

ONE

ADELAIDE —————

Surely that wasn't . . . it couldn't be . . .

Adelaide froze, squinting into the crowd. Her heart sputtered, then pounded. Her eyes had to be playing tricks on her. Here? No way could—

But it was.

Her lungs held her breath captive. At the same time, hot and cold washed through her chest. Nausea slammed over her. Her knees weakened, her legs locked, but the muscles yearned to run. To get as far away as possible before—

“Ms. Fountaine? Ms. Fountaine?”

She jerked her attention to the fire chief's face and demanded her legs support her.

“Are you okay, Ms. Fountaine?” Concern laced his words.

“What? Oh, sorry, I'm fine.” No, she wasn't. Her heart lodged in the back of her throat. Thumping. Pounding. She couldn't fall apart here. Not now.

The chief continued to stare at her with widened eyes. “There's no evidence of any threat. Someone must have pulled the alarm as a prank.” He frowned, the deep lines digging further into his face. “I'll need to check any security footage near where the activated alarm is located.”

“Yes. Yes, of course. Let me find our head of security.” She glanced around the crowd, looking for Geoff but also for—

“It’s clear for everyone to go back inside. I usually just stand in support when hotel management makes an announcement.” He glanced at her. “In case there are questions or something.”

“Of course.” She cleared her throat. Her mouth felt as if she’d eaten a wad of cotton, but she had a job to do.

“Since we’ll work to find out who’s responsible for pulling the alarm, I’d appreciate you not giving too many details. If you can avoid it.”

“I understand.” Probably one of the sales reps in for the convention—goodness knew they’d been a handful—but she would let the fire department do their investigation for the truth.

“Adelaide.”

She turned at the sound of Dimitri’s voice, letting out the breath she hadn’t even realized she’d been holding. He wore jeans and a button-down shirt. The warmth in his look pulled her shoulders back and straightened her posture.

“The chief says everything’s all right.” Adelaide smiled. “We’re about to make an announcement and allow everyone back inside.” She looked around to include the chief, her training and experience kicking in. “This is one of the hotel owners, Dimitri Pampalon. Perhaps you’d like to say something to our guests, Dimitri?”

“My father’s the owner.” Dimitri shifted his weight from one foot to the other but shook the fire chief’s outstretched hand. “Nice to meet you, please forgive my attire.” His smile came so easily, it was automatic. He nodded at Adelaide. “You go ahead and make the announcement. You’re the GM.”

His grin was so contagious that she smiled back, even though her world had been tilted on its axis. She gestured to the chief. “After you.”

Together in the dusk light of New Orleans, the chief and Adelaide made their way up the front steps of the Darkwater Inn. Adelaide loved her hotel, despite its location in the backdrop of the gritty underbelly of Bourbon Street. She fixed her smile as she faced the people spilling into the street. “I’m Adelaide Fountaine, general manager of the Darkwater. I apologize for your inconvenience.” She gestured to the fire chief. “The amazing and quick-responding fire

department of New Orleans has given us the all clear. Please feel free to return to your rooms.”

People flooded the doors in groups. She kept her stare focused on the faces that passed her, forcing herself to smile at the hotel guests. Some nodded at her as they flowed through the massive glass doors. Maybe she'd been mistaken. Maybe her eyes had played tricks on her.

Maybe, but not likely. Not *that* face.

Adelaide spied the head of security and motioned him over. She led the chief and Geoff toward the security office. Once inside the room filled with monitors, she made the introductions. “Chief Wesley, this is Geoff Auboio, head of security for the Darkwater.”

Quickly, Chief Wesley rolled out a blueprint with the alarms marked and showed Geoff what areas of security footage he needed to review.

The vibration of her cell phone nearly made Adelaide jump out of her skin. She glanced at the caller ID and excused herself. Was it after six already? She answered the call as she stepped into the business offices hallway. “Hi, Daddy.”

“Are you still at the hotel?”

She made her way to her office. “I am.” Her day had been one upset after another, going from bad to worse. And it wasn't over yet.

“Good, glad I caught you before you headed out. I figured you'd be running late.” Vincent Fountaine chuckled. “Can you pick up a loaf of garlic bread on your way? Or whatever you want to go with the spaghetti. I forgot to grab some when I was out today.”

Adelaide Fountaine pressed the cell phone to her cheek, shut her office door, then sat. The well-worn leather contoured to her as she leaned back in her executive chair.

She let out a long breath and bent her head. “Daddy, I'm so sorry, but I'm not going to be able to make it tonight.”

“It's Thursday.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes. “I know, but work's just been crazy today. Mr. Pampalon is out of the country, we've had a high number of staff call in sick, my in-house group is more than a little on the rowdy side, and we have just now been let

back into the hotel after a fire alarm.” She took note of his quick intake of breath. “Don’t worry, there was no fire. The alarm was pulled as a prank, probably by one of my boisterous group, but nevertheless, I can’t leave tonight.”

She ignored the strong impulse to rush to her father’s house and tell him all her problems so he could make everything better. But she knew better. He couldn’t fix everything—anything—even if she could find the nerve to tell him. Instead she pinched the bridge of her nose harder.

“Doesn’t matter. You still have to eat.” No mistaking her father’s authoritative tone.

But Adelaide was the general manager of the Darkwater Inn and, as such, was just as authoritative. “This *is* a four-star hotel, Daddy. I’ll grab something here before I go up to my apartment.”

“You need to get out of there. You work there, you live there, you never leave. That’s not good for you. It’s not healthy.”

She forced a laugh. “Hi, pot, meet kettle.”

“It’s different for me.”

“No, it isn’t. You’re a total recluse.”

“I have to be. I don’t have a choice. You do.”

She didn’t have time to argue with her father. Not now. “Can we talk about this later?”

A knock sounded on her door, followed by her assistant, Vicky, sticking her head in the office. Adelaide waved Vicky inside. What now? “I’ve got to run.”

“Are you okay, honey? You sound a little off.”

A little off? She was way off today in more ways than one. Just like him to pick up on the change in her, however slight, she thought. “I’ve just got a lot going on right now. I’m sorry I can’t make it tonight.” For a moment, she couldn’t push away the wave of guilt rushing toward her.

Vicky, gripping a folder that most likely held a guest folio, leaned against one of the chairs facing Adelaide’s desk and stared out the window, clearly trying not to eavesdrop. Or at least not be obvious about it.

“I worry about you, honey.” Her father’s softened tone almost unraveled her careful composure. And it assuaged her guilt.

A little. “Why don’t I make a big pan of lasagna and bring it out Sunday after you get back from church? I can help you take down your Christmas tree and put it up in the attic.” She held out her hand to Vicky, who passed her the folder. She opened the paper binder over her desk. It contained the pharmaceutical convention group folio. The number for the breakfast meal guarantee had been crossed out in red ink.

“Adelaide, are you really okay? I know you’re busy and have a lot going on, but there’s something in your voice that sounds really . . . You don’t sound like yourself, and it’s more than just being distracted.”

“I’m fine, Daddy.” She could barely force the words past the lump in her throat. “I’ve really got to go now. I’ll call you tomorrow, and we’re set for Sunday. I love you.” She disconnected the call before she blurted out everything. Now wasn’t the time, and this surely wasn’t the place.

She couldn’t let the fear and memories wash over her right now, but later tonight, when she could get out for a stress-relieving run . . . then she’d deal with the emotional mess threatening to strangle her.

Her assistant moved to the edge of her desk. “I’m sorry to bother you right now, Adelaide, but Kellie had to leave for the day. Now the group wants to reduce their breakfast guarantee by almost fifty, and that’s not policy. I told Kellie I’d bring it to you.” Vicky chewed her bottom lip. “I was supposed to bring it to you earlier, but with the fire alarm and all—”

“I understand.” Adelaide glanced over the notes in the memo that Kellie, one of the hotel’s best convention services managers, had listed about the group. “I’ll take care of it, Vicky. Thank you.”

“Adelaide, are you okay? Can I get you anything?”

Was she really that easy to read when she was upset? “I’m fine, Vicky, thank you. Just trying to get everything back on track.” Like she’d carefully done with her life after . . .

“Yes, ma’am. If you need anything, you know where to find me.” Vicky made a silent exit, closing the office door behind her.

Giving herself a mental shake, Adelaide studied the notes for a

moment, taking in all the details. Poor Kellie had her hands full with this group, that was clear. She made a mental note to give Kellie a few extra days off next week. With pay.

A knock rapped against her door, followed by Geoff stepping inside, the fire chief behind him. “We’ve confirmed the alarm was pulled without any threat of fire,” the chief stated.

Adelaide stood, crossing her arms over her chest. “I guess I’m not surprised.”

Geoff nodded. “Security camera showed two men pulling the alarm, after checking the hall to make sure it was clear.”

Great. Pranksters. And these were grown men. Supposedly respected in the pharmaceutical industry. She shook her head.

“The men are easily identifiable on the security feed, and they pulled the alarm closest to their rooms. The police are on their way to bring them in.” Geoff rolled his eyes. “I’ll assist as needed. The *guests* were wearing their convention badges.”

Lovely. “Thank you, Geoff.” Adelaide smiled. Geoff was a good man. Protective.

“Thank you for your assistance, Ms. Fountaine. It’s appreciated.” The chief held out his hand.

She shook his hand. “No, thank you. Your response time was impressive, and I appreciate your thoroughness.”

“We’re going to wait for the police, then I’ll be out of your hair. Nice meeting you, despite the circumstances.” The chief turned.

“I’ll let you know if there is any issue. I don’t expect any, not with the police, but I’ll handle whatever, don’t worry.” Geoff smiled, then ducked out of the office behind the chief.

Alone again, Adelaide sank into her chair and closed her eyes, digging her thumbs into her temples. The pressure hurt but then immediately soothed. Oh, what she wouldn’t give to be able to climb into a hot bath with lots of bubbles and soak for an hour or so.

Her intercom buzzing interrupted her daydream. So much for even a moment to catch her breath. She pressed the button. “Adelaide Fountaine.”

“Adelaide, this is Barb at the front desk. We have a guest checking out who claims he’s supposed to be on the pharm group’s master

account, but I can't find any notation of that. Kellie's gone for the day, so . . ."

"I'm on my way." She snatched up the folder from her desk as she headed to the lobby area.

As she made her way across the marble-outlined floor, she flipped through the notes in the folder for the name and number of the planner for the group. She got in contact with her almost immediately, explained the situation with their guest, and asked her to verify with Barb regarding the master account. "Also, Ms. Parsons, I received a notation of a request to reduce the amount of guarantee meals for tomorrow's breakfast. Unfortunately, at this late date, we can't reduce the number. I'm sure you can understand. Kellie will be back in the morning and will work with you the best we can, but the guarantee number is firm."

After ensuring Barb had heard from Ms. Parsons and the guest was satisfied, Adelaide stood off to the side, watching the lobby area. Good flow. Ease of entrance to the streets of the French Quarter, yet a private courtyard for quiet evenings. Adelaide loved the Darkwater. Always had.

The hotel boasted a history almost as old and rich as the Crescent City itself. Records of the Darkwater dated from the 1840s, and several of the original structures had survived the ravages of time and hurricanes, such as Isle Dernière in 1856, Audrey in 1957, Camille in 1969, and most recently, Katrina in 2005. Adelaide loved the history and nuances of the old building as well as the fact that it'd endured so much, yet still stood proudly.

Across the lobby, familiar zydeco beats filtered from the bar as someone opened the door. A man and a woman wove and wobbled their way toward the elevators. Adelaide frowned. She should probably have a security officer in the area. The group had proven over the course of the last couple of days that they believed in playing hard. And loudly.

She checked her watch—closing in on nine. She should grab something to eat and head up. There was a department meeting scheduled for eight in the morning that she had to oversee. She headed toward the kitchen. An enticing aroma hit her before she

pushed open the swinging doors. Her stomach growled in appreciation and in demand.

“Good evening, Adelaide.”

She smiled as she turned. “Dimitri.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“I love boxing. I love Hallmark movies. I love fishing. I love scrapbooking. Nope, I’ve never fit into the boxes people have wanted to put me in.” ~**Robin Carroll** is definitely a contradiction, but one that beckons you to get to know her better.

Robin’s passion has always been to tell stories to entertain others and come alongside them on their faith journey—aspects Robin weaves into each of her published novels.

Best-selling author of more than twenty-seven novels, Robin Carroll writes Southern stories of mystery and suspense, with a hint of romance to entertain readers. Her books have been recognized in several awards, including the Carol Award, HOLT Medallion, Daphne du Maurier, RT Reviewer’s Choice Award, and more.

When she isn’t writing, Robin spends quality time with her husband of twenty-eight-plus years, her three beautiful daughters and two handsome grandsons, and their character-filled pets at home. Robin serves the writing community as Executive/Conference Director for ACFW.

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