

RECKLESS



AUTHOR OF SECRETS AND LIES

SELENA MONTGOMERY

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Blackboard bestselling author Beverly Jenkins

RECKLESS

SELENA MONTGOMERY

*For Mom and Dad,
Andrea, Leslie, Richard, Walter, Jeanine,
Jorden, Faith, and Nakia.
With my enduring love and admiration.*

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PROLOGUE

August 11, 1991

Smoke billowed from the warehouse and flames licked the metal roof with sharp red tongues, lighting the night sky. Kell raced ahead of the conflagration, sneakers slapping the unpaved road with a steady beat that echoed her thudding heart. Scraggly trees with branches gnarled from meager rain lined the road, providing scant shelter from prying eyes. Kell calculated they had a couple of minutes at best to find a place to hide. Assuming it wasn't already too late.

She spared a jittery glance behind her. Findley ran smoothly with the lean, graceful strides that had won the state track championship in April. The satchel strap across her chest, and the bulging tan bag it supported, appeared to have no affect on her ability to run like a gazelle. But Julia stumbled, her petite frame unused to the exertion. Or the panic. Her sherry brown eyes grew

impossibly wider. Terror gripped the younger girl, born, Kell understood, from more than their current predicament. Julia was recalling the last fire, the last frenzied flight that had taken away all she'd known.

Kell shortened her stride and fell back. Automatically, Fin took the lead. Reaching out, Kell captured Julia's arm, as much to propel as to comfort.

"Come on, Jules. Just a little farther." In the distance, sirens wailed toward the burning warehouse. With a quick pant, she instructed, "Fin, we've got to get off the road. Head for the Grove."

In unison, the trio angled left, leaving the gravel road for a wooded path that snaked from the warehouse through the Grove. The dense copse of trees ran for more than a mile, separating the seedy side of town from the merely downtrodden. Tall shortleaf pines towered over stands of sawtooth oak and hackberry and other trees Kell had learned to name in botany. Fin had teased her only yesterday about her fascination, when she'd made them all go and look at a tree she thought was the mythical *Franklinia* that hadn't been seen since the first settler reached Georgia. A tree that would soon be cinder if the fire behind them reached the Grove.

The thought stumbled her feet and caught in her throat. *How had she messed up so badly?* she wondered wildly. Just two months ago, she and Fin stood on stage, receiving release papers from the prison of high school. Now they were fugitives, on the run from a firestorm that could consume their lives and those they loved.

All because of her.

So it would be up to her to save them. A quarter of a mile into the Grove, she skidded to a stop in a small clearing.

“Fin, we’re good,” she rasped out to the girl who continued to streak ahead. Fin curved around and returned, while Kell bent over to drag air into her lungs. Beside her, Julia collapsed onto the sun-baked earth. Ragged breaths turned into heaving sobs as the sixteen-year-old wrapped her arms around her legs and wept. Kell knelt beside her and draped an arm over her trembling shoulders. “I’m sorry, Jules. So sorry,” she whispered into her hair. “I didn’t mean to. I swear I didn’t.”

The quiet apology brought an oath from Fin. “He didn’t give you a choice, damn it. It was them or us. You picked your friends.” She braced coltish legs wide and swung the satchel over her head and let the heavy bag dangle from her clenched fist. “And I’m not sorry. Not at all. He was about to—”

Kell jerked her head up and shook it once to silence Fin. They wouldn’t speak of that now, not yet. Returning her attention to Julia, she stroked her trembling back, murmured nonsense. Soon, the sobs quieted to whimpers that nearly broke Kell’s heart. She pulled Julia deeper into a hug, brushing a light kiss on the top of the short cap of chestnut curls. “You’re okay, honey. He’s gone.” A lump the size of her fist formed in her throat as she choked out the lie. “He can’t hurt you.”

Fin dropped down to sit on Julia’s other side and

wrapped her arms around them both. “It’s okay, Julia. Let it out. Let it all out.” She dipped her head to brush the other two, and they huddled together, a tight knot of fear and worry.

After a while, Julia raised her head and took a long, slow breath. Kell and Fin eased away, but kept their arms taut around her. Julia wriggled suddenly, playfully. “You two trying to smother me? I can’t breathe. Move.” She offered a tremulous smile and shoved at the two girls lightly. She sniffed the air delicately, the acrid scent of fire drifting above. Soberly, she added, “But maybe that’s for the best.”

Grateful the tears had passed, Kell sat and drew her knees to her chin, staring up at the tree cover. “I can smell the smoke, but I don’t see anything. Maybe the fire is under control.” She didn’t mention that this deep in the Grove, with the wind blowing south, the smoke probably wouldn’t reach them. Aloud, she instructed, “Fin, get the bag.”

Fin dragged the satchel into the loose ring the three girls formed. “Here it is.”

Kell tipped the satchel and stacks of bills fell to the ground.

“Is that real money?” Fin whispered in awe.

“Three hundred thousand dollars.” Kell stared at the pile she’d poured onto the forest floor. Tentatively, she lifted one of the bound stacks with the white banker’s tape that proclaimed it held \$10,000. “Have you ever seen this much money in one place?”

Julia picked up a stack and turned it over in her hands. “We have to give this to the police.” She cast a

distressed look at Kell. “If we do, maybe they’ll believe us.”

With a snort, Fin dismissed the idea and gathered stacks of the cash, letting them fall. “Three orphans with three hundred thousand dollars and a burnt-down warehouse? You really think they’ll believe us? Get real.”

“Fin, we have to try,” Julia pleaded. “Otherwise, when they find—”

“If they find out,” Fin interrupted pragmatically, “then we’ll explain. But I know the police, kiddo. Despite the crap they teach us in school, the cops aren’t our friends. Especially once they know the whole story.”

“Which we can’t ever tell.” Kell stood up, dropping the money to the ground. Rising, she paced away from the clearing, her eyes shut as she ran through the alternatives. But there was only one option. She turned around, opened her eyes, and pointed at the money. “Fin’s right, Julia. We have to keep the money and take care of ourselves. The police won’t believe our story. They’ll put Fin and me in prison and send you off to juvenile detention.”

Julia flinched. “Prison? Why?”

“Because Fin’s eighteen and I’m seventeen. You’re sixteen and a victim, so they’ll probably go easier on you. Maybe.”

“But we didn’t have any other way out!” Julia scrambled to her feet. “If you hadn’t come in there—” She stopped, her breath catching in terrified memory.

Fin leapt up and grabbed Julia’s shoulder. “Easy, kiddo. Don’t think about it.”

“Don’t think about it, and for God’s sake, after tonight, don’t talk about it.” Kell joined her friends and clasped their hands. “You two only showed up to help me. This is my fault.” She shook her head to stop their protests, sadness roiling in her gut. Mistake after mistake flashed through her mind. If she hadn’t gone to the warehouse. If she hadn’t listened to conversations that she shouldn’t have. If Julia and Fin hadn’t followed her, trying to help. *If. If. If.*

“This is my fault. And so is what has to happen next.” Kell took a deep breath and linked her fingers with theirs. By habit, Fin and Julia did the same. “A man is dead, guys. And I’m responsible. I’m going to turn myself in and face the consequences. Tell them that I was alone.” *Goodbye college. Goodbye brand-new life.*

“No way,” Fin spat out. “We’re not going to let you cover for us. Not again.”

“This isn’t breaking curfew, Fin. We’re not talking about Mrs. Faraday putting us on kitchen detail for a month. This is murder. And I’m not going to be responsible for ruining both of your futures.”

“And you’re not going to ruin your own.”

Fin and Kell looked over at Julia, her chin lifted in a sign of resolve both of them recognized.

“Julia, whatever you’re thinking, no,” Kell argued. “This isn’t time for your Three Musketeers speeches. This is an adult decision and I’ve made it.”

Shoulders stiff, Julia retorted, “You can’t tell me what to do. Like you said, this is an adult decision, and I think I’ve survived enough to consider myself all grown up.”

Fin shrugged. "She's got a point."

"Shut up, Fin!"

"No, you shut up and listen for once," Julia snapped. "For eight years, you've taken care of us. First Fin, then me. You've lied for us, covered for us. Been the best sister either of us could imagine."

"Amen," Fin muttered.

Julia smiled at Fin and continued. "Now, you're in trouble. We all are. There has to be a way to save you and protect us. Kell, you start college in two weeks, and I've got another year in high school. We can't throw that away."

"Besides, I'm the one who's destined to wear an orange jumpsuit."

Kell swiveled her head to look at Fin. "Cut it out. You just haven't decided what you want to do. You have a track scholarship to UGA, if you still want it. And Julia, if they find out, you won't be going back to high school. Don't you understand that? I can't let you two destroy your futures."

"I'm not going to college, Kell. We both know that." Fin shrugged again, and a dimple appeared in her cheek as she smirked. "College isn't for me. Plus, I'm a known hoodlum. Like mother, like daughter. A fact we can take advantage of."

Fin broke the circle and reached down to the money lying on the ground. She plunged her hands into the pile and jerked out three stacks. "Three hundred thousand. Three of us. Do the math."

Joining her, Julia began to sort the money into separate groups and said, "One hundred and fifty thousand

for Fin to start her new life. A hundred and fifty for you to pay for law school.”

Fin flung the extra stacks toward Julia, who caught them in her lap. “I’m not taking yours.”

“I’ve got plenty of money,” Julia countered. “I don’t need it.”

“Think of it this way.” Fin passed her the extra fifty thousand in Kell’s stack with a grin. “You take it and you’re as guilty as the rest of us.”

Julia laughed shakily and looked up at Kell, pleading. “We can do this. Come on, you’ve always liked the myth of the phoenix, Kell. A new life born from the ashes.”

“Those were bad men, Kell,” Fin said flatly. “Men who can’t exactly go running to the police either. If we skip town, they’d have to spend a lot of time and money tracking each one of us down. Probably not worth it to them.”

“They know you, Fin,” Kell reminded her bleakly. “Besides, three hundred thousand dollars is a good reason to look for us. That and the fact that we’re witnesses.”

Fin winced, but shrugged philosophically. “Only if we talk. Which means we’ll have to keep our contact to a minimum. I’ll head west or something. We’ll be in touch four times a year. Our birthdays and the anniversary.”

Julia stood, spine stiff with determination. “Are we agreed?”

Kell studied the faces of her two best friends, knowing it would be years before she saw them again. Tears

misted across her gaze, blurring the beloved faces. “We do this, it might be for a long time. Your lives ruined just because I got reckless.”

Fin caught her hand and Julia joined them in the circle. “Reckless, Kell? See, I taught you good.”

CHAPTER I

He didn't have to look inside the room to know what lay in wait.

Sheriff Luke Calder hiked up the last of the three flights of narrow, rickety stairs, already snapping latex gloves onto his hands. The stench that hung in the claustrophobic stairwell belonged to one source only.

The dead. After a career of standing over bodies gone ripe in sweltering heat, he figured the deceased had been lying undiscovered for at least forty-eight hours. The medical examiner would have to confirm his hunch, but his nose didn't lie.

Luke took the final steps and rounded the shadowed corner that led to the fifth-floor apartments inside the Georgia Palace. A rundown motel straddling the city limits, the Palace had been the site of more than a few visits from the Hallden Sheriff's Department. In cramped rooms rented by the week, acts against nature