

# Stalked

Sharyl Bales ∞



*The Signe Series - Book 1*

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

STALKED

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Written by Sharyl Bales.

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# **STALKED**

## **Sharyl Bales**

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# **DEDICATION**

To my daughters.

Leslie, Hethyre and Jennifer.

They made my life complete.



# CHAPTER 1

## *Santa Monica Beach, 1968*

Brittany Carlson was a runner.

Not just an ordinary runner, mind you, out for some fresh air and exercise. Britt ran for sheer pleasure and her face glowed with delight as she sprinted along her chosen path. Her long, clean strides were effortless and came as naturally to her as if she were an antelope bounding along a city trail. It was impossible for the people she sped past not to turn and watch her tall, slim body flying by, mahogany tresses tied back into a ponytail that streamed out behind her like a prize racehorse nearing the finish line.

According to her mother, Britt had never walked. She crawled longer than most babies and then, one day, standing on her chubby little legs and balancing against the edge of a chair, she had simply taken off running and never stopped. Oh, she had learned to walk, but it was harder for her to keep her muscles in check than it was to simply let loose and race across whatever space was in front of her.

It was about 10 o'clock on a bright June morning in Southern California. The wind and sun had only recently dispersed the fog that hugged the coast earlier in the morning and the sky was so blue that it almost hurt her eyes. Brittany was running north, along the sidewalk that ran between the rippling sands of Santa Monica Beach and the parking lots and traffic along Pacific Coast Highway. To her left, waves gently washed along the Pacific shore and a cool breeze ruffled the green fronds of the palm trees standing majestically to her right.

It was extraordinary how the shimmering rays of the sun, once they had broken through that first chilly bleakness, could so quickly banish the remaining mist. Sunlight streamed onto the water, turning it from an oppressive gray into a deep sapphire blue just as people, as if cued by some unseen maestro, began to gather on the pier and on the beach and shopkeepers turned around their closed signs to announce the beginning of another day. Doors and windows opened to the mild breeze.

A trawler chugged past just offshore, its cabin upright in the bow with a bright light atop. It reminded Britt of a story, a Little Golden Book story from her childhood. She couldn't quite remember the tale. Something about a tugboat, she thought, but the fleeting memory faded into a pleasant burst of simple nostalgia.

The endorphins flowed through her body, energizing yet calming the restlessness she had felt ever since she opened her eyes that morning. She had an audition this afternoon. It was a small, but important, part in a big movie and she wanted it desperately. It was time for a break. She had paid her dues with commercials, TV walk-ons and bit parts in small plays. She had been in LA for almost two years taking whatever came her way. She had hounded her agent for this chance and Sasha had come through. Now, it was up to her.

She was ready for Hollywood. She just hoped that Hollywood was ready for her.

# JOURNAL OF THE PATH

Los Angeles CA – Tuesday, 5 March 1970

I waited on the dark sand, indivisible at that hour from the blackness of the sea. I was patient, as I had been taught. I had prepared well as was the way. She was the third and she too would be mine.

I chose her carefully. She was lovely and she could run like the wind.

Soon, I heard her coming to me as I knew she would. Only the barest glimmer of moonlight showed her silhouette against the sky, but I required nothing more. My heart beat loudly as she approached. My body throbbed. I lusted for her. I lusted for this moment. Finally, she was here. Finally, she was mine.

One shot. She fell. I drew my knife. I blessed her blood to the Power. The deed was done. The Path was proceeding in its Divine purpose. The way is clear. She was not the Passion, but she was the Third Prelude to the Power of the Path. She is honored.

The Power of the Path. The ancient way of the Divine. Passed down to those who would serve the Path. Passed down to **ME**. I was chosen and I will not fail. The way is clear. My duty has been decreed. I have been instructed by **THE MASTER AND I WILL NOT FAIL.**

# CHAPTER 2

## *New York City – Friday Morning, May 8, 1970*

True rage is not the fiery red of mere anger. True rage is a white-hot bolt of lightning; a blinding miasma that explodes in the mind and overpowers the senses. It strikes rarely and when least expected, but—just as suddenly—it is gone, replaced with deadly certainty as to the action that must be taken.

Signe Carlson was in such a rage. Sitting rigidly in her chair, she took several deep breaths and willed her clenched fingers to relax. After several minutes, she carefully placed the receiver back onto the phone. Her green eyes were as hard as the emeralds they resembled and her full lips were pressed tightly together into a formidable frown as she thought about the call she had just received from a friend at the LAPD. Her pen tapped sharply on the antique oak partner's desk where she sat, oblivious to the view of Central Park, even though it was basking in the ripeness of its springtime glory. She had purchased this four bedroom apartment in Manhattan specifically for the view, but at the moment, it may as well have been a brick wall.

After taking a number of deep breaths to urge her mind to calmness, Signe could feel the return of rational thought overtake her and she quickly jotted down her priorities on the tablet poised on the desk in front of her. Picking up the phone, she punched the pager number of her corporate pilot and had just enough time to scribble a few additional thoughts before the first line of the five-line phone began ringing. Flight arrangements made, she quickly placed several more calls before she stood up, picked up her purse and her briefcase and walked briskly out the door of her apartment. Now that she was in the process of executing her plans, emotions returned so that Signe felt near to bursting. In reality, she was possessed of the most basic primal instinct, born within the first creatures from the dawn of time, of a mother to protect her young.

The doorman—resplendent in his red uniform with gold braid—had summoned her limo. Signe acknowledged him with an automatic smile. Her mind was miles away; over 3,000 miles away to be exact and nothing could keep her from covering that distance as soon as was humanly possible.

The jet took off smoothly from JFK and Signe settled herself for the long flight to Phoenix. When they reached altitude, she pulled her briefcase from under the seat and took out the two-day-old copy of the *LA Times* that had been delivered by special messenger at a very early hour this morning. The headline was as stark and as fearful as she remembered: **THIRD FEMALE JOGGER MURDERED ON SANTA MONICA BEACH**. The photo that accompanied the article showed the pier as background and a number of police and emergency vehicles pulled up onto the sandy shore. The news story was sketchy as to facts about the current victim, but it gave a significant amount of detail on the prior deaths. Over a period of a month or so, three young women, all with dark brown hair worn in a long ponytail had been viciously murdered by a single gunshot wound to the head. Their right thumbs had been severed and, apparently, taken by the killer. The police had no suspects.

None of these joggers had been her daughter, Brittany, but one of them very well could have been.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Woodland Hills, CA – Friday Evening, May 8, 1970*

Brittany Carlson had finally made enough money from her acting career to buy a house in the hills. It was modest by Hollywood standards, but it was hers and she had worked hard for it. She had owned it for over a year and recently it had become the favorite gathering place for her crowd and they partied there fairly often.

Tonight was a very special Friday night and Britt had planned a real celebration. She had just signed a deal with Baez Productions to star in the movie that everyone was hailing as the sure thing to be the next Oscar winner for Best Picture. It was a much-coveted part, fought over by big name actresses from all over the world, but it had gone to Britt. Her friends were both excited for her and a little jealous; that was how it was in the industry.

Everyone was invited. Everyone, that is, except Rafael Baez or Rafe as he was better known. In the last few months while negotiations for the part were ongoing, Britt had fallen head over heels for the handsome Cuban producer and, although he had not made any overt moves toward her, Britt sensed that he might be interested in more than just her acting talent. With his dark eyes and dark hair, he looked more like a leading man than most of the actors he hired. But everyone knew that Rafe Baez had no time for overindulgence in either alcohol or drugs. Oh, he was known to have a few drinks now and then, but he never used. And one didn't want Rafe Baez to know that they used either or they might not get a chance to audition for one of his productions. It was more rumor than fact, but you just couldn't take the chance; not in this town.

Her friends Bettye and Eric had been adamantly opposed when she casually mentioned that she was going to invite Rafe to the party. They begged her not to even think about it. So far, Rafe had been all business, but she wanted to see him, to spend time with him away from the business meetings with agents and lawyers. She was finally persuaded that this wasn't going to be the right time to introduce him to the gang. They all wanted to meet him, of course. He was a major producer and you never knew when someone with the power of Rafael Baez might take one look at an actor and—wham—off went their career into the cosmos. But not this night. This night was party time.

Britt's living room was inexpensive elegance at its best, due to her sister Lia's help in decorating. She and Britt had hit every yard sale and every secondhand shop within 30 miles and then, with Lia's advice, all Britt had to do buy were a few really good pieces to pull the room together. However, when all of the windows and doors leading out to the patio were open, the view of the pool and the large garden that took up an acre around the house gave it a spacious and more casual feeling. The rest of the hilly property had been left to nature. Tonight, every one of the floor-to-ceiling glass doors were open to the cool breeze of the evening and from almost anywhere in the room you could see the pool glistening in the dual bath of tiki lights and moon. The bar had been set-up on one side of the patio and it was doing a brisk business in free drinks. Wine, the current rage, was flowing from bottles with every good label known to Napa or Sonoma. It had to be California wine, of course. Imports were out; local was in.

Everyone was laughing; having a good time. Music played softly from the stereo and the buffet tables held appetizers, chips and dips. It was nearly 10:30 pm but the party was just beginning to flow. No one did things early here, especially when there was no shooting schedule or audition the next day.

Brittany stopped to chat with Marianna, another of her special friends. Eric, who had just come in from the bar, soon joined them. He held a bottle of Chablis by the neck and topped off Britt's glass with a flourish that almost overshot its mark.

"This is great, Britt. Great, great, great," repeated Eric. "Great party."

Brittany laughed. Eric would think any party was great when the booze was free. "Are you really, really, really sure you're having a good time?" she asked with a smirk.

Eric slid his arm around her and pulled her closer to him, moving with a little bump and grind to the song that was playing. He held his wineglass up and away, as not to splash his expensive, new jacket. Unlike Brittany, he hadn't 'made it' yet and couldn't afford to ruin what, for him, had cost a month's pay. But he knew he looked good in it and that was all that mattered.

"Hey, got a light?" he asked as Jerry walked past.

"What are you going to light?" replied Jerry.

"Oh, yeah, got a smoke, too?" Eric laughed as if this was one of the funniest lines in history.

Marianna giggled and Brittany just smiled as she gently extricated herself from Eric's grasp. Eric was a nut. He was also stoned.

Jerry reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of Marlboros and a black lighter with his initials stenciled on it in gold. Shaking the pack, he smoothly produced the ends of two cigarettes through the torn out hole in the corner. Eric took one, slipped it between his lips and leaned toward the outstretched fire. As the flame hit the tobacco, Eric inhaled in a slow, sensuous movement before straightening up in that studied way of his. He choreographed nearly every action or reaction he made, practicing for hours before the wall of mirrors in his bedroom and he knew what looked good and what didn't. Cigarette in his mouth, his eyes casually scanned the room for new arrivals. You could never tell when somebody important would just show up on the scene. And as suddenly as the thought, man, did someone show up. He couldn't believe the face that was staring at him from the doorway; straight out of *Time Magazine*, *Fortune* and *The Tonight Show*. That was when his jaw dropped open and nearly hit his well-muscle chest. It was a good thing he had just removed the cigarette from his mouth or it would have landed on the carpet. This was one of the very few times in his life that he didn't have a practiced look or, if he did, he couldn't begin to remember what it should be.

Brittany caught his look and was amused by the unabashed amazement on his face. She wondered briefly who had walked in and then knew as a silence fell over the room that it must be somebody very famous. Just for a second, she wondered if it was Rafe. Her back was toward the door so she glanced up at the mirror over the fireplace.

No. It couldn't be, it felt as though ice water was flooding her veins and her body went rigid with shock as she saw the images reflected back to her. Panic filled her mind and she could feel herself begin to sweat despite the chills still racing up her spine. Oh, my god. NO. Not HER. And Lia. No. No, no, no. Please, no. The internal cry wailed in her ears as she fought to keep her face from showing her desperation. Not them. Not here. Oh, god, not now.

Signe Carlson stood in the doorway of the living room. Lia, her oldest daughter, was by her side. There was not a party in the entire world that would not have welcomed Signe Carlson as a guest. Except this one, tonight, in Brittany's home.

"Wow," said Eric with the sound of the single word dragging out into polysyllables. His eyes were dazzled as he contemplated the world famous novelist and successful businesswoman extraordinaire. His voice hushed to a whisper. "Whadda ya think she's doin' here?" he breathed, his voice barely a whisper.

Brittany didn't even hear him. She felt as though someone was stabbing her in the chest and the tip of the knife was plunging directly into her heart. And, then, in one of those rare moments of absolute clarity, she saw her 'friends' and she saw the party as if she hovered over it in some sort of weird out-of-body experience. Worst of all, she saw herself. She saw how cheap it all looked. The women hanging out of their skimpy dresses and some of the men with shirts open to their navel. The half-empty glasses of liquor scattered everywhere, staining white rings on her beautiful oak tables. But most of all, she saw the silver trays with the razor-thin, white lines waiting to be inhaled. The emptiness of it all was transparently clear. She had an overwhelming urge to just bolt out the door and hide. She knew she couldn't.

The actress turned around slowly, a smile of warm welcome on her face, her arms outstretched in greeting as she dragged herself toward the door. The daughter curled up inside, hating this moment, knowing what her mother and her big sister were seeing. Worse yet was that she was seeing herself for the first time as what she had become.

"Mom. Lia. I didn't know you were coming. What a surprise. Why didn't you call? I would have picked you up at the airport." She was babbling slightly, but she couldn't help it.

"Hello, sweetheart," said her mother in that low, husky voice of hers. "I'm sorry to just drop in on you like this. Of course, we didn't know you were having guests." Her mother was looking straight at her, green eyes locked on hazel.

Brittany saw the sadness in her mother's eyes. All at once, she knew the pain of a broken heart. It was no longer a trite phrase from a maudlin love song; the dull, thudding agony was a physical reality and it hurt as nothing had ever hurt before.

The actress spoke again. "Mom, you know you're always welcome here." She turned to her older sister and gave her a big hug. "Lia. You look great. How are you?"

"I'm fine, Britt," Lia replied quietly. "How are you?"

"Great. Just great." God, she sounded like Eric. Why did she sound so stupid? Where was the brilliant conversation of just moments ago? Somehow, it had dried up the minute she saw her mother's reflection in the mirror. The only good thing was the hour. Britt had

been busy playing hostess and had only had time to do a short line so far. She had a little buzz going, but she was still in control. In fact, she made sure she was always in control. Being one of the gang was one thing; overdoing it, as some did, was another.

“Hey, let’s get you guys settled in. Then you can come back and meet my friends.” Brittany desperately wanted her mother out of this room. Would these nitwits have the brains to get rid of the stuff while they were gone? She couldn’t trust them. “Mei-li,” she called, gesturing to her own housekeeper rather than to one of the help that had been hired for the evening. “You remember my mother and my sister?”

Mei-li nodded politely. “Of course,” she replied in perfect English. “Welcome, Mrs. Signe, Lia.” Mei-li had immigrated to America a little over five years ago. She was the best thing that had happened to Brittany since she had been able to afford to hire full time staff.

“Mom,” said Brittany, “why don’t you and Lia go and freshen up. Your rooms are ready as always. Mei-li will get Henry to bring in your luggage and I’ll be there in just a second.”

“Of course, my dear,” replied her mother with a strained smile. She turned and walked out the door, as if actually complying with her daughter’s implied order. Lia was right behind her.

“Mei-li,” hissed Brittany as soon as they were gone. “Get rid of everything. Quickly. Please?”

“Yes, Britt,” she said, understanding what Brittany wanted but not entirely sure why. Her lovely almond-shaped eyes looked at her employer with concern; her head tilted slightly sideways, giving her the look of a curious bird. “Why are you upset?” she asked. “You usually can’t wait to see your family.”

Brittany hung her head, her shoulders drooping. “It’s because my family is seeing me—like this. Mei-li, I’ve really screwed up. I know you’ve told me and I know I didn’t listen, but I see it for myself now.” The beautiful face with the faintly red-rimmed eyes looked up. “You’re more of a friend to me than anyone in this room. You know that. Help me.” she pleaded.

“I’ll take care of this.” She paused as she looked at her sandaled feet as if for inspiration and then back at her employer who was just as much her friend. “Because it’s not here when they come back does not mean that they did not see it,” she warned.

“I know,” said Brittany miserably. “But I’ll be damned if I’m going to have my mother and my sister in a room with this stuff lying all over. Get rid of it. Flush it down the toilet or wash it down the sink or whatever,” she continued, anger lacing her voice. “And get rid of Eric and anybody else you think should go. In fact, get rid of everyone.” She clutched Mei-li’s arm as tears welled in her eyes.

Mei-li put her hand over Brittany’s giving her a gentle squeeze of assurance. “I will take care of this, Britt. Dry your eyes and go to your mother. She’s waiting.”

Brittany nodded, wiping at her eyes and willing herself to stop crying. She turned to follow the path her mother and Lia had just taken. She wondered if they still wanted to see



her. She wondered if they still loved her. She had never been so ashamed in her life.

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