

Chapter 1

Reggie woke up with one of the killer headaches she only got if she skipped her coffee for a day. Instead of slowly getting out of bed, she gently pushed her cat Lucy aside, rolled out of bed, and hurried to use the bathroom. She went into the kitchen and grabbed the bag of espresso to start a pot of coffee she certainly intended to drink all by herself.

Next, she grabbed a glass of pineapple juice and slathered some peanut butter on bread for her breakfast. She went outside her apartment door and got the paper. There was something about a paper in hand and a cup of coffee that was more satisfying to her in the morning than going to her phone or computer to get the news like she did the rest of the day. She avoided the television news because she was a television reporter, and found herself critiquing the reports and feeling as if she was doing work. She sat at her kitchen table, sipped her coffee, and ate breakfast in silence, because even the sound of the birds outside made her head ache. Not a very exciting morning for a newswoman.

When she traveled on special assignment, she started her morning with the hotel's brunch and enjoyed having someone pour rich dark coffee into her cup. That was why she'd skipped her coffee yesterday; she had to show someone around town in the early morning. She forgot her usual coffee and took them instead to the local sights. They'd stopped in the park to listen to jazz and drink a mint julep and a Hurricane. Yes, maybe her headache was partly due to the drinks, as she was not a big drinker, but she always drank more when showing someone around. She laughed to herself. *I am such a wild woman.*

Of course, since living in New Orleans, she'd taken them for coffee and the powdered sugar donut like beignets by Jackson Square. It was such a hot day that she ordered some chocolate milk to quench her thirst. It was the middle of summer in New Orleans, and she called it the three shower season, where you needed three showers a day just to try to keep cool. She had lived in Virginia and Washington D.C., but she still found the summers in New Orleans to be the season she wished she was out of town for.

She had been in New Orleans for three months on a special assignment. Some people did not like the city, but Reggie found the people to be warm and wonderful, and the food the best in the United States. She found a good sublet on the trolley line uptown by Carrollton Avenue, and its location made it easy to get to all her assignments. Sam, the love of her life, was in Virginia and would visit, but had no desire to stay in New Orleans. As much as Reggie loved him, there was something about the city and people here that made her never want to leave. Lately, this had been the topic of their conversations that left both Sam and Reggie at an impasse in their relationship.

Besides, Reggie felt she was just beginning to really feel safe going outside after being shot last year. Her shrink helped her a lot in New Orleans, but even the sound of

a car backfiring could send her into a post-traumatic panic. She looked down at the scar and felt thankful she was even alive.

Reggie sighed, forcing herself to enjoy her breakfast and read the paper instead of analyzing her relationship with Sam or thinking about how they both were almost killed. Plus, it made her headache ten times worse. *Let's add a little tension headache to my caffeine withdrawal and a slight hangover.* She laughed to herself.

Her favorite Elvis song began to play on her ringing cell phone. She winced and turned down the volume.

"Hello."

"Hello, may I please speak to Reggie Page?"

"Speaking."

The deep voice on the other end said, "I wanted to say thank you for the help you have given to my foundation in the past. I was wondering if we can count on your help again?"

Reggie liked to give to many organizations, but after hearing from some over and over, she kept a little pink book listing who she made a contribution to, the date, and the amount. Usually, Reggie would get the book, but this morning she was too beat and pleasantly said, "I'm sorry, sir, but I will not be donating. Could you please tell me one more time the name of the organization you represent?" The man said the name of the organization, but Reggie couldn't remember donating to it before. She again said, "I won't be donating at this time."

"How about if I sign you up for our lowest amount? Anything helps," he asked.

"No, but I may give next year. Please call me in a year." She wanted to say, *don't call me when I have been out partying late, and my head is foggy.*

Instead of saying fine and agreeing to call in a year, the man grew increasingly cool on the phone. "I know you can donate something. Just think of all the people you can help. I will send you out this packet in the mail today."

"No," Reggie said firmly. "I appreciate all you do to help people, and I may give next year, but not now."

"I am sorry, ma'am, but you must give today. If you don't, people will be in need because of you! We all have to give in life, or it will come back to haunt us," he murmured.

Reggie could not believe what she was hearing. This person was way out of line, and she needed to end the conversation. "I am going to hang up now. Try me next year, goodbye."

Reggie hung up the phone. Her head throbbed even harder now. She had always been assertive, but in cases like this, she realized the person was only doing their job, and she was nice to them. It annoyed her to get someone who was trying to make her feel guilty.

Suddenly her phone rang. She answered it, not bothering to see who it was.

"Hello, Reggie here."

The man with the deep voice said, "I am sorry we got cut off. I bet you were just ready to donate to our organization."

Reggie was starting to feel a little uneasy now. "No, I told you I was not donating."

"I know you didn't mean that," the man said, sounding very sure of himself and trying to sound as pleasant as possible. "I know you want to help all the people who need it, and I bet you have changed your mind."

"I have not changed my mind, and I want you to not call me again. In fact, please take my name off your list."

"I can't do that, ma'am!"

"Oh, yes you can. Please do. I am hanging up again."

"Fine, I will put you down for ten dollars, our lowest amount, and we will send the packet in the mail."

"No, no," Reggie said, her voice raising. "I do not want to donate!"

There was a long silence on the phone, and then the man said, "If you don't donate, my job is on the line."

"I am truly sorry, but I am not donating," Reggie said, and hung up.

Reggie took a sip of coffee. What he'd said did pull at Reggie's heartstrings a little. If he had not given her such a guilt trip, maybe she would have changed her mind. *Oh, stop it, Reggie, you can't help everyone.*

She started to worry what if he did lose his job when the phone rang again.

"Reggie here," she said, not thinking the same man would dare call again.

The man was on the phone again, this time speaking in almost a whisper. "I know you want to donate. I will call you tomorrow when you're in a better mood. We all have to give in life, and if we don't, it always comes back to haunt us."

There was silence followed by a soft click.

Chapter 2

What the man on the phone did not realize was her boyfriend was a cop in Virginia, and The Donation Man, as she was now referring to him, had better not mess with her, or she would have Sam get him.

She started to think about the man who'd almost killed her in Virginia. If it had not been for Sam, his partner Mike, and her friend Maggie, who she'd met while they were being hunted by The Bomber, she would be dead. She did have some nightmares about The Bomber, and although he was dead, something in this guy's tone made her feel uneasy.

Last year was a whole other story she didn't want to start thinking about today. Besides, she'd seen a shrink for a while, and it helped. Not too many shrinks were surprised if their patient had nightmares when they were almost killed.

She started dating Sam after that, and it seemed like he had been in her life forever. This long distance romance was a pain, but she preferred it over not seeing Sam. Just the thought of him made her start to long for him and his caress.

Maggie remained a good friend of hers, and had fallen in love with Sam's partner, Mike. She missed all three of them, but started making a few friends in New Orleans on the weekends she did not fly back to Virginia.

Reggie had accepted the assignment in New Orleans to help with a documentary being done on the city, which included its history, food, Katrina, and so much more that the assignment was for six months. Three months down and three more to go. She had been here years ago and was enchanted by the city and people then, and in love with the food. When her producer mentioned it to her, thinking she would turn it down since she was seeing Sam, she said, "Yes, of course I will go. But can I get funds to fly back to Virginia every once in a while?"

That night, three months ago, over a glass of wine, she'd told Sam what she was going to do. He'd felt betrayed because she'd made the decision without even talking to him. He wanted her to be independent and take the job, but she knew he was hurt. Reggie did feel she was a little selfish in not talking to him, and promised him she would discuss things with him in the future.

To lighten the mood, Reggie grabbed her tablet and cuddled closer on the couch. She showed him the places they could see and where they could eat. Sam laughed and said, "Is food all you ever think about?"

"In New Orleans, of course. But here there are other things on my mind," she replied. "Gosh, I wonder what they could be?" She turned towards Sam and hungrily kissed his lips, running her hands through his hair. Sam pulled her closer and began kissing her neck gently, slowly unbuttoning her blouse all the while. He kissed her lips hungrily with kisses that took both their breaths away. He gently pulled her shirt off and her cami over her head.

"Let me see you naked," she whispered into his ear." They both started pulling off each other's clothes and felt the heat of the moment take over. Their passion rose as if

their bodies were on fire, hotter and hotter until they both moaned in ecstasy. They laid in each other's arms, content at actually being in love.

Chapter 3

Putting the caller out of her mind, Reggie dressed and headed to the television station. Today she was filming an interview with a group of the top chefs in New Orleans. Many of them had been in the restaurant business for years, and had passed on the love of owning a restaurant to their families. They agreed to let Reggie and Jane come to their restaurants and film. During and after Katrina, the proud people of New Orleans had pulled together to keep their businesses going, and many restaurants stayed open to show their support of the city.

It was hard to narrow it down to a few restaurant chefs for the interview, because they were all so good. It was now down to five restaurants. She decided to do the restaurants in the French Quarter itself, but she would have loved to mention the fantastic roasted oysters at Drago's near Bourbon Street, as well as the Commander's Palace brunch, and too many other places in and outside the Quarter she ate at. An easy five pounds she had put on, but they were worth every bite.

Her camera woman, Jane, was really talented and also not afraid to give Reggie pointers on the history of the city, directions, politics, etc. Jane was a native, had survived Katrina, and made the perfect match when doing a documentary. Jane had an *in* with many of the people in the city, which made it easier to set up interviews.

Reggie met Jane in the Quarter, as she now called it, and they went to the first restaurant to start the interview. This was a lovely restaurant with a garden setting and a fountain. The chef and owner greeted them both warmly, let them film the restaurant, showed how they made bananas Foster, a famous New Orleans dish, and sat down to talk about their restaurant and life in New Orleans.

As a reporter, Reggie could tell early on if this was going to be a good interview and if the public would like it, or if she would have to pull every sentence out of who she was interviewing. This one was easy, and the chef and owner a delight. Of course, it did not hurt that as part of the interview both she and Jane got to sample the bananas Foster. The rest of the day went pretty much the same. Each restaurant seemed to want to delight her the most, and she ate and laughed more than she had done in a long time. She even planned to write a thank you note to thank each restaurant for their time and hospitality.

Just as they stepped out of the last restaurant around 5 p.m., Reggie's phone rang. *Must be Sam*, Reggie thought, not looking at the number.

"Hello, Reggie here," she said automatically.

"Hello, Reggie. I hope you're having a good day. I wanted to call back and see how much you would like to donate to our organization we spoke about this morning," the deep familiar voice almost purred into the phone.

Reggie froze. *What the hell?* she thought.

"I asked you not to call anymore, sir, as I won't be donating anything 'till next year," Reggie said, not having time to get an angry tone.

"I knew you would change your mind, so I called back. Am I putting you down for those ten dollars I mentioned this morning? I know we can count on you!"

"Again, sir, do not call me again. Take my name off the list, and if you call again, I will talk to your supervisor."

There was silence, then the man repeated his same speech, ignoring what Reggie had just said. "I know you want to donate. We all have to give in life, and if we don't, it always comes back to haunt us."

Reggie felt her face getting flushed and blood pressure rising. "That's it! Please let me talk to your supervisor!"

"You're right. That is it for now," he said smoothly into the phone. "My supervisor is busy currently. Talk to you again soon."

Reggie just stared at the phone for a while. "What...? But..."

Jane stared at Reggie now. "You look like you have seen a ghost. What is going on?"

"Oh, some donation place bugged me this morning about giving money, and the guy was really persistent. Way out of line. I told him to take my name off the list, and he called me again. What is weird is he is so pleasant and upbeat. Yet, there was this pushiness. Gives me the creeps, Jane."

Jane looked at Reggie. "I have been in this business long enough to know that there are lots of crazy people out there. The monsters aren't in the movies but in real life. If this guy keeps bugging you, you need to tell someone." She then frowned at Reggie.

"I am going to tell Sam, but in the meantime, it just has shaken me a little. Who would have thought one call could get me nervous? Me, Reggie, the reporter." She laughed with less than her usual loud, infectious laugh. "Jane, tomorrow we meet at ten at the Mardi Gras World Museum to add that interview for the show." She had heard it was a perfect place for locals, and was excited to tour it herself. Besides, hearing about all the Mardi Gras floats, she also found out they had plastic animals, characters, etc. they make for amusement parks, along with places in the USA and internationally. It was by the conference center downtown, so it was easy to get to.

Jane lived uptown by campus, so sometimes if they did not have too much equipment, Reggie would hop on the streetcar by her apartment and ride with her downtown after Jane got on at her stop. Jane had regular use of one of the station's SUV's since she was always on assignment for them.

Jane sometimes asked Reggie if Ben, her twelve-year-old son, could watch the interviews, as he too wanted to be a camera person or television reporter when he got older. He was a really nice kid, and Jane was a great mom. Reggie laughed when Jane would ruffle his hair and give him some mom advice. Jeff, Jane's husband, owned a store in one of the tourists' sections of the city, and always had some cool New Orleans shirt on when Reggie saw him. If they were on a shoot near the store, Jane stopped in to bring him a cup of coffee or get him a po' boy sandwich if he had not packed lunch.

"Are you going to stay downtown, Reggie, or do you want a ride back in the station's SUV?"

“I think I will go home, just chill, and watch some comedy or read a book. Besides, Lucy hasn’t seen me since morning, so she will snuggle next to me all night or bug me to feed her. Plus, it has been awhile since I had lots of time to Skype with Sam, and I miss seeing him!”

“Sometime this week, come on over, and my guys can make you laugh with all the stories of their week. Even at twelve, Ben is learning how to cook like his dad, so you’re in for a treat!”

Reggie laughed. She knew Jane loved to eat and her husband loved to cook. They were a match made in heaven. It warmed Reggie’s heart that she and Jane had gotten so close. Reggie was a good cook, but she liked *not* having to cook. Besides, in New Orleans, to stop at her little local dive and take home some red beans and rice on a Monday was her idea of a great meal. Of course, adding a New Orleans beer topped her meal off.