed at her with an expression of intense, caring interest.

"How are you doing?" He leaned toward her, one hand on the back of her chair.

She glanced away. "Not bad. I don't exactly run the nation's capitol. The President and congress have some say so," she joked, hoping to deflect the real question in his eyes.

"At least they think they do, again according to Miss Rose." Derrick's sensuous lips curved up.

"I divide my time between chasing a dollar and helping a few folks who don't have big money muscle." Talia lifted a shoulder. "Makes me feel less guilty about helping low people in high places."

"Bull, you care about people. You always have," Derrick said with quiet force. "I thought you'd be a nurse or a social worker."

"And take a vow of poverty? Not hardly. I had my fill of being poor and downtrodden, thank you very much," she said bitterly.

Derrick closed a large hand over one of hers. "You made it out, baby," he said softly. "It's okay."

Talia stared into his clear, dark eyes and almost got lost. She pulled back with great effort. "I've got a good life," she said too quickly.

"You've got a lot of friends to stand by you. That Jarrod guy for one." Derrick let go of her hand and picked up his glass.

"Jarrod was one of the first people who helped me in this town. He's a real nice person," Talia said. She shot a sideways glance at him.

Derrick nodded. "I like way he jumped to protect you. He's all right. But you don't need to be protected from me, Talia."

"I never told him anything, just that I'm from Louisiana and a little about Mama Rose." Talia swirled the straw around in her glass.

He sighed and put down his glass. "I'm not talking about him. I've been in town three days. I debated looking you up."

"Derrick, it wasn't you." Talia's voice trailed off.

"I know. You needed a clean break." Derrick stared at his strong hands clasped together. "Things were rough."

"But we both made it through," she murmured. "All that is behind us now."

"Is it?" He looked at her.

"Yes," Talia said vehemently. "Over and done with years ago."

"Lately I've been thinking about those days."

"Don't," she said. "You're not responsible."

"Monette wrote to me four months ago, Talia. She's got a new lawyer."

"She's always getting a new lawyer. Another scam, a new scheme. Same old Monette."

"I thought you two didn't keep in touch." Derrick looked at Talia steadily.

"I get a letter now and then from my half-sister." Talia frowned. "I tried to tell her about Monette. She's too young to remember. Her adoptive parents are great people. But Alyssa had this need to find her biological parents."

"And you. She wanted to find her sister and brother," Derrick said.

"Yeah, finding Karl was easy since he was always in jail," Talia retorted.

"He had it bad, too," Derrick said.

"So have other people. They didn't hold up convenience stores because of it." Talia wore a hard expression.

"Okay, you've got a good point. But, Talia--"

"I really don't want to talk about him, or anything connected to that part of my life." She glanced around as she cut him off.

"I only wanted to spend time with you before... Let's have dinner tonight. There's something you need to know before it hits the newspapers."

"Here we are!"

The waiter stood at the table with two large dinner plates on a tray. He set them down in front of Talia first then Derrick. Talia had completely lost her interest in lunch. A sick queasy feeling of dread lay in her stomach like a rock.

"Enjoy. Need anything else? Are we good?" Tony smiled at them.

"We're fine, thanks," Derrick said. He watched the waiter leave then turned back to Talia.

The grave expression on his handsome face gave Talia chills. "Why the big mystery?"

"I've been talking to Monette for the past six months. I think you need to know what's going on. And no, she didn't ask me to tell you."

Talia gave a small cynical laugh. The rock in her stomach crumbled. She was on familiar ground. "Like I said, one of Monette's schemes. Okay, dinner it is then."

"Good." Derrick nodded and lowered his voice as he leaned even closer. "But it's not what you think. I'll tell you this much, there's a good chance Monette will get out of prison. It may take another five months, but it'll happen."

"I've heard that before, but whatever," Talia replied. She picked up her fork. "I refuse to let her ruin a great lunch."

Despite her words, Talia did not eat much of her spinach salad. She glanced at her watch. Before she spoke, Derrick got the waiter's attention. Within minutes he'd paid for the meal, left Tony a generous tip and escorted her out of the restaurant.

"There's a great Chinese restaurant called City Lights of China. I'll meet you there at about—"

"You don't want me to know where you live." Derrick gazed at her with sadness in his dark eyes.

"I just thought it would be easier with both of us having a long day and..." Talia's voice faded and she sighed.

"It's okay. We can meet there," he said quietly.

Talia fumbled in her purse for a business card and ink pen. She wrote on the back of it. "Here's the address."

Derrick didn't take it. "I said it's okay."

"I didn't mean--" Talia stepped closer and placed the card in his hand.

"I'll meet you at 7:30 tonight." Still Derrick closed his large hand around hers and took the card.

Talia swallowed hard. The years rolled away and she could see them together, two teenagers seeking comfort from a harsh world. The scent and sound of the bayou rushed back to her. She could almost hear the musical blending of crickets and cicadas in the sultry Louisiana summer twilight. A strong memory of the smell of gardenias in bloom hit her. They had sat on Miss Rose's gallery many a night staring at the stars for hours in silence. Then suddenly he would wrap an arm around her. He would always be there to protect her. No one and nothing could change this thing between them. Yet the fear and embarrassment her mother caused had only grown. At seventeen Talia had gotten her way out. She won a scholarship to a high school in Natchitoches, Louisiana for academically gifted teens. Derrick had known the day she got on the Greyhound bus to leave Rougon that she was running away from him as well. He never said a word, but he knew. She'd seen it in his eyes

as he stood watching the bus pull away. The next year Derrick had left town to attend a community college.

Derrick got into a cab and waved once. He gazed at her as it drove away. Talia tried to push down the rise of an old fear. She should have known this day would come.