

Preview of

BELLY FIRES

... Even death can't kill the flames of passion

By

B.L. Wilson

Belly Fires...Even death can't kill the flames of passion

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C HAPTER ONE: A week after the crash

FIRST, THE MEN used a hydraulic wrench to lower Reggie's coffin into the welcoming dark brown earth of Ohio. Then, they settled JJ's smaller coffin next to his mother. If Lieutenant Governor Charlene Ford hadn't been there...hadn't stayed to see her family's final resting place as she watched the men cover both souls with the nearly frozen dirt of Reggie's birthplace, she would not, could not have accepted their deaths. Her tears fell like rain in a mighty hurricane. She couldn't stop them if she wanted to and she didn't want to. She didn't want to think anymore. It hurt too much. Every time she closed her eyes, all she could see were their badly burned bodies in the makeshift morgue at the local high school.

Even now, while riding in the limo back to the hotel, it was difficult to imagine them dead. *Hard to believe they are gone forever*, she thought, looking out the tinted rear window of the limo that her personal assistant and right hand man, Lorenzo Lopez, had arranged. *I'll never again feel Reggie's warm body holding me at night. I'll never hear her telling me how much she loves me after all these years. I'll never see JJ laughing as he and Rusty wrestle on the floor of my office. Dear God, how am I going to get through this?*

She issued a ragged sigh and fought back another sob. She reluctantly pulled her gaze away from the farms they passed along the highway as they headed back to the hotel. Her assistant squeezed her hand and patted it reassuringly, a large beige hand with a sprinkling of dark hair on top of her smaller cocoa-brown hand.

"It's gonna be all right, Charlie. You'll see. We just have to get you back in the saddle again. You'll finish out your term, then you'll decide whether you want to run for governor."

Furious at him for not understanding the depth of her all-encompassing pain, Charlene yanked her hand away from his tender touch to fire a warning shot. "How dare you say that to me as though they aren't dead, Larry? We just attended two wakes, a memorial service, a funeral, and the interment for both of them here in Ohio. That's not counting the services and memorials scheduled in the city and at the state capitol. I need time to mourn, you bastard! Don't talk to me about freaking politics, governing, or any other bullshit right now! I'm not the goddamn lieutenant governor. I'm a woman who just lost every freaking thing that meant a freaking thing to her. If you don't get that, then you're fired, Larry! End of story."

Lorenzo Lopez raised his hands in defense to ward off additional threats from his boss and best friend. “I’m sorry, Charlie. I didn’t mean to upset you. I was just thinking ahead.” He paused to study her angry face, then quickly reached over to pull her glasses down for a moment. It was good to see the fire in her eyes again after so many bleak days and nights of shock, sadness, grief, and then silence. “That’s what you pay me to do. But you also know I’d do it for free,” he remarked quietly.

He continued to stare, noting not for the first time how much the two deaths had taken their toll on his best friend. Her usually warm dark brown eyes were hard and filled with icy blackness. Her customarily smooth, milk chocolate skin looked blotchy and especially swollen around her eyes, while her normally round face looked thinner. Sunken cheeks made her face look gaunt. After noticing how her charcoal gray suit hung on her chubby frame, he wondered how much weight she’d lost over the past couple of weeks.

“Screw you, Larry! Screw God for not taking me too! I hate all of you,” she muttered, knocking his hands away, then readjusting her sunglasses. She sniffed into her handkerchief as she leaned her forehead against the cool tinted glass of the navy blue stretch limousine. She thought about taking off her wraparound sunglasses but decided not to in an attempt to hide the puffy bags under her eyes and the tears she knew were about to flood her eyes again. She grew quiet, watching more Ohio farmland pass by the limo’s window and thought, *Why can’t I be asleep and this mess, all of it, be another bad dream? Why can’t this be a nightmare that I wake up from later on tonight? Everything would be back in place the way it is supposed to be.*

Reggie would be asleep next to her, snoring softly the way she always did when she slept on her back. The moment Reggie heard her moving about restlessly on the bed they shared, her solid, sturdy body would scoot closer and she’d stroke her arms. Then Reggie would whisper soft nonsense words in a scratchy, half asleep voice until she stopped moving and went back to sleep. If that didn’t work, Reggie would cuddle with her. She’d fall back to sleep, using Reggie’s ample chest as her pillow and the extra warmth her solid body provided as her very own personal furnace. After fifteen years of marriage, they still slept in the same bed at night. They still enjoyed each other’s company and conversations at breakfast and dinner whenever Charlene’s crazy schedule of constituent-inspired meetings, state Senate hearings, campaign events, and rubber chicken dinners permitted it.

“Oh my God, Reggie, I miss you so much,” she whispered, closing sad, damp eyes and remembering how supportive Reggie could be.

*

EARLY IN HER CAREER, before becoming a member of city council, when she was a local attorney, Charlene was invited to discuss her plans for creating a new sewer treatment plant in an upper middleclass neighborhood that did not want the plant. The meeting with community and neighborhood representatives was from four p.m. to five p.m. at the local elementary school’s

auditorium. The original meeting had included a small group of six community activists and residents, two community board members, and her two opponents. She expected to see a panel of ten people at the most in the large auditorium and no media. Because the topic was a hot-button issue, the two community boards involved decided at the last minute to open the floor for public discussion. It was a fact she wasn't made aware of until she arrived and noted the long line of residents marching outside the school with several migraine-inducing, ear-ringing bullhorns, vivid placards, and homemade signs.

Of course, the media found out about the demonstrators on the sidewalk outside the school, so they were there in full force with news vans, camera people, and reporters both local and national. Two of the school's security force had to escort her through the crowd of noisy residents screaming at the top of their lungs as they waved signs that read, "*Not in my neighborhood; we don't need no stinking plant,*" as well as other variations on the same theme.

Soon enough, it was after eight p.m. and the line of speakers still looked endless to her tired eyes and empty stomach, since she hadn't eaten dinner, but very pregnant belly. She remembered thinking that at least she was sitting down at the table and not standing on her weary, swollen feet. This was to be her final event of the day, over by six or seven p.m. The school had set up a mic'd conference table at the back of the auditorium to accommodate her, her opponents, board members, and the selected community representatives. They also provided a microphone for the audience that sat in front of the conference table. Later on, additional microphones were provided in several other locations in the large room to speed up the unwieldy Q & A.

During the last ninety minutes, Reggie had been beeping her to ask what time she was coming home for dinner. Not wanting to be rude, she ignored Reggie's beeped messages, which were getting more and more desperate as the night wore on.

When r u coming home? R

R u on your way? R

Want me to come pick u up? R

R u ok? R

What's up with not answering me? R

How's the baby? R

Could u please answer one of my messages, huh? R

Charlie, if I don't hear from u in the next five minutes, I'm sending in bloodhounds to find u!! R

Instead of responding to Reggie's messages, she chose to answer audience questions when she wasn't busy listening politely to audience members' tirades and rants about why the treatment plant should be built elsewhere.

By eight thirty, the chairperson of the community board had called for a twenty-minute break in the public forum while the police department and the board members evaluated the situation. They were receiving complaints about the loudness of the demonstrators outside the school building and the crowd of noisy media, as well as neighborhood people tying up traffic while

they waited to come inside and voice their opinions on the treatment plant.

Meanwhile, inside the auditorium, Charlene had taken a large gulp of water from the bottle in front of her. At the same time, she glanced down at the vibrating beeper on her waist. Pregnancy seemed to make her thirsty. She found she was drinking boatloads of water all the time, then pissing it out minutes later.

“Bet that’s your husband checking up on you and the baby, huh? Is this your first?” one of the board members, a dark blonde woman about her own age with startling blue-green eyes who had been watching her most of the evening, asked her. She pointed to the beeper lighting up at her waist.

Charlene sighed as she looked up and met the woman’s curious eyes. She’d never hidden her sexual orientation, so it was odd to hear the woman ask about a husband. She rubbed her protruding belly in light circles. “Yes. This is our first child. Doctors told us it’s going to be a boy.”

The woman grinned. “I bet your husband will love that. Mine always thought we should start off with boys, then try for girls.” She sighed with regret. “My body didn’t cooperate with his plans, though. We have three girls.”

“I don’t have a husband.”

“Oh, I just assumed...” The woman frowned and her voice faded. She didn’t know what else to say.

Charlene could see she was thinking about what she’d just said. She decided to give her more to consider. “My life partner loves the idea that one of us can carry a baby to term. We tried twice before it finally took with me. Boy or girl, she doesn’t care, as long as the baby is healthy.” She watched the woman’s eyes grow large with surprise and the color of her irises deepened with intensity. *I guess she didn’t get the memo on my lifestyle.*

“Oh my, I didn’t...know,” the woman stuttered and flushed, not knowing quite how to respond to her declaration.

Charlene caught several people at the table studying her and then frowning after they overheard the conversation. A woman sitting across from her ignored her tablemates, gave her a thumbs-up signal, and leaned over the table to say, “Congrats. I’d love to send the baby something. When are you due?”

Two men seated next to her added, “Yeah, we’d like to get in on that too. You have to give us your email before you leave tonight.”

“Well, if our calculations are correct, it should be right after the elections in November.”

“Wow, that’s cutting it close, huh?”

“Yeah, but that’ll make one hell of an early birthday present for the baby if you win, won’t it?”

Reggie had slipped into the auditorium, strode up to the table, catching the tail end of the conversation. She stood behind Charlene’s chair and placed broad hands on her shoulders. “It’s not an ‘if’ she wins. The baby is due after she wins the election in November.”

“How do you know she’ll win?” one of the women seated at the table asked Reggie.

Reggie exhaled, then began her spiel. “I refuse to believe Charlene won’t win. She has a strong program for education that encompasses smaller class sizes, better teacher evaluations that depend on knowledge of subject matter and how kids learn instead just on testing procedures. She has good ideas for balancing our city’s budget. She believes in unions, but she also thinks people should take responsibility for their actions. She’d like to see true affordable housing that working people can afford built in all five boroughs. Our subways, highways, and waterways are in serious need of repairs. She has some ideas on how to do that too.

“For instance, why do we allow the installation of brand new road surfaces to go bad within five to eight years? They should be guaranteed for twenty years. Any repairs needed prior to the twenty-year period should be done at no cost because they are under a warranty just like when you purchase a new washing machine or dryer. While she wants to reduce the crime rate, she also believes strongly in community policing. That means when police get to know people in their precincts as neighbors rather than criminals, they are less likely go for their guns and shoot innocent people. Neighborhood kids are less likely to get violent with the cop on the corner when they know he’ll tell their mama how they acted up. Let’s not forget the environment. She wants to create green jobs and green spaces through city, state, fed, and private funding. She also wants to...”

The woman who gave Charlene the thumbs-up grinned at Reggie, then interrupted. “Are you sure it’s your wife running for city council and not you?” She caught the two men’s eyes. Smiling at Reggie, they too nodded in agreement.

Reggie chuckled at the woman’s remarks and squeezed Charlene’s shoulders. “She’s the politician in the family, but she has me well trained.” Placing an arm stretched around the chair’s back, she squatted down next to Charlene’s side to whisper, “Did you eat yet? How are you feeling? Is the baby acting up?”

Charlene rubbed her watermelon-sized belly. “He’s being quite the well-mannered gentleman tonight. No kicking, yet. He hasn’t moved to put pressure on my kidneys either.” She sighed. “That’s means we’ll be up all night tonight when our son wakes up and starts kicking.”

“He’ll be a little night owl like me.” Reggie smiled at Charlene. Pride was clearly visible in her twinkling brown eyes. She nodded in agreement. “Want me to bring you anything? I won’t ask how long you’ll be. I saw the line out there and the demonstrators too.”

Still rubbing her belly, Charlene shook her head as she looked at Reggie. “No, Reggie, we’re good right now. Should I ask how long the line is?”

Reggie shook her head. “You don’t want to know, honey. I did hear one of the lieutenants discussing how they wanted to close this event down without causing a riot. It sounded like he might be speaking to his boss, so it might be over soon, and we can go home.”

Charlene nodded at Reggie, then looked at the people waiting at the microphone and beyond. She sat watching them and thinking how much they all should have a chance to speak. “Hmm, that would be nice, Reggie, but I want to stay. The people inside here should have the

opportunity to speak tonight, since we all know they've been waiting the longest. Some of them I remember seeing at three o'clock when I arrived. I'd like to give folks waiting outside contact numbers and schedule another day for the forum. I'm sure all of us here would be willing to come here for another round." She caught the attention of her two opponents, Robby Drummond and Edward Lee, and watched them nod in agreement.

"That sounds good to me," Robby remarked.

"You know me, Charlie. I'm always up for another opportunity to talk to my constituents."

"Hey, Ed, unless the Board of Elections held an election that Robby and I don't know about, they aren't your constituents just yet."

Edward Lee, the first Asian American to run in the district, grinned at his word choice and raised his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay, Charlie; I stand corrected. But you can't blame me for trying. Right, Reggie?" His eyes twinkled as he caught her attention, knowing she would add a bit of humor to the conversation. He and Reggie hadn't known each other long, but he liked her wit.

Reggie chuckled and squeezed Charlene's hand as it rested on the table. "As I said before, Ed, she's the political one in the family, not me. I'm just here to make sure she and the baby get home all right."

"Guys, why don't we go find the chairperson and let her know that we're willing to stay until the people inside finish their Q & A, then we'll come back another day to hear the rest?"

Charlene recalled that that was exactly what they did that night. *With Reggie gone, who would be there to take care of me now? A thought struck her like a two-ton sledgehammer between the eyes. Oh my God! My baby boy is dead too.* She knew it was true because she'd just watched the gravediggers cover them both with fresh brown Ohio soil. She wanted to scream at the injustice of it. *Why them and not me too? They were good, so good, and I loved them so much. What am I going to do without them? I wanna die too. God, please let me die too.* She was tired, so very tired of all of it. Her brain couldn't function anymore. It couldn't answer the questions roaming around inside her throbbing skull. The constant rhythm of squeaks and groans of the limo's axles when the tires slapped against the frozen roadways of Ohio finally lulled her to sleep.

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THE GRACEFUL SPIRES of an older church came into view and, a minute later, the entire gray stone building arched upward from a steep hill like a choir of angels struggling to be free of their earthly bindings. The navy limo carrying the bereaved lieutenant governor and her best friend struggled up the long hill that led toward the aging church's rear parking lot. As per an earlier agreement, the driver circled the large, tree-lined gravel lot twice, making sure no media representatives were lurking, hidden by the group of cars and vans parked in it.

"The lot looks okay to me, sir. I don't see nobody snooping around. Is it okay to pull up to the

side entrance over there and let you guys out?" The driver pointed to the second set of tall wooden doors.

Lorenzo glanced out of the window, searching for news vans and reporters. It looked like only church members had parked their vehicles in the lot. It helped that the local police department had posted officers at the church's entrances and exits as well as the parking lot to prevent sneak attack interviews. Against his objections, Charlene had demanded no press at the Ohio gravesite or Reggie's church in Ohio. He'd tried on numerous occasions explain how a grieving widow always made good copy for a run at higher office when the current governor Malcolm Sweeny left. Charlene wouldn't consider it. There were so many great ways to use this tragedy, but once again, Charlene was unwilling to listen to any of his ideas.

"Yeah, that'd be good, Anthony."

He sighed with regret, then wondered what mood Charlie would be in when he roused her. He thrust out his chin to scratch the bristle underneath it. Damn it, he should have shaved this morning. He was starting feel like the wolf-boy from *Teen Wolf*, or maybe the naïve male nurse from *Being Human* who also happened to be a werewolf was a better image. He turned to study Charlene Ford as she slept. No, a better comparison: he felt like Rod Serling, lost in a *Twilight Zone* not of his own making. This whole thing...the last week and a half left him feeling so helpless. He couldn't do anything to make her feel better. Hell, she hadn't even smiled at him recently. He exhaled. "Guess she doesn't have much reason to smile, does she?" he murmured softly.

The driver stopped to park the limo a few paces from the crooked, long walkway leading to the church. "Charlie, wake up, sweetheart. We're at her family's church." Larry gently shook Charlene until she opened puffy, red-rimmed eyes. He watched her slowly sit up and stare at him in confusion. She pushed up her wraparounds to scrub dark, pain-filled eyes with her palms. "What?" She glanced out of the tinted side window without letting it down and grew suspicious, then angry. She recognized the church they'd had left several hours ago where the funeral services were conducted. From there, they drove to the cemetery. "Why are we here again, Larry? I just want to go home and be alone. Can't you understand that?" she barked out in a hoarse voice. "I need to be alone. Take me to the goddamned airport, now. With any luck, my plane will crash and I'll be with my family tonight."

Larry sighed and reached out to squeeze her hand.

Charlene jerked away from him. "Don't you dare touch me! You brought me here, now take me back to my hotel right now, goddamn it!" she yelled, scooting up and away from her best friend until she was on the edge of the wide, leather-covered rear seat. She stretched a hand out to tap on the transparent safe-glass partition, which the driver immediately let down.

"Yes, ma'am, what can I do for you? What do you need?"

"Take me to the goddamned airport right now!" Charlene demanded.

The driver turned around to study the man who hired him before he answered carefully, "Ma'am, I'd love to do that, but your flight doesn't leave for three hours. My instructions are to

take you back to the church, wait for you in front of the church, then I'm supposed to take you and Mr. Larry to the hotel for your things. After the hotel stop, I take you and Mr. Larry to the airport the long way to avoid the media."

"I don't give a shit what your goddamned instructions are, driver!" Charlene stated, her voice raising nearly an octave with every word she spat out. "I demand to go to the airport now. If I have to wait three hours, so be it. It'll be my ass stuck in a chair and not yours." She threw her glasses on the seat to rub her temples in a circular motion to ease the migraine she could feel trying to make its throbbing, aching presence known. "Why can't anybody understand how I feel? I can't stand to spend one more minute in this godforsaken place."

"Ma'am, I'd surely like to do exactly that, but my company won't allow me to deviate from my schedule or my route."

"I'll see that you get a very generous under-the-table tip if you do this for me."

The driver sighed. "I still can't do it, ma'am. You didn't hire me. The guy sitting next to you did. Mr. Larry would have to approve the changes in my route and my timeframe. If he tells me okay, I'll do anything you want, ma'am."

Charlene rubbed her temples, trying to keep the fierce headache at bay. "Do anything, huh? How about bringing my wife and my son back from the dead? Can you freaking do that for me, driver?" She watched the driver shrug narrow shoulders, then shake his head vigorously, and that made his cap bob up and down at a crazy angle. She studied the too-large navy chauffeur's cap, wondering when it would finally fly off his skinny head. "No, you can't? Then what the hell good are you, driver?" She flung open the door, barely missing the minister's assistant, who had come out to see why the limo was just sitting in front of the church's entrance and nobody was exiting. "Let's get this shit over with, Larry. Apparently, I have a goddamned schedule to keep," she snapped over a shoulder as she strode to the church entrance and missed the driver's mumbled but heart-felt apology.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, ma'am. I heard she was a real fine woman. No son should die before his mama," the driver muttered quietly, watching her rapid exit. Despite her nasty attitude, he liked the woman occupying the back seat. He could only hope somebody would miss him that powerful much when he was no longer of this earth.

"I'm sorry about that, but she hasn't been doing very well. See you inside, okay, Reverend?" Larry mentioned to the assistant minister as he scrambled out of the car, hustling to reach the door and open it before Charlene did. He made it with an inch to spare. "If you want, I'll do all the talking when we get inside, Charlie," he whispered, bending his lean frame around her in a protective gesture.

Charlene's eyes narrowed and she flashed him a sullen, angry look. "No, you won't. You've done quite enough already today, Larry. I'll be fine. I'm used to pretending to feel good when I don't. I think I can handle this shit for the next thirty minutes."

Larry groaned. "You might want to cut out the profanity until we're back in the limo, Charlie. And it's sixty minutes, not thirty. They want us to share dinner with them."

“Eat shit and die, Larry. Tell that goddamned driver we’ll be leaving for the hotel in thirty minutes, not the hour you planned without consulting me,” she hissed as they stood at the church’s door, arguing like two children.

“Jesus! We’re in a church, Charlie, so watch your language,” he whispered.

“Need I repeat myself? It’s thirty minutes and eat me, Larry.”

“Damn it, Charlie! You’ve been like a freaking, weepy zombie until today. How was I supposed to know what you wanted or didn’t want when you wouldn’t talk to me?”

Charlene shook an accusing finger at her best friend. “Language, Larry...watch your language. We’re about to enter a place of worship...God’s house. Now open the freaking door and walk me inside like the good son-of-a-bitch you pretend to be and not the bastard you really are. What’s that rev’s name again?”

Larry inhaled, repeating the mantra in his head. *Ignore her mouth. She’s under stress. It’ll be okay. She’s under stress. She doesn’t know what she’s saying when she’s under stress. Remember, she’s under stress.* “He’s not gonna be there. He had another service to conduct this afternoon. That’s why his assistant is here.”

“Duh, that’s who I meant, Larry. What’s the assistant preacher’s name?” Someone was standing behind her. She could feel a presence and she smelled his cologne...an updated version of Old Spice maybe and it was a nice, clean, masculine scent.

“It’s Pierce, Lieutenant Governor Ford...my name is Austin Pierce.” He squeezed her shoulder in sympathy. “I just wanted to say....”

Charlene jerked away from his touch. “Please don’t tell me how sorry you are for my loss, Reverend Pierce. I don’t think I could stand to hear another one of those goddamned expressions of sympathy today.”

Reverend Austin Pierce blew hot breath against his long, bony hands and then rubbed his arms to bring the warmth back to them. “I was about to ask you both if we could please go inside. I forgot my overcoat and my sweater. I’m just wearing a long-sleeved shirt under this rather thin robe.” He watched the lieutenant governor turn around to raise a questioning eyebrow at him and then allow the beginnings of a smile to break through her sad face. He offered her a nonchalant shrug. “The congregation claims that I’d probably forget my brain if it wasn’t still attached to my skull. My mother says the same thing too.”

“Larry, open the door and let the poor man go inside to get warm. After he thaws out, I’m sure he’ll lead us to the food.”

Embarrassed by her own incorrect assumption and her foul mouth, Charlene tried to make a joke, but deep inside where nobody could see, she hurt so badly that nothing was funny anymore. She was certain she’d never laugh again. The pain never left her. The prescribed drugs she took couldn’t quell the deep ache that engulfed her entire body. No amount of sleep when she could go there helped either. She tried to talk to Larry about how she felt, but the words wouldn’t come and she didn’t have the energy to force them from her brain to her mouth. She finally just gave up talking, content to let the fog of drugs and despair overwhelm her. The pain had become such

a constant companion that she wondered how long it would be before she'd have a meltdown.

Today was different. She felt strange. She had a great need to talk, but it was as if a monster had taken over her body. She was a pod person just like in that movie, only she wasn't trying to blend in with friends and family. Instead, she was saying things...nasty, hurtful things to the people she loved. She screamed at Larry when she wasn't busy cussing him and all his ancestors. She tried to bribe the limo driver, then tossed some disparaging remarks his way when he wouldn't go for it. She didn't even know the man, but she wanted to kill him and Larry moments ago. She was cussing God inside a church, of all places. If her very proper parents were alive, they would be appalled at the profanity dripping effortlessly from her lips. For the hundredth time, she wondered what was wrong with her. Once again, she had no answer to the question haunting her waking hours.