

Vendetta

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Quest Books

Nederland, Texas

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ISBN 978-1-932300-70-3
(Formerly 1-930928-56-4)

Second Edition

Revised, Re-edited, Reformatted in 2007

First Printing 2007

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover design by Donna Pawlowski

Published by:

Regal Crest Enterprises, LLC
4700 Highway 365, Suite A
PMB 210
Port Arthur, Texas 77642

Find us on the World Wide Web at
<http://www.regalcrest.biz>

Printed in the United States of America

This book is for Barb, because without her encouragement, faith,
and love it would still be just a dream.

Chapter One

THE NOVEMBER AIR held a pleasant chill, which was a welcome change from the humid summer that had preceded it. Whenever the breeze picked up, colorful pockets of leaves danced their way down the solemn city street. A lone street lamp shed the only light on a rather isolated section of the block. That would not have been the case two years ago when Anthony Vinnelli was mayor. Back then the entire street had been flooded with light, as had many of the streets in the eastern part of the city, due to the high crime rate. Now, however, under Mayor Tomson's administration, the streetlights had been drastically reduced to save the city money, as Deputy Mayor Hawthorne all too often reminded the Larson City Police Department.

On this particular night, Nic Stone and Jimmy Jamison were more than happy with the darkness that engulfed them. They sat in their unmarked Chrysler sipping tepid coffee from Styrofoam cups and waiting. For the past two hours, they had been *not so patiently* waiting for one Marty Geller, a small-time dope dealer and now snitch. Marty was an ex-con who, like most ex-cons, had no desire to do more time. Seems like Marty didn't have a very good time in prison, either due to a lack of his drug of choice, or the overabundance of male companionship. So Nic and Jimmy, the two narcotics detectives who had busted him six years ago, decided it was time to put Marty to good use. That's what brought them here tonight.

"Where the hell is that little puke?" Jimmy grunted. "It's almost midnight for Christ's sake."

Nic threw her empty cup into the backseat. "He'll be here. Marty knows what we'll do to him if he doesn't show."

"Damn right he does. By the way, did I tell you my kid sister called? She's coming to town tomorrow. I gotta pick her up at the airport," Jimmy said with excitement.

"Hasn't it been like three years since you've seen her?" Nic asked.

Jimmy sighed and knitted his brow. "Yeah, three years, one

month, and ten days. But who's counting?"

Nic peered through the night vision binoculars. "Good thing you're not keeping track."

"Well, excuse me for caring about my baby sister."

"Jimmy, I think it's cute how protective you are of Carly."

Jimmy scowled. "Yeah, well I better not hear any razzin' from the guys, or you're the first person I'm gonna be looking for."

Still no sign of Marty. Nic placed the binoculars on the dash and threw up her hands in mock surrender. "Hey, I understand. Remember, I have a little sister, too."

"Yeah, but you two don't actually get along, now do you?" Jimmy rolled his window down and lit up a cigarette that he had extracted from the pack in his shirt pocket. "Besides, with this new job of hers I have reason to worry. She's always traipsing all over God knows where." Carly had taken a job as a photographer with National Geographic a little over a year ago. Jimmy was proud of her, but he'd prefer she had a job with much less travel.

"So where is she flying in from?" Nic asked.

"Australia. She was doing something with that thing they have down there," Jimmy said.

Nic smiled. "You mean the Great Barrier Reef?"

"Yeah, that's it. So how would you like to join us for dinner tomorrow night? I'd like you two to finally meet."

"Sure, that would be nice," Nic replied.

"Great. Well I gotta take a piss, so keep your eyes peeled. I'll be right back." Jimmy reached up and turned the dome light off, then he quietly opened the driver's side door.

"Make it quick," Nic said, never letting her eyes leave the warehouse at the end of the block. She unwrapped a stick of Ice Breakers gum and slid it into her mouth. The spicy cinnamon flavor tasted refreshing after the coffee. Nicole Stone had been Jimmy's partner for the past two and a half years. In that time, they had become a pretty good team, though Nic had been skeptical at the start. She still remembered the look on Jimmy's face when they were introduced. Lieutenant Harold Raimos had paired them up after Jimmy's partner had been killed in a holdup. He had been off-duty at the time when he took two slugs in the chest at point-blank range. Jimmy was quite shaken by the whole thing, so Lieutenant Raimos thought pairing him with a woman, especially a woman who had just gotten her gold shield six months before, would be a good challenge, or maybe a good diversion for him. It took him several months to come to terms with his partner's death, but during those months Nic and Jimmy had become good friends.

About six months into their partnership, Jimmy discovered something about Nic that Nic thought would ruin their friendship

as well as their partnership. Jimmy found out, quite by accident, that Nic was not the least bit interested in men, any men. She had prepared herself for what she was sure would be a huge falling out, not to mention the ramifications of the department finding out. Much to her surprise Jimmy had accepted it and said that it actually made working with her easier. After all, Nic was a “knockout,” as Jimmy put it. She was tall, with jet-black hair, piercing blue eyes, and a physical presence that seemed to intimidate most men. The knowledge of her sexual orientation allowed Jimmy to be himself once he realized he didn’t have a prayer with her. In little time, they became good buddies. Eventually most of the precinct found out over the next two years and most were okay with it, though there were the occasional slanderous statements, usually made whenever Jimmy wasn’t around.

Nic spotted some movement at the corner of the warehouse. A small light hanging down by the overhead doors illuminated the loading dock enough for her to recognize Marty as he climbed the stairs beside the dock. Nic leaned over to the driver’s side window and rolled it down all the way. She tried to do this without losing sight of Marty. “Jimmy? Jimmy, get back here. Marty’s going in.” She watched as the warehouse door opened and Marty stepped inside. She placed her headset on, but she heard nothing from the bug they had wired to Marty’s chest. She checked the connections but still nothing.

Jimmy, hearing his partner’s call, zipped up his fly and returned to the car. He squatted next to the door and spoke through the open window. “Is he inside?”

“Yeah, but I’m not getting anything on the radio. He must have fucked something up with the wire. We’re gonna have to go in after him. He won’t know we can’t hear him. He’ll be a sitting duck.”

“Well then, let’s get going,” Jimmy said, sliding a full clip into his Glock and easing back into the driver’s seat. He started up the car and pulled it to within ten yards of the warehouse.

Nic radioed for backup, then tore the headset off and tossed it onto the dash. She unsnapped her underarm holster and removed her 9mm Beretta, then reached down to check the Sig/Sauer in her leg holster. They got out of the car, and within seconds, they were flanking the warehouse. They both knew backup would take five to ten minutes, and Marty may not have that long. Jimmy gave her the signal, and he made his way up the stairs leading to the overhead doors. Normally, they would both go through the door on the dock, while two other cops covered the side entrance near the back of the warehouse. But without knowing Marty’s status inside, they’d have to cover both entrances themselves and hope that backup arrived soon.

Once Jimmy was secured next to the door, he held up his hand, fingers spread, then he closed it and re-opened it signaling a count of ten to Nic. They had done this a hundred times before, each knowing and relying on the other's abilities. Nic made her way to the side entrance, counting as she ran along the side of the warehouse. She was on five when she got to the door. Still counting, she tried the doorknob, but it didn't turn! *Three*, she'd have to blow the lock, *two*, 'cause she wouldn't make it back to Jimmy, *one*, in time. Nic fired one round at the lock and hoped for the best.

Jimmy watched Nic disappear around the corner as he kept count. When they reached the count of one, they would each enter the warehouse boxing in the occupants. Hopefully, Marty hadn't given himself away by repeating the phrase that would have sent them all inside, "Well...I gotta get going." With the wire not working, they'd need his testimony for a case. He was down to four. Nic should be at the door by now. Jimmy tried the knob and it turned. *Three*, he took a deep breath, *two*, he turned the knob slowly, *one*, he flung the door open as he heard the sound of a shot.

The interior of the warehouse was dim, and before Nic could get inside, several shots ricocheted off the door casing above her head. Diving inside, she landed beside a huge pile of wooden crates. Gunfire and footsteps were all she heard. Marty had given them a rough idea of the layout of the warehouse, so she knew approximately where the buy was going down. Taking a deep breath, she steadied herself against the crates, and then she began returning fire.

Jimmy rolled through the open door and came up in a squat, his right hand gripping the gun, his left palm supporting both. He heard a table crash to the ground and several people yelling. "It's the cops! Let's get the hell outta here!"

There were too many crates piled up around him for him to get a clear look at the people attached to the feet he heard running from the room. He had this door covered, and he knew as well as he knew anything in his life that Nic had the other door covered. *So where the hell was everybody running to?* he wondered. *And Marty, where the hell was Marty?* Still in a crouch, Jimmy made his way to the edge of the crates and cautiously peered around the corner. BANG! A shot sailed right past him, splintering part of the crate to his right. *If I could just see over the top of this crate*, he thought. BANG! This one pierced the crate he was braced against. "Jesus!" Jimmy said, louder than he wished.

"Hey you, behind the crate. Why don't you come out like a good little piggy?" the voice taunted. "Oink, oink," the voice added. Laughter erupted from behind the crates across the room.

"Not quite what I had in mind, but thanks for the offer,"

Jimmy yelled.

Nic had let off four consecutive rounds from her Beretta before ducking behind a crate. She heard a shot, a single shot. It sounded like it was over near the other entrance. Then she heard someone talking, but she couldn't distinguish what was said. Light fixtures suspended from the ceiling by thick rusted chains made the other side of the warehouse brighter. Sliding one of the crates that provided her cover slightly to one side, she peered through the crack. From this angle she spotted three guys. Two were crouched behind boxes, and one was behind an overturned table. Then she heard Jimmy's voice.

"Listen," Jimmy said. "Why don't you guys just drop your weapons and come on out?" Jimmy knew he had to stall. *Backup should be there any minute*, he thought. He hoped Nic was all right. If she was, she should be making her way along the back of the warehouse.

"No, you listen, pig! I'm gonna put a bullet through this piece of sewer slime if you and your partner don't drop your weapons and come out!" The guy behind the table stood up, holding Marty by the back of the collar. Marty's shirt was ripped open and the wire wrapped around his throat. "That is, after I strangle him with this wire, of course."

Well, this plan's gone to hell, Nic thought. Not only was their snitch caught, but he was probably gonna get himself killed, and things weren't looking too good for her and Jimmy, either. Watching the scumbag who was holding onto Marty, Nic glanced up at the ceiling. She noticed one of the long fluorescent lights suspended from the ceiling was directly above Marty and the scumbag. If she could sever the chains with a couple of shots then Marty might have a chance. After all, he wasn't a complete idiot. *When that light falls*, she thought, *he'd better get his ass out of the way*. She would have a better line of sight a little more to her left. Silently, she moved a few feet to her left, still hidden behind several stacks of boxes. Nic hoped Jimmy would be able to take out one of the other two guys and then hopefully the other one would surrender. She raised her gun and closed her right eye. The chain was in her sights. Nic took a breath and fired. The shot hit its target. The chain holding the one side of the light was severed, and the massive light began to fall. Nic immediately sighted the remaining chain and fired again. Now the light was heading for the floor, and all hell was breaking loose.

Jimmy heard the shot and knew it was his partner. For a split second, he was not sure what she fired at, but then it became very clear. Jimmy was still crouched behind a crate, but when he realized what Nic was up to he knew what he had to do. He stood up

and pushed one of the upper crates to the floor. This drew fire from the two guys not affected by the light, which had already crashed to the floor. Jimmy dove to his left and opened fire. He hit one of the guys, a tall blonde wearing a black fedora, who yelled out and then hit the floor with a thud. The other guy, a heavyset Asian, decided to fight instead of give up. He threw himself over the boxes and was headed straight for Jimmy, who fired, hitting the guy in the right shoulder but not even slowing him down. "Shit!" Jimmy cursed.

Nic watched the light crash to the floor, landing on top of Marty and his captor. Before she could react, Jimmy took out one of the guys behind the boxes. The fluorescent light bulbs shattered when the fixture impacted with the table that Marty and the scumbag had been hiding behind. For a brief second, she thought it was over. Then she saw the heavyset Asian dive over a stack of boxes. Actually, it looked more like he simply plowed through them like a hot knife through butter. Jimmy was on the floor, and the Asian bulldozer was headed straight for him. Without so much as a blink, Nic squeezed the trigger in rapid succession. BANG! BANG! BANG! The three rapid shots startled Jimmy. His mind was still processing data. Before he could roll out of the way or get up to mount a defense, the Asian was lying face down on the concrete floor of the warehouse. All three shots had hit him square in his massive chest. Crimson red blood seeped onto the floor from the wounds he had sustained. Jimmy, lying prone on the floor, breathed a sigh of relief. He turned his head and saw his dark haired partner shouldering her weapon. She gave him a wink.

"You're welcome," she said as a wide smile spread across her face. Jimmy just started to laugh.

IT TOOK AN hour to get everything taken care of at the warehouse. Backup had arrived a few minutes ahead of the ambulance. Both the Asian guy and the blonde were dead. Marty had sustained some minor cuts and abrasions but was far luckier than the scumbag who had been threatening to kill him. When the light had started to fall, Marty had shoved the guy away from him and dove to the side, hoping to avoid the crashing fixture. He was mostly successful. The light had landed on top of the other guy, who by then had decided to cover his head and run, but it had been too late. By the time Nic and Jimmy uncovered him, he was unconscious and barely breathing. The ambulance transported Marty and Louis Gato, the scumbag, to St. Peter's Hospital.

It was two-thirty when Nic and Jimmy finally returned to the 21st Precinct. A call to the hospital informed them that Louis Gato

was still out cold. A six-inch gash on the back of his head required thirty stitches to close and was the obvious cause of his current state. Marty was being held for observation, and both men were under police guard. An hour later, having finished their paperwork, Nic dropped Jimmy off at his West Side flat, which was directly above Mama Sirelli's Pizza Palace. The entire block smelled of garlic and simmering tomato sauce. Nic took a deep breath, savoring the aroma. Jimmy stood on the sidewalk, holding the car door open.

"You want to grab a bite? Sirelli's is open till four."

Nic was tempted. "Some other time, Jimmy. I should get home."

"Suit yourself," Jimmy said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Night, Jimmy." She watched her partner enter Mama Sirelli's, then she pulled her black Nissan Xterra from the curb and headed to her house in suburban Fairfield Hills, nearly twenty miles from the precinct where she worked ten hours or more a day. She liked living a bit outside of the city. She figured that she spent enough time dealing with the city's scum. She'd be damned if she would live next to them, too. People who knew where she lived were actually surprised, which in turn surprised Nic. For some reason, no one expected her to be living in the suburbs. Nic didn't give a shit, though. She never had, and suspected she never would give a crap about what other people thought.

She turned onto Kingston Drive and threw a wave to the paperboy who was walking down Mrs. Kramer's driveway. Nic pulled into her driveway and activated the car's alarm system. The street was quiet. The night air was cool and exhilarating. The detective paused in front of her steps, took in a deep breath, and stretched her long frame to get the kinks out. Tonight had been exciting, and the adrenaline had not completely worn off. *Getting to sleep wasn't going to be easy*, she thought, even though physically she was beginning to feel the toll the day had taken. Grabbing a stack of mail from the box, along with the newspaper, she unlocked the door and went inside. A purring pile of fur immediately greeted her. She reached down and scooped the cat into her arms. More purring accompanied by constant kneading were her reward.

"I know," she said, "you missed me." Nic stroked the sleek black fur. "I bet you're a little hungry, too." Harley's tail flicked back and forth, a sure sign of the cat's happiness.

Nic carried the feline into the kitchen and poured out a saucer of milk. Harley was all too happy to get down once the saucer was on the floor. Nic reached into the cupboard and grabbed a wineglass and uncorked the White Zinfandel she kept on hand in the refrigerator. She headed to the bathroom to draw herself a bath

after first retrieving a book from the office. She knew that a hot bath, a glass of wine, and a good book would get her relaxed in no time.

JIMMY SAT IN his usual booth near the back of Mama Sirelli's with a glass of red wine and a small pepperoni pizza. It was ten minutes past four, and Jimmy was the only one in the place. Vinny Grayson, the night manager and an old friend of Jimmy's, told him he could stay until they had cleaned up. Jimmy thought about the evening's excitement, and he smiled. Being a cop was all Jimmy had wanted since he was five years old. The job had its highs and lows, but he had never regretted becoming a cop for a minute. He downed the last of his wine, paid Vinny, and exited the restaurant.

Jimmy knew he had better get some sleep if he expected to pick up his sister in a few hours. He stretched his six-foot muscular frame then walked up the flight of stairs leading to his apartment. The hallway was dark. Jimmy made a mental note to change the bulb in the morning. He reached his door, but in the darkness, he fumbled with his keys. He thought he heard something, so he turned to see what or who it was, but darkness veiled everything. He couldn't even make out his own hand if he held it up to his face. He couldn't shake the feeling that he wasn't alone, and he started to reach for his gun when a deafening BANG pierced the stillness surrounding him. Suddenly, a mind-numbing pain ripped through Jimmy's left leg. As his leg began to buckle another shot rang out. This one caught him in the chest. Jimmy collapsed on the floor as footsteps descending the stairs echoed in the hallway.

SCATTERED ALONG THE edge of a deserted beach, palm trees swayed in a warm tropical breeze. A brilliant turquoise sea splashed rhythmically onto the beach a few yards ahead. Nic looked around. She was stretched out on a blanket laid over soft, white sand. She was wearing her bathing suit, a stunning one piece with a purple and navy design. She thought she was alone when she heard an unfamiliar voice from behind her. She turned to meet the most amazing woman she had ever seen. The blonde, silken hair, lithe body, and dazzling green eyes held her in a trance.

"Let's go for a swim," the woman said as she extended her hand to Nic, who just smiled in response.

"Yes, let's," Nic said. She wanted to get up, go to the woman who was standing on the edge of the surf, motioning with her hands, imploring her to come. If only the ringing would stop. *Where was it coming from, she wondered. There should be no ringing here, no*

ringing at all. Her dream was slipping from her, slipping slowly away. She didn't want it to, she wanted to hang on, but she couldn't. She was awake once again. The phone rang. "This had better be important," Nic grumbled. She groped in the darkness for the phone and hit the speaker button.

"Yeah, Stone here," she stated flatly, her head still buried in the pillow.

"Stone, it's Lieutenant Raimes." His voice sounded grave.

Nic was startled. Raimes never called her at home. She sat up and turned on the light, which momentarily blinded her. "Yes, Lieutenant. What's up?"

"I'm afraid I have some bad news, Stone." He took a breath and continued. "Jimmy's been shot."

Nic picked up the handset. "What? Jimmy was shot? How? When?" She felt her hand shaking as she struggled to hold the phone.

"Around four-thirty this morning. Looks like he got ambushed in his hallway."

Nic couldn't believe what she was hearing. It was only six o'clock. She had dropped him off little more than two hours ago. *How could this have happened?* "Where is he now? Is he alive?"

"Yes, he's alive. They took him to St. Peter's Hospital. He took two slugs, one in the right side of his chest and one in the leg. You better get over to the hospital ASAP."

"Who did it?" she asked, her jaw clenched.

"We don't know yet. At that hour of the morning there weren't a lot of people around. We've got cops canvassing the area. Maybe we'll get lucky."

"Thanks for the call, Lieutenant," Nic said weakly.

"Listen to me, Stone. I don't want you going off half-cocked, you hear me?" he commanded. "We'll find the bastard that did this, and I want no loose cannon fucking up the investigation."

"I'll be at the hospital with Jimmy," Nic said, not even listening to the lieutenant, who was still talking when she hung up the phone.

Nic was at the hospital by six-thirty. She dressed so quickly she wasn't even sure what she was wearing. She went straight to the information desk and was informed that Jimmy was being prepped for surgery. The nurse was not allowed to give out any more information, even when Nic flashed her gold shield and informed the nurse that Jimmy was her partner. "I'm sorry, miss. You'll have to speak to Dr. Austin. You can find him on the fourth floor."

"Thanks," Nic said as she headed to the elevators.

The west wing of the fourth floor of Saint Peter's hospital

housed the intensive care unit. The floor was a flurry of activity. Nurses and orderlies were filtering in and out of rooms, where patients were monitored around the clock. A tall man in his early fifties was standing by the nurse's station studying a clipboard he was holding. He was wearing a white lab coat, and he sported a gold Rolex on his left wrist.

"Excuse me," Nic said. "I'm looking for Dr. Austin."

The man looked up from the clipboard. He eyed the woman who was almost as tall as he was. For some reason he felt intimidated, yet he wasn't quite sure why. "I'm Dr. Austin. How can I help you?"

"I'm Nicole Stone, Jimmy Jamison's partner. How is he doing?"

The doctor's cool demeanor changed to a slightly more compassionate one. He looked into cool blue eyes and the determined expression. "Oh," he said. "Well, your partner is lucky to be alive. He took a bullet in the right side of his chest. It just barely missed his lung. He was fortunate that it didn't ricochet off any bones and lodge in his spine."

"Is he going to be okay?" Nic stared directly into his eyes.

The doctor felt the sudden desire to look away. He returned his attention to his clipboard. "We are prepping him for surgery. We had to wait until he was stabilized. He also sustained a wound to his left leg. The bullet passed through cleanly. I expect I'll have him in the O.R. for two to three hours, depending on what I find when I get in there."

"You still haven't told me if he's going to be all right." Nic felt herself starting to lose control. If this guy didn't answer her she thought she might rip his head off, and she doubted he would be any use to Jimmy after that.

Dr. Austin cleared his throat and looked her sternly in the eyes. "Unless I find something unexpected when I get in there, I expect him to recover. Of course, he'll be on crutches for a while. A bullet tends to be destructive, even when it isn't lodged inside the body."

No shit, Nic thought, but she managed to remain composed. "Thank you for your time, doctor."

"I'll talk to you after the surgery is over," he said and walked away.

Nic returned to the elevators and headed for the cafeteria to get some coffee. She knew she'd need something to get her through the next few hours. *What a great way to start the weekend*, she thought. Of course, it was too early for the cafeteria staff, so she would have to make do with the vending machine coffee, another bonus.

Depositing her coins she made her selection: black. She was

rewarded with a paper cup filled to the brim. Gingerly, she took a sip, and it instantly began to soothe her frayed nerves. Sure the doctor said Jimmy would recover, but she would believe it more once she saw Jimmy herself. She looked at the items in the vending machine, Danish, bagels, cookies, but her stomach was in knots, so food was out of the question. She took a seat at a small table in the corner of the dark cafeteria. *Why?* she thought. *Why Jimmy? Sure, he's put a lot of people away. But were any of them stupid enough to try to kill a cop?* She held the hot cup between her hands. The warmth felt good. She started ruminating about last night and everything that had gone down at the warehouse. She needed to talk to Marty. He would probably be released this morning, since they were only keeping him for observation. She would hook up with him later and ask him a few questions about last night. She looked at her watch. Only six forty-five. Jimmy wouldn't get out of surgery until at least nine. She decided that sitting around the hospital for the next three hours would drive her insane, so she left her beeper number with one of the nurses at the nurses' station on the fourth floor and headed for Jimmy's apartment.

TWO SQUAD CARS were parked in front of Jimmy's building when Nic pulled up. She parked her car in the first spot she could find, which was a few doors up from Jimmy's place. She flashed her badge at the cops guarding the entrance to the building as she stepped over the yellow tape, which read "Caution Police Line Do Not Cross." Two technicians from the forensics lab were dusting the doorway for prints. Inside Jimmy's apartment, Nic found two detectives from the 21st Precinct. Tom Sanders and Paul Mahoney were looking through Jimmy's mail when she entered the room.

Paul Mahoney spotted her first. Her raven hair, still slightly damp, was pulled back into a ponytail. She had on a faded pair of denims, a royal blue T-shirt, and a black leather bomber jacket. "Sorry about Jimmy, Stone. How's he doin'?"

"He's in surgery right now. The doctor said he was lucky the slug he took in the chest missed his lung." Nic looked at the stack of mail sitting on the table. "So what have you turned up?"

"Not a damn thing, I'm afraid. We were checking the mail to see if there was anything unusual, like hate mail or something," Sanders answered, dropping himself into one of the chairs that surrounded the kitchen table. "Maybe we'll get lucky with the slug we dug out of the doorjamb."

"What about any cases you two have been working on?" Paul asked.

Nic's brow furrowed. "I've been going over them in my head,

but no one is coming to mind. I'll run a check on anyone Jimmy's arrested in the past five years. Maybe somebody recently got released from the joint." Nic shuffled through a pile of mail, carefully examining the return addresses.

"Listen, Stone, not that we don't appreciate it," Tom cleared his throat, "but you know the rules. This case is too close to home for you. Let us handle it." Tom wouldn't look Nic in the eye because he knew what he would see.

"Fine, officially you will handle it, but if you think for a split second that I won't be involved, then you must be crazy." Nic just smiled, first at Tom, then at Paul. Both men quietly returned to the mail they were going through.

The last piece of mail in the pile jarred Nic's memory like a lightning bolt. It was a postcard from Australia. It was a gorgeous picture of a hotel, which was completely surrounded by deep blue water. Nic turned the card over. It read,

Having a great time. The water is beautiful, and the hotel is fabulous.
See you soon.
Love Carly.

"Shit!"

Paul looked at Tom, then at Nic. "What's wrong?"

"I forgot that Jimmy's sister is flying in today to visit him."

"Can't you get a hold of her and tell her what's happened?"

Tom asked.

"I don't know where the hell she is now. All Jimmy told me was that she was coming in from Australia and that she'd be here today. I don't even know when." Nic started sifting through more of the stuff on Jimmy's table. *Maybe he wrote down the time and the airline*, she thought. "Did either of you see any notes or anything?" She threw them an irritated look.

"No, just some bills, a postcard, and a *Sports Illustrated*," Paul said.

"I'm going to check his desk. You guys check the coffee table," Nic commanded.

"Yeah, sure," Paul said. They both walked into the adjacent living room. A stack of newspapers was on one end of the coffee table and a stack of magazines on the other. They both sat down on the sofa. Paul picked up the swimsuit edition of *Sports Illustrated* and started fanning the pages while Tom scanned some miscellaneous papers that were scattered over the table. Most were notes on things to do or pick up at the store.

Paul held up the magazine. "Wouldn't you like to be trapped

on an island with this?"

Tom looked up. The blonde in the picture was lying on her stomach on a white sandy beach wearing a tiny black bikini. "Anytime, any island," Tom replied with a lecherous grin.

Nic walked into the room waving a small piece of paper. "Bingo," she said. "Northwest Airlines, Flight 17, arriving at eight-thirty this morning."

Nic couldn't remember the last time she had seen a picture of Carly, and she knew she needed one if she hoped to spot her getting off the plane. She walked over to the television, a twenty seven-inch Magnavox that Jimmy purchased last fall. On top were several photographs of various sizes. There was a picture of Nic and Jimmy when they received the Governor's Medal of Bravery for thwarting a bank robbery and saving the lives of twenty people. There was a photo of Jimmy and his first partner, Johnny Holmes, fishing at Johnny's cabin on Lake Wintocka. There were several pictures of Jimmy with his mother and his aunts, and in the center of all the pictures, in an antique silver frame, was a photograph of Jimmy and Carly. Nic figured it must have been taken at least four years ago. *Carly was stunning*, Nic thought. Blonde hair, shoulder length and wavy, a cute little nose, and an inviting smile. She looked a little like Jimmy, especially around the eyes and nose. They were standing in front of a Christmas tree. Jimmy towered over her. She couldn't be more than five and a half feet tall. Jimmy had his arm around her, and Carly looked as if she had just heard a great joke.

Nic looked at her watch. It was already seven-thirty. It would take her thirty minutes to get to the airport, maybe forty if traffic was heavy. "Well, guys, it looks like I'm gonna have to get to the airport."

Tom rose from the sofa and yanked the *Sports Illustrated* from Paul's grip. "Hey, what did you do that for?" Paul complained.

"We've got work to do. Or did you forget why we're here?" Tom said sarcastically.

"I didn't forget," Paul answered.

The forensics team walked in and announced they were finished. Paul and Tom went over to discuss what, if anything, they found. Nic went to the phone to call the hospital. The receptionist at St. Peter's put her through to the intensive care unit. The nurse who took the call informed Nic that Jimmy was still in surgery and would be for at least another hour. Nic discussed the forensics team's findings with Paul and Tom before she left for the airport. To her disappointment, few fingerprints were found, and they probably belonged to Jimmy. The bullet that went through Jimmy's leg was recovered from the doorjamb and was sent to ballistics.

Paul and Tom went down to the street to see if the cops canvassing the neighborhood came up with any witnesses. Nic told them she'd call them later from the hospital to see how things were progressing.

Traffic through the west end of the city was moderate. It looked like it was going to be a fine fall day. The sun was shining, and the temperature hung around forty-five degrees. Nic drove faster than usual to ensure she would get to the airport before Carly's plane landed.

Quincy Airport was in the northeast end of the city and was still under construction. The old terminal building, which was built thirty some years ago, was partially torn down and would be the site of a new two-story parking garage. The new terminal building was an impressive two-story structure shaped like a football goal post. The baggage area and several airport shops were located on the first floor, while the gates to the various airlines were spread across the second floor. Nic parked her car in the short-term lot and checked her watch. She'd made it with twenty minutes to spare.

Upon entering the airport, she studied one of the Northwest monitors to see if Carly's plane was on schedule. Flight 17 arriving from Los Angeles was on time at Gate 5. Nic stopped by the newsstand and grabbed the morning edition of the *Larson Chronicle* since she hadn't gotten to read the one she had at home then she took the escalator to the second floor. As she walked to the gate with the newspaper tucked under her arm so she could keep her hands in her jacket pockets, her thoughts returned to Jimmy. She silently prayed that he was going to be all right. She wasn't a religious person by any means, but to whatever God there was, she prayed. It wasn't going to be easy to tell his sister what had transpired a few short hours ago. Nic wondered how his sister would take the news.

She approached the checkpoint and removed her gold shield, flashing it at the security guard. Once acknowledged, she slowly removed her gun and walked through the metal detector. She proceeded on to Gate 5 where a handful of people were loitering about. Some looked anxious, others just bored. A small boy with a mop of yellow hair crawled along the floor pushing a plastic fire engine amongst the chairs. Nic took a seat by the window and unfolded her paper. She watched the boy for a moment and then wondered where his parents were. She mumbled to herself, "And people wonder how kids get abducted."

Chapter Two

ACROSS TOWN IN a small diner, two men were enjoying a greasy bacon and egg breakfast. Salvatore Linetti mopped up the yellow yolk with his butter-soaked toast. He loved bacon and eggs and had eaten it almost every day for the past forty years. He knew it would probably kill him someday, that is, if his profession didn't. "This is great," he said, swilling down a mouthful of coffee.

Leo Tolstrom nodded his head in agreement, his own mouth too full to talk. The early morning's events had given him a ravenous appetite. The waitress, a short stout woman in a blue uniform, appeared and added more coffee to their cups. Leo didn't like her. She looked mean as hell and reminded him of his first parole officer. She was a real bitch. Salvatore grabbed the waitress by the wrist before she could get away. "Listen, doll," Salvatore licked his lips, enjoying the salty taste of the bacon, "bring us some more bacon and toast, okay?"

The waitress glared at Salvatore. "No eggs?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No eggs. Just the bacon and the toast, doll."

The waitress jerked her arm away. She yelled to the bald guy working the grill. "More bacon and toast for these two, Hank."

Sal looked at Leo. "So, you ready to finish this shit today?"

Leo looked up from his plate, his mustache dripping with yolk. "Sure, Sal. I'm always ready, you know that."

"So you keep telling me." Salvatore wiped his massive jowls with the napkin he had spread across his lap. "Listen, Leo, I know you only been outta the joint for a couple of weeks, that's why I'm giving you a break."

Leo started blinking furiously. "I know, Sal, I know."

"So when we finish the job we been hired to do, I want to know you're gonna lay low for awhile."

"Sal, of course I will. I'll disappear for a month or two."

"Make it two, Leo. Make it two."

THE PLANE LANDED right on time, its wheels touching the runway at exactly eight-thirty. By eight thirty-six, it had taxied to the terminal and by eight forty-five passengers began to disembark. Nic folded the newspaper up and turned her attention to the incoming passengers. She felt the knot in her stomach tighten. She carefully watched the crowd. An elderly couple appeared first; then a man in a pinstripe suit carrying a briefcase; another man, this one in jeans and a college jersey; another couple, younger than the first, their arms intertwined followed by a woman with a leather backpack slung over her shoulder. The woman scanned the area, obviously searching for someone. *Someone*, Nic thought, *she wouldn't find*. Nic walked over to her. "Hi, you must be Carly."

The woman was clearly taken by surprise. She stared at this rather imposing woman. "Who are you?"

"I'm your brother's partner, Nicole Stone."

"Oh," she said surprised. Her demeanor immediately softened, and she smiled. "Let me guess, my big brother was too busy to come and get me, right?"

Nic hated what she was going to have to say next. "Not exactly, I'm afraid." Nic grabbed Carly's elbow and pulled her to the side out of the flow of traffic. The knot in her stomach tightened more. "Listen, there is no easy way to tell you this, so here goes. Jimmy's been hurt," Nic said.

Nic held her up as she felt Carly's legs go a little limp. "Hurt, how?" Carly's face grew serious. The smile completely gone.

"Why don't we sit for a moment?" Nic pointed to a row of chairs lining the aisle.

"What do you mean, hurt?" Carly asked abruptly. "I just spoke with him the other day."

Nic took a deep breath. "Carly, he was shot sometime around four o'clock this morning in the hallway of his building." Carly looked like she had just been hit in the face with a brick. Nic instinctively put a reassuring hand on her back. Telling her partner's sister, a sister he hadn't seen in three years, that her brother was lying in a hospital was the last, the absolute *last* thing she wanted to be doing. The woman was visibly shaken and on the verge of tears. *Not tears, please, anything but tears*, Nic silently pleaded.

"Just tell me he is going to be all right." Her green eyes, the color of jade, implored Nic for the confirmation. Green eyes. She had a vague thought about green eyes, but she couldn't quite get a handle on it.

"Miss Stone, he is going to be all right, isn't he?" Carly laid her hand on Nic's knee. She seemed to have gone to another place.

Suddenly, Nic realized that Carly was talking. "I'm sorry, what

did you say?"

With a perturbed look, Carly repeated her question. "Is he going to pull through?"

"Yes. He is in surgery right now, but I spoke to the doctor this morning, and his prognosis is good."

"He's in surgery right now? What are we waiting for? Let's get going." Carly sprang to her feet, and Nic followed suit.

The crowd had dissipated a little, so they quickly made their way to baggage claim.

"Where was he shot?" Carly asked, weaving a path through an apparently reunited family. Everyone was hugging and kissing and crying. Nic cringed as she followed closely behind Carly. For a relatively short woman she sure could walk fast. Nic took a couple of long strides just to keep up with her.

"A bullet passed through his left leg, and he took another shot in the right side of his chest." Carly stopped dead in her tracks, almost causing Nic to slam right into her. Nic grabbed Carly's shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Carly turned, tears streaming down her face, and she just buried her head in Nic's jacket. At first Nic didn't know what to do, but then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, she put her arms around her. "Shhh, it's all right. Everything is going to be all right, Carly, I promise. Jimmy's a fighter. He'll come through fine, I'm sure of it."

Carly looked up and forced a smile. "I know he will." She was reluctant to release her hold on Nic. She buried her head in the leather jacket once more. It was so soft, and Nic's arms felt so comforting. She barely knew this woman, though she did live up to Jimmy's description. She was beautiful. Hair as black as the night, and she was tall, almost as tall as Jimmy. Carly noticed that Nic didn't seem to be letting go of her, either. Carly looked up again and was captured by the penetrating blue eyes that looked back at her. "Thanks for coming to get me. I...appreciate it." She finally released her hold and stepped back, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

"It was no problem. Besides, do you really think that I would let my partner's little sister take a cab from the airport?" *No way*, Nic thought, *especially not when the scene at Jimmy's apartment would have scared her half to death*. "Come on, let's get your bags. Oh, and you can call me Nic." She smiled as they resumed their journey to baggage claim.

THE BLUE FORD sedan cruised slowly up Kingston Drive. Upon finding the house bearing number thirty-four, the driver

slipped the car into a parking space along the opposite side of the street. Elm trees, their leaves scattered on the street and sidewalks, lined both sides of the block. The street was quiet, except for the occasional dog walker. Sal sat in the passenger seat, an uncomfortable fit for a man his size. His knees were crammed up against the glove box, and he was losing the feeling in his feet. By contrast, Leo, who was at least a hundred pounds lighter, was quite comfortable behind the wheel. His eyes shifted from one side of the block to the other. "What do we do now, Sal? Just sit here and wait?"

Sal, irritated by the question, answered, "No, stupid. I told you we're just scoping out the area. She probably won't be back here till tonight. So tonight we'll be waiting, just like last night."

"Okay, Sal. Whatever you say." Leo nodded his head nervously.

"Damn right, whatever I say," Sal grumbled. Sal looked first up then down the street. Thirty-four Kingston was nestled among a row of similar houses with large front yards and cobblestone walkways.

Sal watched a woman emerge from the house next door. She was a pretty redhead dressed in a beige trench coat and high heels. She scowled and started rummaging through her purse. When she found what she was looking for, the scowl disappeared. A yellow cab, with the name Tom's Taxi emblazoned in bright red along both the front and rear doors, pulled up the street and stopped at the redhead's residence. Sal and Leo watched her descend the staircase. She moved as if she didn't have a care in the world. Sal wondered what it must be like to live in such a neighborhood. It was like another world compared to the slum where he grew up. Then another thought crept into his brain. *How did a cop come to live in such a neighborhood?* Most of the cars parked in the driveways were sports cars or expensive sedans. *Maybe she was on the take?* Sal realized that the blue Ford they were sitting probably stuck out like a sore thumb. "We better get outta here, Leo. I've seen enough."

Leo nodded his head. "Okay, Sal, okay."

The redhead noticed a rusty Ford sitting across the street when she descended the stairs. It was the kind of car that wasn't usually seen in this part of town. The cab arrived before she got a look at the car's occupants, but she did mentally note the license plate number. After the string of robberies that had hit the neighborhood last year, Marcy Bartlett paid a lot more attention to any strange cars or people in the neighborhood. She would give Nic a call at the station later, after her shopping trip, and tell her about the rusty Ford. Maybe she could put Marcy's mind at ease.

CARLY AND NIC entered the baggage claim area, which was filled to capacity, and made their way to where the bags for Flight 17 would be coming off. People were standing everywhere. Carly could barely even see the conveyor belt. She looked up at her companion, who was keeping an eye on the luggage doors. "My brother has told me a lot about you."

Nic smiled. "All good, I hope."

"Well..." This got a raised eyebrow from Nic. "He did say you two are quite a team." *Now I can see why*, she thought. For the first time in two years, Carly understood what her brother had been talking about. At first she had thought he was smitten. He made this woman sound like a god or something. But now, standing next to her, she saw the same power and presence that her brother had spoken of. Her mind abruptly returned to Jimmy. She desperately wanted to see him, to touch him. She wanted to know he was going to be all right. "Nic, can we go to the hospital right away?"

"Sure, as soon as we get your bags, we'll go straight there. By the way, what do your bags look like?"

Carly responded, "I have one large Pullman, brown leather with a bright red ribbon tied to the handle."

"Great, that'll make things easier. Stay put and I'll find it. I have a better shot at it from up here." Right after she said it Nic wished she hadn't. She didn't want Carly to think that she was making a crack about her height. She watched several bags go by, but nothing resembling Carly's description. Now that the bags were starting to circle things were getting ugly. The crowd around the conveyor belt had doubled. People were jockeying for better positions, so they could spot their belongings. Nic held her ground. A rather large man with a red flannel jacket stepped directly in front of her, completely blocking her view of the bags.

Nic tapped him on the shoulder, "Excuse me, but I was standing here first."

The burly man looked over his shoulder and sneered. "So what? Now I'm here." He turned back around.

Nic could feel her temper rising. She didn't need this. She briefly toyed with the idea of grabbing his left palm and twisting it until the man stepped aside, but then she realized that might start something she didn't have time to finish. She knew how anxious Carly was to get out of here, so she took a deep breath and calmly removed her shield from the inside pocket of her jacket. She tapped the man on the shoulder again, who now abruptly turned around. Before he could say a word, she shoved the shield in his face. "I don't think you heard me before. I said I was standing here." She let a smile creep across her face. The man staring at the shield blinked a couple of times then stepped aside without so much as a word.

Carly stood there just watching this take place. She was amazed at the commanding presence the woman had. That guy was pretty big, yet Nic wasn't the least bit intimidated.

Nic noticed a bag resembling Carly's description. She shoved a guy, who was too busy arguing with his wife to notice, to the side and reached down to snag the suitcase.

After successfully retrieving Carly's luggage, they were finally on their way to the hospital. Midtown traffic had increased considerably since Nic had made the trip to the airport. With several streets being paved, construction crews were adding to the traffic congestion. Nic picked up her cellular phone, dialed the hospital, and was informed that Jimmy was in recovery and that he was stable. She relayed this to Carly, who looked relieved. Nic sympathized. She was also terribly worried about Jimmy and to make everything that much harder, she was seething with anger over his shooting. She found herself going over old cases, new cases, and any threats that had ever been made, anything at all that might give her a clue as to who could have done this. Each time she came up empty, and that fueled her anger even more.

"The city really hasn't changed much," Carly commented. "It doesn't even seem like it's been three years."

Nic grinned. "I swear the older we get the more time seems to take on a new meaning."

"You've got that right," Carly agreed. "Years feel more like months. I remember when Jimmy and I were kids it felt like a year took forever. Now, they come and go before you can blink."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. It's almost like the clock speeds up or something." Nic crossed lanes just in time to beat a traffic light.

"How old are you, Nic? If you don't mind my asking."

No, I don't mind at all, Nic thought. "I'm gonna be thirty next month, actually. And if I'm not mistaken, Jimmy told me you turned twenty-six this past June, right?"

Carly eyed her, impressed that she remembered such an insignificant event.

"So, Nic, do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"I have a younger sister, but I don't see her very much. She lives in Arizona."

Carly sensed this was a subject Nic did really want to discuss, so she dropped it. They were stuck behind a line of cars waiting for the construction flagman to wave them on. She watched Nic, who was impatiently tapping her fingers on the steering wheel. She had a striking profile.

Changing the subject, Nic asked, "So how was Australia?"

"Beautiful," Carly replied. "The brochures sure don't lie."

"What was your assignment?"

"It was a photo shoot on the Great Barrier Reef's marine life."

"Sounds exciting," Nic commented.

"I think so, but compared to yours, it's probably dull as hell."

"We do have our share, but there is a lot of boring crap, too. Jimmy didn't tell me you were an underwater photographer."

"I didn't start out as one, but my mentor at the magazine, John Tillman, convinced me that I should give it a try. So about six months ago, I got certified. And when this assignment came up, John and I went together, sort of an on-the-job training assignment."

They rode the rest of the way in silence with Nic wondering if Carly was involved with her mentor. She wasn't even sure why she cared, but she did. After parking the car, they took the elevator to the fourth floor Intensive Care Unit. Several rooms, all with large glass windows that allowed visibility to the patient, surrounded the main desk where a heavysset nurse in a white uniform sat.

The nurse looked up when they approached. "May I help you?"

"Yes. Could you tell us how James Jamison is doing? He had surgery this morning for gunshot wounds," Nic stated.

The nurse looked back down at the chart on her desk, her eyes quickly roaming the list of names. "He'll be in recovery for awhile," she said, "then they'll move him to ICU."

Carly asked, "Is he going to be okay?"

The nurse smiled. "You'll be able to talk to the doctor in a few minutes. He can better tell you how the patient is doing. Why don't you wait in the lounge, and I'll have him come over as soon as he gets up here." She smiled and pointed to the lounge area a few doors down from the nurses' station. Nic and Carly did as the nurse suggested. Nic wanted to demand an answer, but she knew that it wouldn't get her anywhere.

The lounge had a small sofa and two easy chairs, all decorated in a soft blue floral print. Magazines were scattered over the top of a coffee table that sat in front of the sofa. An episode of *Happy Days* was playing on a television in the corner of the small room. The lounge was empty. Carly sat down on the sofa and Nic in one of the chairs.

"Well, at least he is out of surgery," Nic said, trying to sound optimistic.

"Yeah," Carly agreed. "But I'll feel better after we talk to the doctor and after I see Jimmy."

Nic played with the silver ring she wore on the thumb of her right hand. She slid it off her thumb and onto her middle finger, something she did whenever she was nervous. She knew she had to be there for Carly, especially if the news about Jimmy wasn't good.

The problem was that she was struggling with her own fears and worries. She'd never lost a partner before, and she didn't want to lose one now. Over the past two years, she had forged a tight bond with Jimmy, tighter than she thought she could ever have with any man. She watched Carly, who was sitting on the edge of the sofa and staring blankly at the television screen. Richie, Potsie, and Ralph were surrounded by a roomful of small, frenzied children. "Why don't I get us some coffee?"

Carly looked up. "Yes, that would be great. Black, please. I'm sorry if I'm drifting. I'm just exhausted from the flight. I don't sleep well on planes."

"Yeah, me, too. I got about two hours sleep when my lieutenant called about Jimmy," Nic rose from the chair removing her leather jacket and laying it across the arm of the chair. She really didn't think she even got that much sleep, but she didn't see the need to worry Carly. Then she thought about it and wondered if Carly *would* be worried about her. She wanted to think that she would be. "Coffee might do us some good. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

When she returned with the two cups of coffee, Nic felt her beeper vibrating on her hip. Carly, still seated on the sofa, was leafing through a *People* magazine with Cher on the cover. Nic was amazed at how good the woman still looked. She hoped she'd look half as good at that age. Carly looked up and reached out for one of the cups. Nic checked her beeper and saw Lieutenant Raimés's phone number. Having left her cell phone in the car, Nic informed Carly she had to make a call, and after finding the nearest phone, she punched in the lieutenant's number.

"Yeah, Raimés here."

"It's Stone, Lou. What's up?"

"I've got some news about Geller," he said. "Seems like he up and disappeared. Nurse went to check on him around nine-thirty, and he was gone."

"Son of a bitch!" Nic cursed. "What happened to the patrolman who was posted outside his room?"

"From what I understand, he left the room unattended when he went to take a leak. He was only gone five minutes, but when he returned he never bothered to check on Geller. The patrolman thinks it happened between eight and eight-thirty."

"Great. Fucking great!" Nic scowled. "How's the other guy, Gato, doing?"

"I'm afraid he's slipped into a coma. The doctor said that he suffered a severe concussion, and there's no way to know when or even if he'll come out of it."

"Any word from ballistics on the slug they dug out of the

doorjamb?"

"Yeah, looks like it's from a Colt 45. One other thing, a Marcy Bartlett left a message for you with the desk sergeant. He figured I'd be talking to you, so he passed it along to me."

"What was the message?"

"She wants you to call her at home. Something about a suspicious car parked near her house this morning."

Nic digested the information, thanked the lieutenant, and hung up the phone. She looked at her watch and was surprised to see it was going on eleven o'clock. With Geller gone and probably nowhere to be found and Gato in a coma, there was no way she would find out what went wrong last night. She needed to get to the precinct and do some checking, but it wouldn't be right to leave Carly here alone. A nurse walked by carrying an assortment of linens. She stopped and looked at Nic, then said, "The doctor is in the lounge talking to your friend."

"Thanks," Nic said and started for the lounge.

Dr. Austin was sitting next to Carly when Nic entered the room. They both looked up then resumed their conversation. "As I was saying, your brother was very lucky. He should make a complete recovery. He'll be in ICU for a couple of days, then we'll move him to a private room."

Carly looked relieved. Some color was returning to her previously pale complexion. "Thank you, doctor." She looked at Nic and smiled. "When will we be able to see Jimmy?"

Nic liked the fact that Carly included her. Dr. Austin glanced at his watch and said, "He'll be in recovery for about three hours, and then you'll be able to see him once they move him to ICU. I'm afraid you'll only be able to see him for a few minutes. He needs his rest." Standing up, the doctor picked up his clipboard from the coffee table and said goodbye to them both.

Nic sat down beside Carly. Tears of relief were rapidly spreading across her cheeks. Nic put her arm across Carly's shoulders and gave her a squeeze. Carly melted into Nic's body. She had been putting up a brave front. For some reason she couldn't quite explain, she didn't want Nic to think she was weak. Nic's firm yet tender grasp was comforting. Carly felt safe, yet she felt something more. Nic said, "Sounds like good news. See? I told you Jimmy would be fine."

Carly wiped the tears from her eyes. She looked up at Nic, whose warm smile brightened the whole room. "I'm glad you're here, Nic. I don't think I would have handled this very well on my own."

"Don't shortchange yourself. You're a lot stronger than you realize."

"Maybe so, but thanks anyway for being here." Carly gave Nic a hug.

Nic suddenly felt strange, and it scared her. She felt herself caring about this woman. She wanted to protect Carly, and that feeling scared her, too. Nic placed a finger under Carly's chin and gently tipped her head up until she was looking directly into her soft, green eyes. They were enticing. She was starting to feel something she hadn't allowed herself to feel in long time, and she fought it desperately. This couldn't, wouldn't happen. Nic abruptly stood up, startling Carly. "What's the matter?" Carly asked.

"Nothing. Umm...listen, you must be exhausted, and Jimmy won't be brought to ICU until around two o'clock, so why don't we get you settled in? Then we'll come back."

Carly studied her for a moment. Something happened to cause this sudden mood change. *Now, Carly, how would you even know if this was a mood change? You barely know this woman.* "Okay. You can drop me off at Jimmy's apartment. I can take a cab back here. I don't want to be a burden or anything." She pushed a few errant strands of golden hair behind her ear as she stood.

Nic cleared her throat. "Actually, Carly, you can't stay at Jimmy's."

Carly looked at her, eyebrows raised in question. "And why not?"

"Well, for starters, it's currently the site of an on-going investigation."

"Oh, yeah. I'm sorry. I didn't even think of that. Well, just drop me off at the nearest hotel, then."

Nic didn't know if this was a good idea or not, but she couldn't let Jimmy's sister stay at a hotel, so here goes. "You could stay at my place; I have plenty of room."

Carly thought about the invitation. She liked the idea of not being alone right now. She was still emotionally drawn from this whole thing, and she could use the company. Besides, she found that she liked this intriguing woman, and it might be fun to get to know her better. "Okay. If you're sure you have enough room."

Nic smiled. "Yes, I'm sure. Come on, let's go."

After they were back in the Xterra, Carly asked, "Does this offer include lunch? I think I might actually have an appetite, now."

Nic laughed a little. "Sure. I'm starved myself."

ACROSS TOWN AT the Bay Ridge Marina, Jake Fulton was smoking his pipe as he and Samson, his black Labrador retriever, walked along the wharf. His wife, Irene, did not allow him to

smoke in the house. So, three times a day, he took Samson for a long stroll down by the wharf. In the summer, when boat traffic was high, the two of them would sit and watch the boats come in and out of the marina. There would be little boat traffic today, though it was a fine morning for a walk. The sun was bright, the sky clear, and the air slightly cool, as it usually was in November on the East Coast. He always wanted a boat, but Irene wouldn't hear of it. "Money pits. That's all boats are," she would say whenever he dared bring up the subject. So coming to the marina and ogling everyone else's boats was as close as he would ever get. They were approaching the end of the docks when Samson pulled Jake so hard he lost the leash. The dog darted to the edge of the dock, clearly agitated by something he spotted in the water. He began barking and whipping his tail back and forth.

"Samson! What the hell are you doing? What's the matter, boy?" Jake picked up the pace to see what the dog was barking at. *Probably a harbor seal*, Jake thought. But when he got to the edge of the dock Jake knew it was no harbor seal. A body, face down in the water, was bobbing up and down with the rhythm of the tide. All Jake could see was a red shirt and a pair of ash white hands floating on the surface of the water.

"Holy shit!" Jake said, the pipe dropping from his lips. He groped for Samson's leash without taking his eyes off the body. "We better get somebody down here right away, Samson. Right away!" Jake tugged the barking dog down the wharf toward the marina manager's office.

Joe Tanner and Stan Siegel were deciding where to go for lunch when their car radio announced a floater had turned up in the Bay Ridge Marina. Since they were only five minutes away, they were the closest car, so they had to respond. That made Stan's stomach growl louder. By the time they waited for the coroner's office to send someone over, it would be one o'clock before they could break for lunch. When they pulled into the marina parking lot, the manager greeted them. After speaking with him for a moment, the two officers followed him to the end of the wharf where a man, dressed in a tan parka and sporting a red plaid cap, was standing. A black Labrador sat at the man's feet.

Joe Tanner asked, "So you're the one who found the body?"

"Yes," Jake answered. "I was walking my dog and that's when we found it."

"We?"

"Me and my dog, officer." Jake reached down and patted the obedient dog on the head. His tail thumped in appreciation.

"Oh, yes, of course." Joe and Stan smiled to each other, and using a pole the manager provided, they snagged the body and

pulled it to the edge of the dock. From the looks of it, the body had probably only been in the water for a couple of hours. They secured the body with a piece of rope, got Jake's statement and address, and returned to their patrol car to radio the coroner's office.

Chapter Three

A PERKY WAITRESS, dressed in black pants and a white polo shirt, sporting *The Broadway Café* logo in bright red, delivered the lunch orders. Nic got her usual bacon cheeseburger and fries, while Carly opted for two chilidogs. "More to drink?" the waitress inquired.

"Yes, please," they answered in unison. The waitress smiled, placed the ketchup and mustard on the table, and returned to the kitchen.

Carly immediately took a bite of her dog, relishing the taste. "This is pretty good," she said between chews. "Do you come here often?"

Nic nodded her head as she took a bite of her burger. "Yeah. I like this place. I usually stop by here a couple of times a week."

The waitress returned with their refills. "How is everything, ladies?"

"Very good, thank you," Nic replied, while Carly nodded, too busy with her food for a verbal response.

Carly watched Nic as she devoured her cheeseburger. She noticed the slight bags under her vibrant blue eyes. This morning when Nic had looked her in the eyes, she had felt like she was falling. Falling into an endless blue heaven. Nic's eyes had captivated her, and she could have stared into them for the rest of the day, hell, the rest of her life. *Wait a minute. Where did that come from?* Carly thought. She shook her head a little to clear her thoughts.

"What's the matter?"

"Huh?" Carly realized those blue eyes were boring right into her. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

Nic gave her a worried look. "I just saw you shaking your head, and I asked you what was wrong."

Carly let out a little giggle. "Oh, nothing...nothing is wrong. I guess I was just lost in thought for a second." *Way to go, Carly. Now you're daydreaming about someone you met less than four hours ago. God, I must be tired, I'm really losing it,* she thought.

Nic eyed the young woman suspiciously. *What was she thinking about?* Nic wondered. She shook the thought away. She had enough things to worry about.

VICTOR MARCONE SAT in the library of his Cedar Hills estate sipping his second cup of espresso while he surveyed the morning paper. The headline of the Larson Chronicle read "Cop Shot, No Suspects." Victor smiled. He was dressed in his usual attire, a three-piece Armani suit, this one a navy pinstripe. His morning routine seldom varied. Each and every day he awoke around ten, did one hundred pushups followed by one hundred sit-ups, showered, shaved, and was served his breakfast in the library by eleven. Today, however, his routine had varied because in the early morning hours his only nephew had been seriously injured and was now hospitalized. This was very disturbing to Victor. He had promised his sister, Theresa, on her deathbed that he would look after the boy, and now he felt that he had failed her. All because of a pair of overzealous cops and their two-bit snitch. So this morning, Victor dispensed with his calisthenics and, having little appetite, skipped breakfast as well.

In the middle of the night when he had received word about the foul-up at the warehouse, he had vowed on his sister's soul that he would get those responsible. That plan was already under way, and he was now awaiting the arrival of the two men in charge of carrying out his orders. Victor sipped the last drops of espresso and set the porcelain cup down on its saucer. He folded the newspaper neatly and removed a cigar from the humidor. He answered the knock at the door with a gruff, "Come in."

Frank Torelli, a tall, well-built man of forty-five, entered the library and took a position by the door, allowing Sal and Leo to enter the room. Sal was sweating profusely. Getting called to the Marcone mansion meant you had screwed up, and Sal knew what happened to people who screwed up. Leo, too naive to know any better, was marveling at the splendor surrounding them. Leo had never seen so much mahogany and marble in his life. Frank, Victor's right hand man, closed the library doors behind them. For a moment, Victor said nothing. He simply puffed on his Cuban cigar and stared at the odd duo. When he spoke, Sal almost jumped out of his skin.

"Do one of you boys want to tell me what the hell went wrong this morning?"

Sal patted at his sweaty brow with a handkerchief. Frank had told them in the car that the cop they whacked this morning was still alive and at St. Peter's hospital. Sal knew he should have made

Leo check the body, and now he mentally cursed himself for the mistake. "I'm sorry, boss. We popped him twice, but we screwed up. We should have checked him before we left."

Victor mulled over Sal's response. Sal had been in the organization for the past three years, and he knew the type of answer Victor wanted. He liked it when people took responsibility for their actions, good or bad. Sal wasn't blaming anyone else for his mistake and that alone saved his life. "You're right, Sally," Victor puffed on his cigar, a cloud of white smoke encompassing him. "You should have checked the body." Victor walked over and stood eye to eye with Sal. He patted the man's chubby cheek. "This time I'm gonna give you a break." Sal listened intently, too nervous to move. Leo stood silently by his side. "Nobody hurts a member of my family and gets away with it. So you take care of the situation that you screwed up, and you complete the rest of the job by tonight. If you don't, then you better find a hole and crawl inside it because if my boys find you, your lives will reach an abrupt conclusion."

CARLY SAT ON the passenger side of the Xterra and admired the view. They were en-route to Nic's house in the suburbs. Carly was a little surprised to find out that Nic lived in the 'burbs. For some reason she had expected her to have a loft or something. Apparently, Nic was full of surprises. They drove through neighborhoods filled with several beautiful homes, all with impeccably groomed yards and long driveways leading to two or three car garages. When the occasional car was in the driveway, it was usually a Mercedes, a BMW, or a Lexus. After their satisfying lunch, Carly was all too happy to sit back and enjoy the ride. Nic had some mellow jazz playing on the CD player, the smooth sounds nearly lulling Carly to sleep.

Nic looked over at her companion whose eyes were now starting to droop. She was far more beautiful than that picture at Jimmy's had divulged. Nic slowly turned the corner onto Kingston Drive, so she wouldn't startle her passenger. A few seconds later the Xterra was pulling into her driveway. Carly's eyes fluttered a little as she took in the house and its surrounding yard. The house was a two-story brick with a deck at the rear. White birch trees flanked the back of the yard. Small shrubs and landscaping foliage surrounded the base of the house. A two-car garage sat about seventy feet behind the house.

Carly opened her door and jumped out of the car. "Nic, this is your house?"

"Yeah, what do you think?" Nic went to the back of the car to

grab Carly's luggage.

"What do I think? I think this place is awesome!" Carly actually hated that word, but at this moment it was the only one that came to mind. She twirled around and took it all in.

"Yoo hoo, Nicole."

Nic turned around to see Marcy Bartlett strolling up her driveway, waving her gloved hand in the air. Her high heels clicked on the driveway as she approached. If you wanted to know what was transpiring in the neighborhood, Marcy was the one to talk to. "Hi, Marcy. What can I do for you?" Nic reached up and closed the back of the car.

"I left a message at the station for you. Did you get it?"

"Yes, I did, and I was going to come over and see you in just a few minutes." Nic forced a smile.

"Well, I just got back from my lunch appointment, and I saw you here in the driveway, so I thought I would just pop over for a second," Marcy said.

Carly came over and stood next to Nic. She smiled at the redhead, who eyed her thoroughly. "Aren't you going to introduce your friend, Nicole?"

Nic rolled her eyes. "Marcy, this is Carly. Carly, Marcy." She gestured as she introduced them.

"Nice to meet you," Carly said.

"Likewise, dear. Are you a police officer, too?" Marcy inquired, lifting her eyebrows at the petite blonde.

"Oh no. I'm a photographer. My brother is Nic's partner. He was shot last night." Carly already disliked this woman. She seemed to be horribly nosy.

Marcy gave a startled gasp. "Oh, my! Is he all right?" Her eyes darted to Nic. "I had no idea. Was that the shooting they had on the news this morning?" She patted her chest rapidly. "Oh, my."

Nic's voice was edged with tension. "Yes, Marcy, that was the shooting, and yes, my partner will recover. Now I don't mean to be rude, but we are going to have to go back to the hospital soon, so..."

Before she could finish Marcy spoke. "I'm sorry. I had no idea you were in such a rush." She straightened the cuffs of her London Fog trench coat. A smirk crossed her lips. "Anyway, there was a rather suspicious car parked across the street this morning. I noticed it when I was waiting for my cab." She pursed her lips, waiting for Nic to ask the obvious question.

"What did the car look like?" Nic obliged.

"Well, it was a dilapidated blue..." she brought her forefinger to her lips and looked to the sky in thought. "Ford." She reached into her purse and extracted a piece of paper, which she handed Nic. "Here, I wrote down the license plate number. There were two

men in the car, at least that was all I saw."

Nic eyed it and slipped it into her jacket. "Thanks, Marcy. I'll run it through the DMV and see what I get. Did they look like they were casing the area?"

"They were only here for a few moments. I couldn't really tell what they were looking at. As soon as they saw me looking at them, they drove off."

"Well, thanks. I'll let you know what I find out." Nic picked up Carly's suitcase just as Carly started reaching for it. Carly pulled her hand back and picked up her backpack instead.

"All right, then. I guess I'll let you two get inside." She looked at Carly. "It was nice meeting you."

"Yes, you, too. Bye." Carly started for the stairs that led to the deck and the rear door of the house.

Nic followed Carly and waved a hand at Marcy who headed back down the driveway. "Bye, Marcy. I'll call you."

LIEUTENANT RAIMES WAS polishing off a pastrami sandwich in his office at the 21st Precinct when his phone rang. Wiping the mustard from his lips, he answered the phone. He hated to be interrupted when he was eating. "Raimes," he growled.

"Harry, it's Walter."

Raimes swallowed what he had been chewing. "Walt, how the hell are you?" Walter Longwell was a Lieutenant with the 23rd Precinct and an old friend of Raimes.

"Not bad, my friend, not bad. Little more meat around my middle, but other than that I can't complain." Walter leaned back in his chair and looked out the window. "How's that detective of yours? You know, the one who was shot last night."

"He's hangin' in there." Raimes took a sip of his root beer. "You didn't call just to find out about that, did you?"

"No, I didn't. This morning, two of my officers snagged a floater that someone discovered in the Marina. Looks like it was Geller. I just got the report."

Raimes ran his hand slowly over his forehead. "Great. Fucking great." This was shaping up to be a shitty day. "I don't suppose it was an accident." Raimes knew that there was no doubt Geller had been whacked. Somebody didn't want him talking about anything that went down last night.

Walt laughed a little at Raimes's rhetorical question. "Nice try, Harry."

Raimes nodded his head. "I know, Walt, I know. Well, thanks for the info, and say hello to Helen for me."

"You bet, Harry. Hope things get better for ya. Bye."

"Bye, Walt." Raimes hung up the phone and decided to finish his lunch before he called Stone. He knew she wouldn't be happy to hear about this.

CARLY SAT ON the bed in the spare room and began unpacking her things. After Nic gave her a tour of the house, she had brought her to one of the three bedrooms on the second floor. The master bedroom, which was Nicole's, was huge, at least fifteen by twenty feet, Carly suspected. The other two were a bit smaller, but still a nice size. Two of the bedrooms shared a common bathroom with the master bedroom having a lavish private bath, complete with garden tub and glass shower stall. Downstairs, there was a family room with a fireplace, a cozy home office, where Nic had several bookcases as well as her computer, a dining room, and a spacious kitchen. She was curious to know how Nic had come to live at such a residence, but she didn't feel she should pry. Maybe she could somehow get her to talk about it without seeming obvious. Carly lay back on the bed and thought about it for a moment.

After showing Carly around the house, Nic returned to her office to run the plate number Marcy had given her. Her computer was connected to the Police Department's LAN. She turned it on and waited for it to connect. Then she went to the DMV plate search and entered the number. It would take a few seconds to search the database, so she went out to the kitchen to grab a soda. When she returned, the computer was still busy. Sitting down behind her desk, she ran her hands over the smooth surface. It was a Chippendale mahogany desk, with a matching credenza that sat below the window. It had been her father's desk, and she still remembered how he used to sit her on top of it whenever her mother brought her to his office.

The computer beeped, acknowledging it had completed the search. Nic read the information that appeared on the screen.

Blue 1987 Ford Crown Victoria Sedan-Plate Number:46A T82
Owner Name: Jay MacFarlen-Residence: 29 Carmichael Street

Nic tapped the keys on the keyboard to bring up the database of cars reported stolen within the last week to see if she would get a hit and she did. The owner reported the car stolen early this morning. She swallowed some Pepsi, picked up the phone, and dialed the station. The desk sergeant answered, and she was forwarded to the lieutenant's office upon request. Raimes answered the phone with his usual gruff demeanor.

"Lieutenant, Stone here."

"Yeah, Stone. What is it?"

"I need to have an APB put out on a car. It's the one that Marcy Bartlett left me a message about this morning. It was reported stolen around 7:00 A.M. this morning."

Raimes straightened some forms he had strewn across his desk. Sliding them into a folder, he dropped it into his desk drawer. Then he picked up a pen and grabbed a pad of paper. "Give me the details, and I'll run it right away."

"It's a blue 87 Ford Crown Sedan. The plate number is four, six, Adam, Thomas, eight, two."

"Got it. Listen, Stone. I got some news this afternoon from Lieutenant Longwell over at the 23rd."

Nic had a feeling she wasn't going to want to hear this. "What kind of news?"

"A floater showed up this morning in the Marina. It was Geller."

Nic closed her eyes when she heard the name. *Damn it!* she thought. She propped her elbow up on the desk and stroked her eyebrow with her thumb and forefinger. She had planned on looking for him tonight in the hopes that he would shed some light on what went wrong Friday night, but now that option was gone.

"Stone, are you there?"

"Yeah, sorry, Lou. Did you get the coroner's report yet?"

"No. Walt was going to send me a copy. I should have it later this afternoon."

"All right. I'll check back with you after I get back to the hospital. Thanks for the info."

"Stone, don't forget what I said earlier. You stay out of this investigation. You're only gonna muck things up for Sanders and Mahoney. You got me, Stone?"

She replied through gritted teeth, "Yeah, I got it. Bye." She slammed the phone down. She managed to quell the urge to throw something, anything, at the wall. "Shit!" She pounded her fist down on the arm of the chair. Things were going from bad to worse faster than she could even think. The fact was, she was too damn tired to even come up with alternative avenues to find out who had shot Jimmy and why. She knew what Raimes had said, but he should know there was no way in hell she wasn't going to be involved in this investigation. It would just be unofficial involvement. Nic crossed the room to where her salt-water fish tank was set up. Several of the brightly colored fish swam to the surface waiting for the forthcoming food. She sprinkled it evenly over the surface and watched them all rush for the offering. She looked at her watch. It was going on twelve-thirty. Picking up and finishing the last of her soda, she deposited the can in the recycle bin below

the sink and headed upstairs to check on Carly.

Peering around the doorway, she found her curled up on the bed and fast asleep. Nic couldn't stop the smile that crept onto her face. *She must be wiped out*, Nic thought. She retrieved an afghan from the closet and gently placed it over Carly. Nic stood there for a moment and just watched her sleeping friend. She looked absolutely angelic. Her hair was as bright as the sun, and she had the faintest smile playing across her lips. Nic quietly closed the door as she withdrew from the room. Back in her own bedroom, she kicked off her boots and stretched out on the bed. She set the alarm clock for one-thirty, and within seconds she drifted off to her own version of sleep.

SANDERS AND MAHONEY returned to the 21st Precinct with little in the way of leads about Jimmy's shooting. They were told to report to the lieutenant immediately upon returning. They scowled at this information but made their way to his office anyway. Raimes pulled the door open just as Sanders went to rap on the door. Raimes was a man of average height, slightly overweight, with graying hair where he wasn't bald. Physically, he was not an imposing figure, but as they say, "Attitude is Everything," and Raimes had plenty of attitude. He shot them a scorching look and motioned for them to enter his office. They obliged and sat in the two chairs that faced his desk.

"Well, what have you got for me?" he questioned as he dropped into his swivel chair.

"Not much, boss," Tom Sanders answered apologetically. "We couldn't scratch up one stinkin' witness, but then I'm not surprised, considering what time this went down." He looked over at his partner, who nodded his head in agreement.

Raimes shook his head in disgust. "This case is gonna be a ball breaker. First Jamison gets hit, then Geller turns up dead this morning."

Sanders and Mahoney's eyebrows shot up in unison. "What did you say?"

"You heard me. Geller is dead. Someone whacked him this morning."

"How?" It was all Sanders could manage to say.

"Haven't gotten the report yet, but he was found in the Marina," Raimes answered. "So, boys, I think you better start diggin' in the area of this whole Gato sting that went south. With Geller dead, it's pointing in that direction."

Paul Mahoney spoke, "That means we're going to have to talk to Stone, since she's the only person that we can get our hands on

that knows anything about that night."

"That's right," Raimes sighed. "But keep her involvement to a minimum. I've already warned her that I don't want her screwing up this investigation. Jimmy and her are close and that's gonna mess up her thinking." He gave the detectives a stern look. "Make sure she stays the hell out of it. Now get out of here, and bring me back some good news for a change."

Sanders and Mahoney exited the office and returned to their desks. As if things weren't bad enough, now they were going to have to question Stone and make sure she stayed out of this mess. They slumped into their chairs and started poring over the rap sheets for Louis Gato and Marty Geller.

SAL AND LEO pulled their newly heisted car into the hospital parking lot. They had ditched the blue Ford they had used earlier that day for a gold Buick LeSabre. Leo turned the car off and sat quietly behind the wheel. Sal patted his forehead with a handkerchief as he contemplated their next move. Marcone would surely cut his balls off if he didn't take care of this matter, so he had to think carefully about how they were going to accomplish their mission. "Okay, Leo, listen up."

The smaller man's grip tightened on the steering wheel. He blinked rapidly. "Yeah, Sally, go ahead."

The fat man cringed at the nickname. "Don't call me that!"

"All right, Sal, sorry." Leo continued blinking rapidly.

"We got ourselves a bad situation here, Leo."

"How's that, Sal?"

"Well, let me lay it out for you. The guy you failed to off last night is probably in ICU, which means it's gonna be hard as hell to get to him. Plus they probably have a guard on him."

"Oh, Jesus, Sal. What are we gonna do? I didn't even think of that."

Sal placed his handkerchief in his shirt pocket. "For starters, we're gonna go inside and scope out the area. Then I'll figure out a plan from there."

"Okay, Sal. Whatever you say."

"Leo." Sal put his hand on the smaller man's arm to get his attention. Leo turned and looked into the deep-set eyes. "If we can't get to this guy, we're dead. You understand that, right?" Leo nodded his head like one of those bobbing dogs people used to keep in the back window of their cars. "We gotta get this guy, Leo. And we gotta take out his partner, or we might as well just off ourselves, 'cause if Marcone gets a hold of us we're gonna pray for death."

THE ALARM CLOCK went off, bringing Nic from her restless

slumber back to the reality of the day. She opened a bleary eye and slapped the alarm to quiet the annoying buzzer. Rolling over, she found Harley curled up in her usual place between the pillows, snoring softly. She stroked the cat's fur, which was as soft as silk. A low purr was her response. Nic rolled her neck back and forth to loosen the tight muscles. She felt like shit, and she figured she probably looked like it, too. She rose from the bed and discarded the shirt she had just slept in. No time for a shower, so she rummaged through her closet and put on a purple polo shirt and ran a brush through her hair. *Not too bad*, she thought, after giving herself the once-over in the mirror. She scooped up the cat, which was now meowing and winding herself through Nic's legs. Upon entering the hallway, she noticed Carly's door was open, so she sauntered by but found it empty. "Now I wonder where she could be?" Then she thought about it. "Probably in the kitchen," she mumbled to the cat as she made her way there.

Carly was scribbling a note to Nic when she felt as if she was being watched. She turned to find Nic leaning against the door-frame, her right eyebrow raised in question, and holding a beautiful black cat lazily in her arms. Carly let out a nervous giggle. "Hi, Nic. Sleep well?"

Nic rolled her tongue over her teeth before she spoke. "And just what are you doing, if you don't mind my asking?"

Carly crumpled the note and replaced the pen in the holder by the phone. "Oh. I was just leaving you a note."

"A note about what?" Nic's intense blue eyes narrowed, and Carly felt a bit uneasy, but she wasn't sure why.

"Well, when I woke up, and by the way, thanks for the afghan." She smiled sweetly. "Well, anyway, I went looking for you. I peeked into your room, just to see if you were there." Carly swallowed. Nic hadn't even blinked yet, and her eyebrow was still raised. "I didn't have the heart to wake you, so I thought I'd call a cab and head over to the hospital. I was leaving you a note explaining that."

Nic lowered her eyebrow. She didn't like the idea of Carly going to the hospital without her, but she thought it was sweet that she hadn't wanted to disturb her. She guessed she should lighten up a little. She smiled, and Carly let out a sigh of relief. "Well, since I'm up, I guess I can take you to the hospital, if that's okay."

"Actually, I'm glad you're up, because the truth is, I didn't really want to go by myself."

"And you don't have to. Now let me put some food down for Harley, and we can get going." Nic placed the cat on the tile floor. She immediately sauntered over to Carly to check her out.

Carly cooed, "Oooh. She's so pretty." Reaching down, Carly

picked up the feline and cuddled it. "I love cats. They're great companions. Jimmy and I had two when we were growing up." Carly's face saddened. "I miss them."

Nic poured some dry food into the cat's bowl. "What did your cats look like?"

"Salty was black and white, and Amber was orange and white. They were both females. I like them better than males because they don't get so big." She continued to pet the cat, getting a kneading pair of paws on her forearm. She watched Nic fill the water bowl and place the dry food next to it.

"I bet they were beautiful," Nic said.

"Yes, they were. They lived a pretty long time, too. Salty was fifteen when she passed and Amber sixteen." Carly put the cat down next to her bowls and gave her one last stroke.

"Ready to go?" Nic asked, grabbing her car keys from the counter.

"I'm right behind you," Carly answered, slipping into her barn coat as she followed Nic out the door.

It took them about half an hour to get to the hospital from Nic's place. Several ICU nurses, dressed in pristine white uniforms, hustled about, ducking in and out of rooms attending to the patients with precision. The nurse at the station smiled as they approached.

"Mr. Jamison is in room 402, and he is doing fine. He'll probably sleep the rest of the day, though."

Carly let out her breath, which she inadvertently had been holding since the elevator doors closed. "That sounds like good news to me." She looked up at Nic, who also looked relieved. She hadn't even realized Nic's hand was resting on her shoulder. She felt comforted by it, and she didn't want her to remove it. "Can we see him?"

"Are you family?" the nurse asked, peering over her glasses, which hung down her slender nose.

"Yes, we are," Carly said. "We're his sisters." Nic remained silent, her hand still resting on Carly's shoulder. She looked over at room 402 and saw Jimmy surrounded by several monitors, an IV drip, and a nurse who was jotting something down on a clipboard, which she re-attached to the foot of his bed. She was pissed that she didn't see a uniform guarding the doorway.

The nurse looked first at Carly then at Nic. She didn't quite believe the young woman, but being a lie detector wasn't part of her job description. "Okay, you can see him one at a time, and no more than five minutes each." She gave them both a stern look.

Nic returned the look. "Did you see a police officer here at all today? Jimmy is supposed to have a guard at all times."

"Yes, there was an officer here before Mr. Jamison was brought up. He probably went to the cafeteria. I'm sure he'll be back any minute."

He better be, Nic thought, or I'll have his hide on my wall. Carly and Nic thanked the nurse. Nic reluctantly removed her hand as they proceeded to Jimmy's room. She whispered to Carly, "Thanks for the sister thing back there."

Carly looked up into the sincere eyes, which were now a pale blue. "No problem. Besides I know Jimmy considers you a part of his family, even if he has never told you so."

Carly gasped when she stepped into the room and saw Jimmy lying in the bed, a white blanket tucked neatly around him. Wires were attached to his chest and tubes were coming from his nose. She felt her knees start to give. Suddenly, a strong pair of hands steadied her, and she felt Nic's breath brush her right ear. "Are you okay?"

Carly felt like her mouth was full of cotton. She struggled to find her voice. "Yes. I'm okay. I...I just didn't expect him to look like that."

"It'll be all right. I know it's scary, but I'm right here if you need me."

Carly felt those words wrap around her like a warm blanket. She leaned back against Nic for a moment, garnering strength from their closeness. Taking a deep breath, she continued into the room. Nic watched her go in then turned and spotted a young patrolman exiting the elevator with a magazine tucked under his arm. He was thin with a boyish face. Nic wondered if he was old enough to shave, let alone carry a gun. She met him a couple of doors down from Jimmy's room. She looked at his uniform. The nametag read "Smullen." Nic attempted to curb her anger before she spoke.

"Officer Smullen, where have you been?"

Removing his hat, the young officer cleared his throat and looked up. "Ma'am?"

Nic slipped her badge from her jacket and showed it to Smullen. His eyes widened. "I'm Detective Stone with the 21st. Now, I asked you where you have been."

"I was down in the gift shop. I thought I'd grab a magazine." He pulled it out from under his arm and showed it to her. "To pass the time." Her gaze held him in place, and he abruptly felt like he was going to lose his lunch.

"I don't ever want to come here and not see you or some other officer sitting in a chair or standing outside that room." She pointed to 402. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I'm sorry." He dropped his eyes to the floor.

"Listen, Smullen, that's my partner in there and as far as these

nurses are concerned, my brother." Smullen looked up confused. "No one but family is allowed in ICU, so he is my brother, get it?" She raised her brows and flicked her thumb toward the nurses' station.

Smullen nodded his head in acknowledgement.

"Good. Now, if anything, and I do mean anything, happens to him, I will hold whoever is on guard personally responsible. So trust me, you don't want anything to happen to him." Smullen shuffled his feet. He believed her with all his heart. She stood at least two inches taller than he, and she looked like she was quite capable of wiping up the floor with him. "Now take your post, and if you see anything out of the ordinary, here is my pager number." He took the card she offered and assumed his position at room 402.

Nic followed him with her eyes. Carly emerged just as Smullen reached the room. She was dabbing her moist eyes with a tissue. At that moment Nic had the oddest sensation. It was almost like a giant magnet was pulling her in Carly's direction. Without hesitation, she responded, and with a few strides of her long legs, she was by Carly's side. Grabbing her elbow, she asked, "Is everything all right?"

Carly reached over and patted Nic's arm. "Yes, everything is fine. I'm just a little unnerved that's all. Jimmy's fine, though. The nurse said he is resting comfortably."

"Great. I am so relieved to hear that." Nic squeezed Carly's elbow. "See, everything is gonna be fine."

Carly's face beamed. "I am so glad that you were right, Nic. Now go on in and see Jimmy. I'll be waiting in the lounge."

Before Carly retreated, Nic introduced her to Officer Smullen, who politely stood and shook her hand. This earned him a couple of points with Nic. *Maybe the kid wasn't that bad after all*, she thought. Nic entered Jimmy's room alone. The nurse was gone, and all that could be heard was the beep...beep...beep from the heart monitor. She touched Jimmy's foot through the blanket and gave it a gentle squeeze. She'd seen cops who had looked worse. Right now, Nic was just grateful that Jimmy was alive and that he was going to make it. She walked up to the head of the bed and leaned down. "Jimmy, I don't know if you can hear me, but if you can, I want you to know that we're gonna get the bastard who did this to you. That's a promise, partner." A single tear slid down her cheek.

Chapter Four

DRESSED IN AN orderly's uniform, Leo Tolstrom watched the tall, dark-haired woman as she comforted a smaller blonde who appeared to be crying. They were standing outside the room that he needed to get into. He had been checking the area out from a distance for the past hour. Sal was right. The place was crawling with people. He'd never get near that cop without being questioned by someone. Hell, he didn't know anything about hospitals, let alone their procedures. *Maybe orderlies weren't even allowed in ICU*, he thought. He ducked back into the closet that was located at the end of the hallway. He checked his watch. *Shit*. He was supposed to report to Sal on the third floor in five minutes. He opened the closet door slowly and peered out. The blonde was gone, and the other woman was in with the cop. Leo slipped out of the room and headed for the stairs.

Sal was sitting in the third floor waiting room. *Appropriate*, he mused, *since I am, in fact, waiting for Leo*. He looked at his watch for the hundredth time. He was getting hungry and this waiting game was starting to grate on his nerves. He hated to wait. Just like his daddy, Salvatore Linetti had no patience. He knew it would probably kill him one day, either from a heart attack or from a hasty decision, but either way, his lack of patience would do him in.

A young girl in a pretty blue flowered dress skipped into the waiting room and plopped into the chair next to Sal. Her brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail with a bright, pink ribbon. She looked at him and smiled. He returned the smile then looked at his watch again.

"Are you here visiting someone, Mister?" the little girl asked, swinging her legs back and forth.

Sal was startled by the sudden conversation. "Yes...yes, I'm here visiting a sick friend." His eyes softened as he spoke. *She's a cute kid*, he thought.

"Well, I'm here visiting my grandma, 'cause she's sick, too."

Sal noticed Leo motioning to him from the stairwell. He frowned as he hoisted himself off the sofa. He looked down at the child. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. I hope your grandma gets better."

An attractive woman entered the room. She gave Sal an inquisitive look as she walked over to the child, grabbing her hand. "Come on, Lindsay, it is time to leave."

Lindsay dropped her feet to the floor and looked back at Sal as she was led from the room toward the elevators. She waved her little hand, and Sal, not even realizing that Leo was still watching, waved back. Sal watched the pair get into the elevator before he walked over to the stairwell. Leo was stifling a giggle when Sal shoved him back against the wall and closed the door.

"Hey, watch it, Sal! You coulda knocked me down the stairs." Leo rubbed his shoulder where it had made contact with the wall.

"Listen, Leo, just fill me in about what you found out upstairs and can any comments about the kid, okay?" Sal stated through clenched teeth.

"Alright, alright. Take it easy, will ya, Sal?" Leo continued to rub his shoulder. "It's just like you said. The whole damn place is crawling with people. I couldn't get within twenty feet of that room without someone asking me who I was and what I was doin' there."

Sal rubbed his forehead. "Jesus, Leo, what the hell did you tell them?"

"I told them that I was new and gave them a phony name, Tom Jones."

Sal rolled his eyes. He had an insatiable urge to backhand Leo into next week. "You idiot! Tom Jones? What the fuck would you use that name for?"

Leo blinked several times and squinted, anticipating a smack from one of Sal's hefty mitts. "Sal, don't worry about it. The only people that asked me were too young to even know who Tom Jones is." Leo waited a second to see if the blow was coming.

Sal clenched and unclenched his fists, but he kept them at his sides. "Is there a guard on duty?"

"Yeah, there's one right outside his room, just like you said."

Sal's eyes narrowed. "Is there anything else?"

Leo thought about it for a moment. "There were a couple of broads visiting him, but that's it."

"Broads? What did they look like?"

"They were both lookers, Sal, if you know what I mean." Leo whistled, and Sal smacked him hard across the mouth, knocking spittle all over the wall. Dazed, Leo shook his head and rubbed his now sore jaw.

"Leo, don't be whistling in here. It echoes like crazy. Now continue."

Leo was afraid to say anything else, so he spoke very carefully. "Well...like I said, they're both good-looking. One was a small blonde, real pretty. The other one was a lot taller with dark hair.

She was in with the cop when I left."

Sal stroked his chin and thought. Frank Torelli had showed them a picture this morning of the other cop that they had to take care of. She was a looker, too, and she had dark hair. "Leo, did she look like the woman Frank showed us the picture of this morning?"

Leo let his mind's eye recall the photo. He nodded his head. "Yeah, now that you mention it, she does."

"So who the hell is the blonde?"

Leo offered, "Jamison's old lady, maybe?"

"Maybe," Sal said. A plan was forming in his mind. They had to solve this problem tonight, there was no doubt about that, but the order in which they solved it was up to them. Sal grabbed the smaller man's shoulder and gave him a wide, toothy grin. "Come on, Leo. Let's go get something to eat, and I'll fill you in on my plan."

CARLY WAS LEAFING through a *Ladies Home Journal* when Nic entered the ICU lounge. She took a seat next to her and slumped back into the softness of the sofa. She let out a huge, cleansing breath. Turning her head, she was captured by a dazzling pair of green eyes.

"Well, you look better, or should I say relieved?"

The corners of Nic's mouth curled up, ever so slightly. "I'd say both."

Carly placed her hand on Nic's thigh. "I'm glad, because I am, too." She smiled, a glow radiating from her face that Nic found enticing. She forced herself to break the eye contact.

"I talked to the nurse. She said that Dr. Austin will be doing his rounds in another twenty minutes, and he'd stop by to talk to us."

"Great," Carly replied. She removed her hand from Nic's leg. She could have sworn she heard Nic let out a small groan. She started turning the pages of the magazine, idly looking at the scrumptious recipes they had in there, complete with photographs of the finished products. "Listen, after we talk to the doctor, why don't you let me cook you dinner?"

"You don't have to do that," Nic said. "Besides, you must be beat."

"Nic, I didn't say I had to do it, did I?" Carly gave her a serious look. "I would like to cook you dinner, if you don't mind my using your kitchen?"

Nic raised her brow. "Are you kidding? Help yourself. I'll even take you to the market after we leave here."

Carly smiled, clearly satisfied with her victory. She knew just

what she was going to prepare, too. After dinner and a good night's sleep, they would both feel a lot better, she was sure of it.

It was three-thirty when Nic pulled her vehicle into the parking lot of Burnham's Market. They had spoken to Dr. Austin, who had assured them that Jimmy's surgery had gone well. He had successfully retrieved the bullet and turned it over to the police. He expected Jimmy to be out of ICU within a day or so, at which time he would be moved to a private room. After stopping in to check on Jimmy, they departed for the market.

Burnham's had been a local market since 1936, when Joseph Burnham had decided factory work was not his life's ambition. He had been an inspiration to many people back then. He borrowed money from relatives, mortgaged his house, and God knows what else to start his business. Back then, the small store had had a few aisles of dry goods, some baked items, and some vegetables that the Burnham's had grown in their own garden. Over the years the store grew. A bakery and a delicatessen were added, and the size of the produce department nearly doubled. Burnham's always had a fine selection of goods, and their staff was knowledgeable as well as friendly.

Nic grabbed a shopping cart as they entered the store. Carly was eager to begin, so she wasted no time in exploring the store's contents. She had questioned Nic about her food likes and dislikes on their way there, so she knew just what she was looking for. First, they hit the produce department, where Carly selected two large Russet potatoes. She displayed them to Nic, doing a little Vanna White impression. Nic laughed and nodded her approval of the selection. They skipped over to the carrots. After perusing the offerings, Carly scooped some baby carrots into a produce bag then started for the meat department. Nic quietly followed her, pushing the cart. Normally, she hated going to the market, but with Carly, it was actually kind of fun. Maybe it was just her exuberance, or maybe, Nic thought, it was that she simply liked spending time with the woman.

Carly was already at the meat counter when Nic rolled up with the cart. She was holding up her thumb and forefinger to indicate the thickness of the meat. The butcher returned with two, nice sized center cut pork chops, two inches thick. Carly nodded her approval. He handed the wrapped package to Carly and asked, "Anything else today?"

Carly answered, "No, that'll be it, thanks." She did a quick inspection of the items in the cart. "Do you want sour cream for your baked potato?"

Nic replied, "You bet. Some diced up chives would be nice, too."

"Ooh. Yeah, that does sound good. What about dessert? Any preferences?"

Nic contemplated that for second. "They have a wonderful bakery here. Why don't we swing through there, just to see what they have?" She grinned when she saw the twinkle in Carly's eyes. *Someone has a sweet tooth, I see.*

By four o'clock, they had the groceries packed into the car and were on their way back to Nic's house. Nic had just slid a piece of cinnamon gum into her mouth when her beeper went off. It was the lieutenant again. "Now what?" Nic muttered. She handed Carly her cell phone and asked her to dial the number displayed on the beeper.

"Raimes," the lieutenant barked.

"It's Stone, sir. You beeped me?"

"Yeah, Stone. Listen, I've got the autopsy report on Geller. Can you stop by the station?"

Nic frowned. She was looking forward to going home and unwinding a bit. She thought about it for a second then said, "Sure. I'll be there in about thirty minutes, okay?"

"Yeah, see you then."

Nic hit the disconnect button on the phone and returned it to her pocket. Carly looked at her with wide eyes. "Is anything wrong?"

"That was my lieutenant. He needs to see me at the station." Nic glanced at Carly, who quickly tried to hide her disappointment. "Don't worry, I'll be back in time for dinner." *It feels a little odd to be saying that to someone, Nic realized, but odd in a nice way.*

Carly perked up a bit with that reassurance. "Okay. I'll start dinner while you're gone. It'll take a while anyway. Those pork chops are pretty thick." She smiled, which made Nic feel a little better.

Nic pulled the Xterra into the driveway, barely avoiding a squirrel, which scampered out from under one of the bushes in the front yard. They carried the few bags they had into the kitchen, and Nic gave Carly a rundown of where everything was located. Though Carly protested, Nic showed her how to start both the barbecue grill and the hot tub before she left for the station.

ON THE SOUTH side of Larson, Sal and Leo were busy discussing their evening plans over dinner at Lorenzo's, a small Italian restaurant. The place was mostly empty since it was so early. Most people didn't even consider dinner until at least six. The place was what most people would consider a "hole in the wall," but Sal found those kinds of places often had the best food. And Lorenzo's

had good food. It was, by far, Sal's favorite restaurant in Larson. They prepared the best shrimp marinara he had ever tasted. They sat at a small, round table, draped with a white tablecloth, near the rear of the establishment. Some violin music was playing softly from the stereo behind the bar. Sal had just finished his second glass of Chianti. Leo was busy swilling down a vodka and tonic while they waited for their entrees.

The big man laid out the plan for Leo, and then he went over it two more times before he made Leo repeat it to him. By then, Sal figured Leo had it down. He realized he didn't want his much smaller friend having any more alcohol, that's for sure, so when the waiter offered refills, Sal waved him away.

"Hey, what did you do that for? I wanted another drink." Leo tapped his fingers on the table.

"Why do you think? I want our heads to be clear tonight." He thrust his finger at Leo. "Tonight has to go off without a hitch, Leo, or we're dead!" Sal's mouth quirked in annoyance.

"Okay, okay. Don't worry, Sal, it will."

Sal looked across the table at his meager accomplice. He was starting to think using Leo on this job had been a bad decision, but it was a little late for second thoughts. The waiter appeared with their food, and Sal decided to push the negative thoughts from his mind so that he could enjoy his meal. Leo just dove into his plate of pasta and didn't seem to have a care in the world. In a lot of ways, Sal envied him.

CARLY UNPACKED THE groceries and began familiarizing herself with the layout of the kitchen. She was impressed with the kitchen's organization and with the fact that Nic had it well stocked. Either she liked to cook and just didn't admit it, or she hardly ever ate at home. Carly couldn't decide. Since Nic wouldn't be back for at least an hour and a half, there was no rush to start dinner, so Carly decided to finish unpacking her things. Having fallen asleep earlier, she really hadn't gotten much of that done.

She was halfway up the stairs when she thought she heard something. Stopping to listen, she heard it again. "Meooow, meeoow." Heading back down the stairs, she poked her head into the family room then the dining room, but the cat was nowhere to be seen. She walked back down the hallway toward the kitchen when she heard it again. She was standing in front of Nic's office. Carly bit her lip. She didn't really want to go in there. She had the distinct feeling this was Nic's personal space, and she didn't feel comfortable invading it. She contemplated waiting for Nic when Harley meowed again. Carly decided she should at least make sure

that the cat was all right, so she eased the door open a crack. The room was dark, only a small amount of light came from the corner, just behind the door. A low hum and the gurgle of water came from the same corner. Feeling along the wall, she located a switch and flipped it, illuminating the room with a soft glow. Harley was perched on top of the credenza, lazily flicking her tail back and forth.

Carly walked into the room. "Are you suppose to be up there?" she asked the cat, who merely arched her back, as if to say, "Pick me up." Carly could certainly understand if this was Nic's haven. The office was quite cozy. A magnificent desk was the focal point of the room. It was made of mahogany with cabriole legs and claw and ball feet. If she wasn't mistaken, it was a Chippendale. Carly raised her eyebrows at that realization. Behind the desk sat a matching credenza. Mahogany bookshelves filled with reference materials occupied opposite walls. Most of the books were on police procedures, investigation techniques, forensics, and constitutional law. A beautiful fish tank, probably at least fifty gallons in size, was filled with tropical fish, in a variety of colors. From the coral that was growing in the tank, Carly knew it was a salt-water aquarium, which was the hardest to maintain.

She walked over to a display case that sat next to one of the bookcases. Inside the locked case were four swords, all exceptionally detailed. Directly above the floor case, a smaller locked case hung on the wall. It was lined with red velvet and held several knives of various lengths. "You're becoming more intriguing by the second, Nicole Stone," Carly said to herself.

THE 21ST PRECINCT was a large three-story brick structure on the corner of Clark and Maple. The station was its usual flurry of activity. Nic was stopped a half dozen times on her way through the station by fellow officers inquiring about Jimmy. She made her way to the second floor office the detectives called "home," and she wasn't surprised when she found Sanders and Mahoney at her desk. She wasn't happy, either.

"Well, have you guys found out anything yet?" She stood in front of Sanders with her arms folded.

"No. How is Jimmy doing?" Tom asked.

"Well, he's in ICU, but the doctor said he should completely recover."

"That's great news, Nic. We're both glad Jimmy's gonna be okay," Paul said, looking first at Tom then at Nic.

Nic had a feeling something was up, but she'd wait them out and see what developed. "Listen, I have to see the lieutenant, so if

there's nothing else..."

Tom cleared his throat, "Actually, Stone, we do need to talk to you about the sting that went down Friday night. With Geller dead, and Gato and Jimmy incommunicado, so to speak, you're the only person who can fill us in."

She gave them both an icy stare. "Fill you in about what? Didn't you read the goddamn report we filed Saturday morning?"

Mahoney backed up a step while Sanders stood his ground. He wasn't going to let her intimidate him. "Of course, we read the report. But we still need to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind?"

She smiled maliciously. "No, I don't mind. I'll stop back here when I'm done with the lieutenant." She turned on her heels, not giving either man a chance to say another word. The drawn blinds inside Raimes' office indicated that he didn't want to be disturbed. She approached the door and lightly rapped her knuckles on the glass window.

"Come in."

Opening the door, she found Lieutenant Raimes staring out the window, his hands folded behind his head. He swiveled his chair around to see who was entering his office. "Ah, Stone. Take a seat." The lieutenant actually looked as tired as Nic felt. He leaned forward and slid a folder across his desk. "Here's the autopsy report on Geller."

Nic took the folder and opened it, carefully reading the contents.

Victim died from excessive amounts of diacetylmorphine in the bloodstream. A puncture mark was found on the left arm. A few small contusions were found at the base of the neck. Approximate time of death: 10:00 am Saturday, November 13th.

Nic looked up at the lieutenant. "So it looks like someone gave him a fatal dose of heroin then dumped him in the water."

Raimes nodded. "You knew Geller. Would he talk without much force being required?"

"If he was strung out, he would sell his soul for a hit. He was probably high at the warehouse last night, so, yeah, by this morning he would have been ready for some more."

Raimes loosened his tie and sat back in his chair. "So who the hell do you think is behind this?"

"Lou, I wish I knew. First, somebody tries to take out Jimmy, and then someone does take out Geller. The only connection is Friday night and that damn warehouse." She spit out her now taste-

less gum into the wastebasket then slid a new piece into her mouth.

"That blue Ford turned up this afternoon, too. A patrol unit located it in the parking lot of the Hillsborough Mall. Forensics went through it, but there were no prints, though several fibers were found, but they could all belong to the vehicle's owner."

Nic frowned. "Fabulous."

"Did your neighbor get a look at who was inside?"

"Not really. She said there were two guys, but they sped off once they realized she had seen them."

"The ballistics report came back. The bullet they took out of Jimmy matched the one they found at his apartment. The gun used was a Colt Mustang." Raimes yawned and rubbed his eye with his fist. "How is he doing?"

"The doc said he'd recover. He'll probably be in ICU for a couple of days, then he'll go to a private room."

"Well, he'll be under twenty-four-hour guard till we catch the son of a bitch that did this," Raimes assured her.

"Thanks, Lou. Is there anything else? I'd like to get home."

The lieutenant looked her in the eye. "I just need you to fill in Sanders and Mahoney about what happened Friday night." He threw up a hand to stop her before she could say anything. "I know you filed a report, but I'm talking about anything else that might be pertinent. There is obviously a link between these events, so just take a few minutes and talk to them, okay?"

"Sure, Lieutenant, whatever you say," she replied as she rose from the chair and calmly sauntered out of the office.

Returning to her desk, she shot Sanders and Mahoney an icy stare then picked up her phone and dialed her house.

"Hello, Nicole Stone's residence."

"Carly?" Nic asked in surprise.

"Yeah, Nic, it's me," Carly responded.

Nic smiled. "Wow, you sound as if you're my maid or something."

Carly giggled at the comment. "Sorry. I didn't expect anyone would be calling me."

"Yeah, I can understand that," Nic said. "I just wanted to check in to see if you were making yourself at home. You are, aren't you?"

"Yes, actually I am." *A little too much probably*, she thought. "Nic, are you sure that's the only reason you called?" Carly suspected that it wasn't.

Nic was starting to think Carly could see right through her. "Well, I did want to make sure you were all right." She didn't even know exactly why. She just needed to know it.

"Well, I am. So you can stop worrying."

Nic sat down in her chair. She watched two detectives enter the room with a young man in tow, whose hands were cuffed behind him. "Who said I was worrying?" *Forget it, Nic, this woman all ready has you pegged.*

"Oh, no one, Nic, absolutely no one." She couldn't help but smile. "But thanks anyway."

Nic felt herself starting to blush. She checked the time clock, which hung on the wall next to the message board. "No problem. Listen I should be back by five-thirty or so."

"Okay, I'll start dinner in around ten minutes. Nic?"

Nic detected a change in her friend's tone. "Yes?"

"Drive safely, okay?"

"You bet. Bye." Nic placed the receiver in the cradle then motioned for Sanders and Mahoney to come over.

CARLY HUNG UP the phone. She had just emerged from the shower when she heard it ringing. Luckily there was a phone in her room, or she never would have found one in time to answer it. While in the shower, she had decided a fire might be nice, especially since the night was getting chilly. Changing into a fresh pair of jeans and a red sweatshirt with a National Geographic emblem on the front, she proceeded downstairs.

The family room, which was at the front of the house, was quite large. The walls were light beige and a deep burgundy; thick pile carpet covered the floor. A stone fireplace occupied part of the outside wall. A fully equipped entertainment center was on the adjacent wall. It housed a Sony home theater system, complete with DVD player. Small speakers with the word "Klipch" on them were positioned about the room. She turned the stereo on, filling the room with the sounds of soft jazz. Clearly the speakers were positioned for optimum acoustics, because the sound was amazing. A stack of wood, held on a black iron grate, was next to the fireplace. Some kindling was inside a box next to the wood. She placed some of the kindling under the grate that would hold the logs. After placing three good-sized logs onto the grate, she struck one of the long matches that were on the mantle and lit the kindling. Flickers of sparks turned into flames. The dry wood caught easily, and within a few seconds, she had a nice fire going. She smiled, pleased with her accomplishment. She took a minute to look at the photographs that lined the mantle. In the center was an 8" x 10" photo, which Carly guessed were Nic's parents. The man was tall, with dark hair like Nic's and some graying at the temples. He was standing behind a seated woman, who had wavy, auburn hair, high cheekbones, and a slender nose. They were a handsome couple and certainly looked

happy. Carly wondered where they were now.

Back in the kitchen, she removed the pork chops and potatoes from the refrigerator. She went out to the deck and started the grill then returned with the grates to coat them with some cooking spray to avoid sticking. Finding the spice rack tucked inside one of the overhead cabinets, she gingerly applied some onion powder, a dash of garlic, and some meat tenderizer to the chops. She pierced the potatoes with a fork several times before placing them in the microwave. Punching eight minutes on the keypad, she hit start and then returned to the deck to place the chops on the grill. Dusk was settling and the night air was getting crisp. Carly was glad she had put a sweatshirt on. Returning to the kitchen, she set the carrots on the stove with some water to boil. Harley sat happily on the kitchen chair and watched her every move.

AFTER DISCUSSING FRIDAY night's events with the two detectives in charge of Jimmy's assault, Nic's nerves were frazzled. She hated repeating herself, especially when it was within the same conversation. She couldn't give Sanders and Mahoney much more to go on than they already had. She and Jimmy had been after the leader of a major drug smuggling operation for the past three months. In that time frame, they had been mildly successful, nailing some small dealers who were at the bottom of the food chain. They wanted the guy at the top, though, and they were going to use Geller to get to him. Gato was definitely higher up in the ranks, but how high up they didn't know. He had a pretty small rap sheet and never did any serious time, so someone was either keeping him insulated, or he was just damn lucky.

"Listen, guys, it's past five o'clock, and I'm wiped. I'm gonna take off."

Sanders looked at his watch. "Okay, Nic. I guess that's enough for now."

Standing, she stretched her arms over her head. "Gee, thanks, Sanders, you're too kind." Throwing her leather jacket over her shoulder, she flipped them a half-hearted wave. "Night, fellas." She grabbed the handle of the door to open it, when she was suddenly flung backward into the room.

She struggled to remain on her feet as Sanders and Mahoney sprang up from their seats, hands reaching for their weapons. A man, in his early twenties, sprawled through the door, not expecting the door to be opening when he slammed into it from the other side. His eyes widened when he saw a tall brunette falling backward as he was falling forward. Nic spotted the man coming straight for her, but she couldn't stop her momentum. The man

looked half crazed. He had long, stringy hair, and he wore a tattered T-shirt with a snake on the front of it. In his right hand he was wielding a hunting knife. Several officers bounded into the room, guns drawn. Nic knew they couldn't shoot with her in the way. So, as she hit the floor, she curled up her legs and rolled onto her shoulders in an effort to vault the man over her, and hopefully far enough away so that he couldn't use her as a shield. The man's stomach came down squarely on the bottom of her left foot. Using her right foot, she hooked him behind his buttocks and, with her incredibly strong legs, tossed him behind her. The knife fell from his hand when he hit the floor face first. Four cops were on top of him before he could blink.

Lieutenant Raimes stormed from his office. "What in the hell is going on out here?" His eyes bulged as he saw the four officers on top of a civilian. Looking down at his foot, he saw a ten-inch Buck knife.

Nic simply dropped her head to the floor and closed her eyes. Paul Mahoney strolled over to her. "Nice move, Stone. Are you okay?" Then he spotted it. Her left arm was covered in blood. "Stone, you're bleeding!"

Nic's eyes shot open. She looked at her body and saw blood coming from a gash on her left forearm. She was so tired she hadn't even realized she'd been cut. "Shit! He must have gotten me on the way down." It wasn't too painful, so the cut couldn't be that deep, she figured. "Mahoney, throw me that towel."

Paul spun around and grabbed the indicated item from the top of a nearby desk. "Here you go." Tossing it to her, she wrapped it tightly around the wound to halt the bleeding. She stood up and came eye to eye with Lieutenant Raimes.

"How bad is it?" he asked, with concern in his voice.

She wobbled her hand from side to side. "Not too bad. I think a couple of butterflies should take care of it."

Raimes instructed Mahoney to retrieve the medical kit from the locker room, which he did. When Nic removed the towel, she saw that the bleeding had slowed down immensely. From that brief encounter she now sported a two-inch long gash on her forearm. She taped four butterfly bandages over the cut and then wrapped her arm with sterile gauze. A glance at the clock told her it was five-fifteen, and she wanted to be home before six. Grabbing her jacket, Nic bolted from the station. She felt a little lightheaded from the loss of blood, so when she got to her car she waited a few seconds before she put it into drive. She made a quick stop en route to the house, and by five forty-five, she was pulling the Xterra into the driveway.

She stood on the deck for a minute, taking in the delicious aroma of grilled pork chops. More enticing smells hit her when

Carly greeted her at the door. "Dinner is almost ready. Why are you standing out here?"

Nic couldn't help but smile. "Just admiring the wonderful aroma." She pulled her hand from behind her back to give Carly the bouquet of flowers she had gotten on the way home. "Here, I thought these might look nice on the dinner table."

Carly's eyes lit up. "Oh, they're beautiful." She took the bouquet, a mixture of yellow roses, red carnations, and baby's breath.

"There is a vase in the cabinet on the left side of the sink," Nic said, closing the door behind her.

Carly found it and arranged the flowers in the vase before she added the water. Nic removed her jacket and threw it over the back of the kitchen chair. "Would you like some wine?" she asked, reaching for a wineglass.

"Yes, please," Carly answered as she turned around and nearly dropped the vase. "Nic, what happened to your arm?"

Nic glanced at it. "Oh, just a little mishap at the station. It looks worse than it really is." She looked at Carly, who just stood there gawking in disbelief.

"And what, exactly, do you mean by a mishap?" the blonde inquired.

Nic grabbed a bottle of wine from the refrigerator and filled the two glasses. "Let's just say that I was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"You were in the police station for heaven's sake. How wrong can that be?" Carly was amazed at how nonchalant Nic was being. "Come on. We are eating in the dining room. I hope you're hungry?"

Nic followed Carly, wineglasses in hand. "I'm famished." Several taper candles that Carly had placed on the table illuminated the dining room. Two place settings were on opposite sides of the table. Nic placed one glass in front of each setting. "Wow, you've been busy. This looks great."

Carly put the vase down in the center of the table. She fussed with the flowers. "Well, it's just my way of saying 'Thank You.' I can't tell you how much I appreciate you letting me stay here."

Nic looked into Carly's green eyes, the soft glow of the room deepening their color. "It's no problem, really. Now, can I do anything to help?"

Carly shook her head. "No! You sit down and relax," she demanded. "I'll be right back."

Nic did as instructed, surprisingly. She sipped some wine and simply enjoyed being home. The house seemed different to her. It was warmer. Not a temperature warmer, either. It was like the house came to life with Carly's presence. She didn't understand the

feelings she was having. After all, she had just met this woman, yet she felt like she had known her for a long time. It felt incredibly wonderful.

Carly returned with a bowl of carrots and a plate containing two pork chops and two steaming baked potatoes. "Here we are." Carly placed everything on the table and took her seat. She looked over at Nic, who seemed impressed as well as hungry.

Nic gave her a sincere smile, her blue eyes twinkling. "Everything looks delicious."

Carly could feel a wave of heat creeping up her neck. "Well, then, dig in." She broke contact with those amazing blue eyes. If she didn't, she was sure her face would turn beet red.

They chatted throughout dinner. Nic complimented Carly several times on how wonderful everything was. She loved the carrots, too. Carly told her that the secret was to prepare them with butter and brown sugar, which made them delightfully sweet. After some prodding, Carly got Nic to tell her about the so-called "mishap" at the station. Her face had paled a little during the story, which made Nic wish she hadn't told her. Carly reached out and placed her hand over Nic's. "Are you sure you aren't in a lot of pain?"

"I have a pretty high threshold. Why don't we have dessert in the family room?" Nic stood, taking her plate and glass.

"Okay." Carly followed Nic back to the kitchen, where she refilled their glasses while Carly sliced up the pie. Back in the family room, Nic added another log to the fire and then nestled herself on the sofa next to Carly. The fireplace provided the only light in the room. A light melody was playing on the stereo, lush with guitar riffs.

"Oh, I like this song," Carly said.

Nic did, too. "This is 'San Diego' by Peter White. He is one of my favorite jazz artists."

"I can see, or should I say hear why," Carly replied. She kicked off her shoes and curled her legs up under her, so that she could face Nic, who stretched her long legs out, putting her now bare feet on top of the coffee table and crossing them at the ankles. She stared into the flames, watching them lick the logs, causing the wood to crackle. For the first time all day, she honestly felt relaxed.

"So, tell me, Nic, why did you become a cop?"

The question took Nic by surprise. Her eyes took on a haunted look, and for a moment Carly was sorry that she had asked the question. She could see, maybe even sense, a deep pain behind those eyes. "I guess I wanted to make a difference." She was torn with leaving her answer at that or actually exposing an old and still very painful wound.

"And I'm sure you've made one, Nicole Stone." Carly smiled

and reached out, lightly touching Nic's shoulder. The touch alone warmed Nic's soul and eased the pain she still held so firmly in her heart.

Chapter Five

THE GOLD BUICK made its way slowly up Kingston drive until it was within two houses of its destination. Sal, sitting in the passenger seat, held up his hand to indicate to Leo that he should stop. "Right here is fine, Leo. No need to get any closer." Sal saw a black vehicle parked in the driveway. The house itself was dimly lit, but the deck lights were still on. Leo parked the car under an elm tree, which provided some cover from the streetlights. This car fit in much better than the Ford did, Sal thought. He rolled his window down, flicking cigar ashes into the street below.

Leo fidgeted. "Sal, it's not even eight o'clock yet. Maybe we should come back later."

"Leo, we are sticking to my plan. This cop has got to be tired. She was at the bust last night. When the lights go out, we'll wait another thirty minutes or so, then we'll take care of business."

Leo scowled. He would rather be waiting at the bar, where he could at least watch the heavyweight fight that was being televised tonight. He turned the radio on in the hopes of finding a station that was covering it.

AFTER FINISHING THEIR wine and watching the fire burn down to glowing embers, they decided to retire. Nic cleared the dining room table while Carly loaded the dishwasher and tidied up the kitchen. After checking the doors and turning off the lights, they went upstairs. Harley was meandering down the hallway when they reached the top of the stairs. She was quickly scooped up by Carly, who nuzzled her soft fur.

"Do you have everything you need?" Nic asked.

"Yes, I'm all set. Thanks again, Nic. I know I couldn't have handled today without you."

"You're welcome. Sleep well." Nic watched Carly put the cat down then enter her room.

Back in her room, Nic stripped out of her clothes. For a second,

she contemplated taking a shower then she looked at her arm and decided against it. Pulling on a pair of shorts with the Mets logo on the leg and a matching T-shirt, she slid into her soft bed. Harley jumped up to join her, finally settling near the foot of the bed. Nic lay there afraid that she was so over tired that she wouldn't be able to fall asleep. Her mind kept going over the day's events. Then her thoughts drifted to Carly and how nice she looked in that pale blue sweatshirt. Her golden hair was utterly beautiful. She had never felt so comfortable with someone so quickly. *Do you know how you are affecting me, Carly?* Thoughts of the woman carried Nic off to sleep with a smile on her lips.

Carly was snuggled comfortably into her own bed. It had been a full day, and she was exhausted, yet she felt like she could have talked all night with Nic. She wondered what had caused that painful look in Nic's eyes. She didn't like the thought of Nic being in pain, physical or otherwise. Whenever she looked into those eyes, something stirred deep within her. Something she could not explain. Sleep finally overtook her as images of Nic floated through her mind.

SAL HAD DOZED off in the car, listening to the prizefight on the radio. Leo was too wired to sleep. He had a big bet riding on this bout, and he was intently listening to the announcer. He hadn't even realized the lights at 34 Kingston Drive had gone out. The fighter Leo had his money on took the tenth round, and Leo was so excited that he slammed his hand on the dash, waking Sal. The big man was so startled by the sudden noise that he smacked Leo in the back of the head. Now completely awake, Sal looked over at the house and seeing total darkness there, he smacked Leo again.

"Jesus, Sal, what the hell was that one for?" Leo asked, rubbing the spot Sal just hit.

"When the fuck did the lights go out over there, Leo? Can you tell me that?"

Leo squinted then blinked. "I don't know, Sal. I'm sorry. I was listening to the radio."

"You stupid son of a bitch! You just don't get it, do you, Leo?" Sal waved his palm in Leo's face. Leo cringed, afraid he was going to get hit again.

"I do, too, Sal, I do!"

"Get your ass out of this car before I fuckin' blow you away myself!" the big man exclaimed, opening the door and easing himself out. "And be quiet closing that door. We don't want to attract any attention."

Leo nodded his head repeatedly. Gently, they both closed their

doors and made their way up the street. Donning his gloves, Leo took out his lock picks and worked on the back door. Sal stood on the deck and kept an eye out. For nine o'clock, the neighborhood was pretty quiet. The back yard was nicely concealed by a fence along the far side and a row of trees at the back. Sal screwed the silencer onto the tip of his gun. Seconds later, they were inside the kitchen. They both turned on pocket flashlights to help them navigate the dark house.

Sal whispered, "Her bedroom is probably upstairs." He pointed at the ceiling with his index finger. They left the kitchen and moved to the front of the house. They had to move carefully, so as not to step on any creaking floorboards. With every step, they stopped and listened, but they heard nothing.

Leo leaned in close and said, "Man, Sal, this place is pretty nice. After we off her, can we take a better look around? Maybe we'll find something valuable."

Sal held up his hand. He put his finger to his lips and cocked his head to listen. He could have sworn he heard something. Leo watched and waited. He knew Sal would kill him if he said anything else. Finally Sal pointed his finger at the staircase then followed Leo as he started up them.

Nic was knee-deep in a dream when something caused her to stir. Harley was standing on her chest. The cat's black face was mere inches from Nic's nose. Reaching up, she patted the cat on the head. "What is it, Harley?"

The cat immediately jumped down and ran to the door. Nic raised herself up on her elbow and squinted to see the cat in the dark. Then she heard it. A faint creak. Her eyes bulged. Someone was on the stairs! For an instant, she had forgotten about Carly being in the house. She relaxed. *Maybe Carly just got up to get a glass of milk or something. But then why was Harley so agitated? I'd better check it out*, she thought. Padding over to the door, she heard another creak. A sixth sense told her that it wasn't Carly on the stairs. She returned to the nightstand and removed her gun. Quickly, she checked the clip. Scooping up Harley, she placed the cat in the bathroom and closed the door. She placed a pillow under the covers to make it look like she was in the bed, then she returned to the door. She stood with her back along the wall so that she'd be behind whoever came in. Adrenaline surged through her causing her heartbeat to speed up. Now she heard two sets of footsteps. She looked down. The doorknob was turning. Gripping her gun with both hands, she held her breath.

Leo turned the knob slowly and eased the door open. Their eyes had adjusted to the darkness, but it was still difficult to see into the room. A meow from the bathroom caused Leo to jump. Sal

quickly placed his heavy hand on Leo's shoulder then gave him a shove to move him into the room. Sal stepped beside Leo as they both leveled their guns on the bed. Two red dots appeared on the comforter. Squeezing the triggers, they fired two rounds into the bed. Nic's mind was racing. She needed a plan, and she needed one quick. A large, heavysset man stood the closest to her. The other man was much smaller.

"Go check it out, Leo," Sal ordered.

Nic realized this was the break she needed. As soon as the little man was farther into the room, she stepped from behind the door and placed the muzzle of her gun into the back of Sal's thick neck.

Sal felt the coolness of metal. *This is bad*, Sal thought, *very bad*.

"You, over by the bed. Drop your weapon now, or I'll blow your friend's brains out!" Nic shouted.

Leo froze. He dropped the gun then thrust his hands into the air.

"Okay, now kick it into the corner," Nic instructed. She removed the gun from Sal's right hand as she watched the other man follow her orders.

"What's going on?" Carly asked, approaching the open doorway.

"Shit!" Nic blurted. She turned slightly to see where Carly was. "Carly, get out of here!" she demanded.

Sal took this opportunity to come around fast with his left arm. He took Nic by surprise, throwing her off balance and knocking her against the dresser. The force dislodged Sal's gun from her hand, sending it crashing to the floor.

Leo, now scared out of his wits, bolted for the door. Carly didn't know what was going on. She heard Nic, but she couldn't move fast enough to get out of the way of whatever was coming at her. The small man hit her with all his weight, enough to throw Carly back into the hallway wall, knocking the air out of her. She slid to the floor in a heap.

Sal knew he was at a disadvantage. The cop still had her gun and his was somewhere on the floor. He charged her, grabbing her left forearm in an attempt to keep her weapon pointed behind her. Nic yelled from the pain his grip imposed on her wound. Before Sal was able to bring his left hand up around her throat, she stomped her heel down hard on his left instep, causing him to screech in agony. He was expecting the next move—a groin shot. He grabbed her right leg as it started to come up. Now he had her in a semi-sitting position on her dresser, her left arm held high over her head, gun still in hand. She could feel blood starting to slide down her arm where her wound had re-opened.

Only one option left, Nic thought. A head butt right into the

man's nose. She heard the crack as it broke, and blood started gushing over his face. Sal grabbed his face, releasing Nic's arm in the process. Nic came up with a hard knee to his overstuffed midsection. Sal doubled over, his breath taken away. He fell to the floor with a thud.

"Carly? Carly, are you out there?" Nic kept her gun leveled on the wheezing man.

Struggling to regain her breath, Carly finally answered, "I'm here. I'm okay."

Nic was relieved to hear Carly's voice. She needed her cuffs, but they were in the nightstand. She stepped away from the man and backed up to the nightstand, never taking her eyes off of him.

Sal, lying in a pool of blood, cursed the day he took this job. He knew his options were gone. He wouldn't go to prison and wait for Marcone's men to slit his throat. He'd go out his way. Reaching down to his ankle, he slipped the small revolver from its holder. When Nic returned to put the handcuffs on him, he grabbed his chest with his free hand, feigning a heart attack. Bending down to check on him, she almost didn't see the object in his other hand. Sal swung it around, but before he could get off a shot, Nic fired. BANG! BANG!

Carly jumped clean off the floor at the sound of the shots. She didn't know if she should rush in or get out. Her heart sank at the thought that Nic had been shot. Then she realized that if Nic had been she would be next. Seconds seemed like hours. She was too afraid to even breathe.

"Carly?" Nic's voice broke the silence. She reached down and checked for a pulse.

Tentatively, Carly peered into the room. She could only see a form to the right side of the bed, but she recognized it. Hitting the light switch, she temporarily blinded them both. When her eyes adjusted, she almost fell over from the sight before her. Nic was standing over a man who must have been dead. Blood covered his face and chest. His right hand still gripped a small gun.

Then Carly realized Nic was bleeding. "Nic!" she rushed over to her.

Seeing Carly, Nic smiled. She was grateful that Carly was not hurt. "Carly, I'm okay."

"You're not okay, you're bleeding." She immediately started examining Nic's arm. The gauze was soaked and no longer white.

"Where did the other guy go?" Nic asked as she placed herself between Carly and the door.

"He took off down the stairs, that is, after he nearly knocked me out."

"Listen, I want you to call 911. Tell them what happened; tell

them it's a code two, and stay on the line 'till they give you the okay."

Carly walked over to the nightstand and picked up the phone. She looked at Nic, who was slipping into a pair of jeans. "Where are you going?"

"I'll be right back. I'm just gonna make sure the other guy is gone."

"You're not leaving me in here with that?" Carly pointed at the corpse lying on the floor.

Nic realized that she was being insensitive. "Okay. Go back to your room, and make the call. Lock the door when you get inside."

Once downstairs, Nic turned on lights all over the house as she combed through every room. The front door was wide open. Nic wasn't sure if they came in that way or if the other perp left that way. Stepping out onto the porch, she got her answer. The urn she kept on the front porch was now laying on the walkway, broken. The dumb ass must have fallen right over it in his haste to escape. The street was quiet. *So much for gunshots waking up the neighbors*, Nic thought, as she went back inside.

Back upstairs, she rapped on Carly's door. "Carly, it's Nic, let me in."

The door swung open, and Carly, unable to suppress the urge any longer, wrapped her arms around Nic's midsection. Nic, startled at first, returned the embrace. She knew this incident must have rattled Carly. She was impressed with how well she was handling it.

"Well, is he gone?"

"Yes, he's gone. And he broke my urn on the way out," Nic smirked.

"Nic, I think we should take care of your arm. You're still bleeding."

Nic agreed and sat down on the bed. "What did the 911 operator say?"

Gathering supplies in the bathroom, Carly responded, "They dispatched a car. Should be here soon." She knelt down in front of Nic and laid the needed items out on the bed. Nic watched her in silence. Carly carefully removed the blood-soaked gauze, revealing the nasty gash Nic had received earlier that evening. "Nic, this looks bad. Why didn't you go to the hospital?"

"Are you kidding? And spend my evening sitting in the ER waiting for someone to stitch it up. No thanks."

The flow of blood had slowed down enough for her to clean the wound with a damp washcloth. Carly doused a cotton ball with some hydrogen peroxide. "This may hurt a bit," she said, dabbing the wound gently. The peroxide fizzed where it made contact with

the infection. Nic didn't even flinch. After placing four butterfly bandages over the cut, she finished by wrapping fresh gauze around the arm.

"Thanks," Nic said. Placing her hand on Carly's chin, she tilted her face up. "Are you sure that you are okay? He didn't hurt you, did he?"

Carly sat down next to her heroic friend. "No, he didn't hurt me. He just knocked the wind out of me." She waited a second before asking her next question. "Nic, what were they doing here?"

"They were trying to kill me," she answered absently.

Carly's face paled. "Why?"

"That I don't know, yet. But I'll bet good money that they are connected to Jimmy's shooting, too."

Anger surged through Carly. She wanted to go in the other room and kick that guy, even if he was dead. And the thought that they tried to hurt Nic, too, infuriated her more. She looked at Nic, who now seemed to be lost in thought. "Are you in there?" she asked, waving her hand in front of the woman's face.

Nic blinked. "Yeah, I just realized something."

"What?" Carly asked.

Nic's tone was serious. "You aren't safe here."

Carly hadn't expected that particular statement. It took her a few seconds to react. "Well, neither are you," she stated, matter-of-factly.

"Carly, I'm a cop. I'm never safe. You, on the other hand, need to be safe, and I need to make sure that you are."

Carly didn't know if she should consider this sweet or overbearing. "Nicole Stone! I am not a child, and I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself." Her tone was harsher than she had intended.

Nic lowered her eyes to her hands, which were splayed across her thighs. She didn't want or mean to offend Carly, but she was her partner's sister, and Nic wasn't about to let anything happen to her. She remained silent, struggling to phrase her response. Nic looked up into Carly's eyes. "I'm sorry. I know you can take care of yourself. I didn't mean to upset you." Returning her gaze to her hands, she continued, "I just want to make sure nothing happens to you. Tonight was a horribly close call, and I want you completely out of harm's way." She dared to look up, noticing the green eyes had softened.

Carly felt her anger subside at the sheepish expression on Nic's face. She knew that Nic was just being protective, not unlike her brother would be in the same situation. She couldn't suppress the need, so she went with it. She lightly rubbed her friend's cheek with the back of her hand. Nic's skin tingled at the touch. "I'm

sorry, too. Jimmy is so overprotective that sometimes I feel like I'm always trying to prove that I can take care of myself."

Grabbing Carly's hand, she gave it a squeeze. "It's okay. I understand. Truth is it isn't safe for either of us to stay here. So, after the cops leave, we're going to a hotel. For tonight, anyway." Nic smiled as she stood. She heard a car pull up out front and figured it must be the cops.

Carly jumped at the sound of two car doors being shut. Nic placed her hand on Carly's shoulder. "Calm down, it's just the cops."

"I didn't even hear any sirens, are you sure?"

"Yes. Remember, I told you to tell them it was a code two." Carly nodded. "Well, that means it's urgent, but don't use lights or sirens."

Carly's eyes signaled her understanding. "Didn't want to freak the neighbors out, huh?"

Nic smiled. "You got it. Come on, let's go talk to them."

After an hour and a half, the coroner finally showed up and removed the body from the bedroom. The doors were dusted for prints to try to determine the identity of the man's partner. Unfortunately, they found nothing. The corpse had hospital rubber gloves on, so it was likely his accomplice did, too. Once everyone was gone, they returned to their rooms to pack some things for the next few days. While she had explained the evening's events to the police, she remembered that Harley was still in the master bathroom. Carly had quickly retrieved the irritated feline, who was now sleeping on top of the bed. Dressed in jeans, a long sleeve shirt, and sneakers, Nic sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the blood-soaked carpet and simply shook her head. On Monday, she would have to call someone and arrange for the carpet to be replaced. An alarm system, long overdue, was going to be needed, as well. Carly appeared in the doorway, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, and watched Nic, who was completely lost in thought. *She looks haggard, she thought. She must be running on nothing more than fumes. And still she managed to fight off that man, who clearly outweighed her by, at least, one hundred pounds. She's amazing,* Carly mused.

"Are you ready to go?" Carly asked.

Nic looked up, not realizing Carly had been standing there. "Yeah, let's go."

"Nic, what about Harley? We can't leave her here."

Nic looked at the sleeping ball of fur, which was emitting a soft, droning sound. Picking the cat up, she nestled her on her shoulder and picked up her duffel bag. When she turned toward the door, she was not surprised to see a beaming Carly. *Okay, Nic, so now she knows you're a mushball.*

An hour later, they were tucked into a room at the Sheraton in downtown Larson. Nic snuck Harley into the hotel inside her duffel. They brought a small plastic bin and some scoopable cat litter so that no accidents would occur. When Nic had requested separate rooms, Carly felt a surge of panic at being alone. The evening's excitement had shaken her more than she realized. But after her "speech" about being able to take care of herself, she felt stupid bringing up her insecurities, so she remained silent. When the desk clerk informed them that there were no adjoining rooms available, Carly had all she could do to not let on how glad she was. Nic had asked her if sharing a room would be okay, and Carly immediately gave her consent. She was pleased when Nic registered them under phony names. Whoever was after Nic, Carly didn't want them finding her.

The room was nicely decorated with two double beds covered in green floral print bedspreads. A television sat on the large dresser, and a nightstand sat between the beds. Nic emerged from the bathroom in shorts and a T-shirt. Carly, who was engrossed in something on the television, was already tucked into her bed with Harley snuggled into a ball next to her. Carly idly petted the feline.

"What are you watching?" Nic asked, sliding under the covers of her own bed.

"*The Honeymooners*." Nic arched her brow. Carly didn't see it, but she had a sense that Nic had given her a disapproving glance. "What?" she asked, shrugging her shoulders.

"That thing is ancient."

"Good comedy is timeless," Carly replied with a smirk.

"If you say so." Nic rolled onto her side and was asleep within seconds, with Carly not far behind her.

Sunlight streamed through the small slit in the window curtain, tracing a direct line across the bed, where Carly was soundly sleeping. The cat, still in the same position, was snuggled firmly next to her. The "Do Not Disturb" sign on the doorknob kept the maids away from the room, and since only the hospital knew they were there, there was little chance of the phone waking them.

Meeoow. Meeoowww. Nic woke with a start. She bolted up in bed, darting her head left then right in search of the sound. She turned her head back, seeing the small, black cat on the other side of her roommate. Wiping her sweaty brow with the back of her hand, she got out of bed and padded into the bathroom. Drawing a cool glass of water, she downed it then refilled it and downed another. After closing the door, she flipped the light on and peered at her reflection. "Man, Nic, you're losing it," she said to her reflection. The awful nightmare she'd had was a replay of last night's attack, but this time she was not victorious. She shuddered at the

thought and tried to force it from her mind. But the image wouldn't recede: Carly lying in a pool of blood, two gunshots in her chest. Nic squeezed her eyes shut as the image took hold of her mind. She shook her head violently to eradicate the picture. Her eyes shot open. Turning on the cold water tap, she splashed handfuls of water onto her weary face. A knock on the bathroom door almost made her jump out of her skin.

"Nic, is everything all right?"

Nic ran her hands through her hair and dried her face before poking her head out of the door. "Yes, I'm fine."

Carly eyed her suspiciously. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, Carly, I'm sure. What time is it, anyway?" Nic folded the towel and casually sauntered out of the bathroom.

Standing by the closet with her arms folded, Carly still wasn't convinced Nic was okay. "It's nearly ten. Why don't we call the hospital?"

"Good idea. I'll do that now. Go ahead and jump in the shower if you want." Nic picked up the phone and dialed the number.

Carly had the feeling that Nic was hiding something, she just wasn't sure what. She seemed a bit agitated. Carly studied her while she gathered her bathroom necessities. Nic played with the ring on her thumb, sliding it on and off, while she waited on the phone. The ring was a beautiful silver band with a black flame-like design that covered it entirely.

"Okay, thanks for the information." Nic hung up the phone. "Jimmy is doing fine. He awoke in the middle of the night, briefly. Right now, he is still sleeping. Though the nurse said she suspected he would be awake soon."

Carly let out a sigh. "Thank God! I can't wait to talk to him." Carly walked to the bathroom door. "I won't be long. Do you want to order some breakfast?"

"Yeah, sounds good. Anything special?"

"Surprise me," she replied, smiling as she entered the bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later, Carly emerged from the steamy bathroom, pleased to find Nic lounging on the bed perusing the Sunday paper. Nic looked at her companion. She was wearing a white, terry cloth robe, and her head was wrapped up in a peach-colored towel. Rosy cheeks, from the heat of the shower, gave her a healthy glow. Nic gulped. She had relaxed considerably while Carly showered, but now the sight of this woman caused her heart to race. Suddenly, the dream she had been having prior to last night's attack came swiftly back to her mind. They were in Nic's hot tub. Carly looked amazing, her blonde hair damp and clinging to her neck and shoulders. And her eyes, those mesmerizing green eyes, were dark

with desire. Carly wasn't wearing anything and neither was Nic. Then Carly slowly closed the distance between them. There were mere inches between them, and Nic felt like she would die if she didn't touch Carly. Just when she was about to do what her heart demanded her to do she awoke to a cat on her chest. Now that image was back.

"Nic, did you hear me?"

Nic's eyes fluttered. "Oh. Sorry. Guess I was lost in thought. What did you say?"

"I asked where you got the paper from?"

"They left it outside the door. I saw it when I went to remove the 'Do Not Disturb' sign." She forced her eyes back to the paper. A knock on the door signaled the arrival of breakfast. Nic got up. "I'll get it. Why don't you take Harley into the bathroom."

"Okay," Carly agreed, picking up the cat, which was quite busy cleaning every inch of herself.

Nic surveyed the breakfast before dismissing the waiter and rapping on the bathroom door to signal Carly. Nic had had every hope that Carly would get dressed while she was in there, but that hope faded when Carly padded out with her bathrobe still on. *Damn, Nic thought, now I have to try to get through breakfast.*

FRANK TORELLI KNOCKED on the door to the library and waited. He adjusted his tie and flicked some lint from the shoulder of his black suit. Finally, he heard his boss respond, so he entered. Victor Marcone was pacing on the balcony, which overlooked the grounds. A cool breeze filtered into the cavernous room. The sun was inching its way into the sky, painting the few clouds that hung on the horizon a pale pink.

"Well?" Victor halted his steps and stared into Frank's eyes.

"I'm afraid there still is no sign of him. We've hit all the known locales, but it's like he vanished."

Victor clenched his jaw then resumed his pacing. Back and forth, back and forth. Frank stood by and awaited instructions. It had been a long time since he had seen his boss this upset. Victor stopped mid-stride. "That little shit has to be somewhere, and I want him found!" Frank flinched at the angry fire in Victor's eyes. When Victor was this angry, no one was safe. "Do you hear me, Frankie? I don't care how many men it takes. I want that fuck brought to me! Now go!"

Frank bobbed his head in acknowledgment and quickly retreated from his boss's wrath. Before he made it to the door, he heard a flowerpot crash to the floor. He decided he'd better tell the maid some major cleanup would be required up here later.

PAUL MAHONEY RELUCTANTLY opened a bleary eye and groped the nightstand for the source of his irritation. The voluptuous body sprawled next to him didn't stir, completely oblivious to the ringing of the telephone. "Mahoney," he stated gruffly.

"Paul, it's Tom." He straightened up upon hearing the tone of concern in his partner's voice. Paul knew he wasn't calling to set up a racquetball game. He noted the clock read nine fifteen. "Listen, somebody tried to whack Stone last night."

Hearing this, Paul pulled himself from the bed. "Who? When?"

"I don't have the specifics, yet. A Lieutenant Crandall at the 45th notified me. Seems that Raimes contacted them, informing them that if anything happened at Stone's residence to inform us about it."

Paul paced back and forth, rubbing his eyes with his free hand. "Well, I take it the person wasn't successful, right?"

Tom Sanders cleared his throat. "Yeah, right, they weren't. From what I heard there were two perps, one got away, the other one is dead."

Paul's lips slid into a slight grin. He wondered what had prevented Stone from killing them both. Her reputation was well known throughout the department. She was a damn good cop, but a little on the reckless side. If you went up against her then winding up dead was a real possibility. "Has the body been identified?"

"Well, that's where we come in. There was no ID on the body, so we need to get somebody down to the morgue to run the prints, ASAP."

"Terrific." Mahoney sighed. He looked down at the brunette. The bed sheet exposed one long, well-toned leg. He swallowed hard. *Oh, well, duty calls*, he thought. "Where is Stone, now?"

Sanders finished the last of his morning coffee and placed the mug in the sink. "My guess would be at the hospital. I'll be by to pick you up in ten minutes." Sanders disconnected, leaving Paul no other option than to trudge off to the bathroom.

THE SUNDAY MORNING traffic was light, allowing Nic to navigate the normally busy streets easily and make it to the hospital in fifteen minutes. Breakfast had been a quiet affair. Nic had tried her best to keep her mind off of the dream she had last night. She knew Carly was aware that something was wrong, so she made several attempts at small talk, none very successful. Nic wasn't sure herself what was going on inside her. Too many things, big things, had happened in too short a period of time. She needed to clear her head and concentrate on who was after her and Jimmy. As

the pair exited the elevator, they spotted Dr. Austin leaving Jimmy's room. They caught him before he slipped into the next room. His report relieved them both. Jimmy was making good progress, and he would be moved from ICU sometime on Monday or Tuesday. Carly was so happy she hugged him, taking him quite by surprise, though he did return the hug with a warm "You're welcome."

Entering the hospital room, they were both grinning like fools when Jimmy opened his eyes. Carly couldn't suppress the tears of joy that gushed forth at seeing him. Placing her hands on Carly's shoulders, Nic eased her further into the room. Jimmy blinked several times, wetness appearing in his own eyes. Then he looked at Nic and smiled a silent "thank you," and Nic knew what he was thanking her for.

Dabbing her eyes, Carly placed her hand on Jimmy's arm, rubbing it gently. "Jimmy, you scared the hell out of us. But I am so thankful that you're going to be all right." She brushed back his sandy brown hair with her hand, letting it linger on his brow for a moment.

His throat was so dry he croaked when he tried to utter, "Sorry, squirt."

Carly poured some water into a cup and held it to his lips. He managed a few sips before laying his weary head back down. "Don't you be sorry about anything. You just get better."

Nic struggled to keep her emotions in check. Even when the doctor had told them yesterday that Jimmy would recover, she still had a fear that they might lose him. An old wound she thought long healed now seemed as fresh as ever. "Hey, partner, how are you feeling?"

"Like someone...ran over me...with a dump truck." He lifted his head, indicating he wanted more water, which Carly immediately gave him. "Did you catch the guy?"

Nic mulled over the response she should give him. "No, not yet, Jimmy, but Sanders and Mahoney are working on it." There was no need to let Jimmy know about last night's attack, especially when she had no proof the two incidents were connected though she knew they had to be. The man she shot was certainly involved, but she didn't know if he was the triggerman. It could have been the bastard who knocked Carly to the floor. "Jimmy, did you see anything that night? Anything at all?"

His brows knitted as he tried to remember that evening. It was all too foggy. He shook his head slowly. "I don't remember anything...past saying good night to Vinny."

"S'alright, Jimmy, we'll get him. Just rest now."

A nurse bustled into the room and tapped her wristwatch. "I'm

afraid that's got to be it for now. This young man needs his rest."

Reluctantly, the pair exited the room after Carly kissed her brother's forehead. Back in the hallway, Nic spoke with the cop on duty and was informed that the previous evening had been a quiet one. He hadn't seen anything unusual. Satisfied with this, Nic invited Carly to join her in the cafeteria for a cup of coffee, which was quickly accepted.

The cafeteria was mildly busy for a late Sunday morning. Several of the kitchen staff were shifting into lunch mode. After getting their coffee, the two women managed to find a quiet table near the large windows that looked out onto the grounds behind the hospital. A rabbit, brown with a fluffy white tail, peeked out from under a nearby bush and twitched its tiny pink nose. Carly spotted the creature first then eagerly directed Nic's attention to it. Once satisfied that it was in no imminent danger, it hopped out and sniffed at the sun-soaked grass.

Nic took a drink of her steaming coffee, enjoying the taste as well as the warmth. "Carly, we need to talk about a few things."

Carly, her hands wrapped around her own coffee mug, looked into Nic's pale blue eyes. "Sure, what about?"

Nic, having a feeling Carly would not be too enthusiastic about her idea, averted her eyes back to the tabletop. "Well, because of what happened at the house last night, you know it won't be safe for either of us to stay there, at least not until I get an alarm system installed." Carly nodded. "And now that they, whoever they are, have come after me, I'm going to need to do some investigating." She looked into the jade eyes. "So I would like you to stay with a couple of friends of mine." There she got it all out. Now all she had to do was wait for the rebuttal.

Carly brought the mug to her lips, never taking her eyes off of Nic. She took a long, slow sip and contemplated the proposal. "Nic, I don't need babysitters."

Here we go, Nic thought. "That's not what this is."

"Isn't it? You don't think I'm capable of taking care of myself."

Nic clenched her jaw in frustration. Taking a deep breath, she regarded the woman who sat across from her. In some ways, she reminded Nic of Jessie, her younger sister. "Carly, that is simply not true. I just don't want anything to happen to you. I couldn't live with myself if it did." She looked deeply into those jade eyes, imploring them to listen.

Carly held Nic's eyes with her own. She wanted to know if Nic felt this way simply because she was Jimmy's kid sister, or if she cared about her well-being because she, too, was starting to feel the same unexplainable attraction. She bit her lip. Decisions, decisions. "Is that only because I'm Jimmy's sister?"

Nic looked like she'd just been stabbed, the pained expression so clearly etched on her face. "No. It's not just because you are Jimmy's sister. I like you, Carly. I don't make friends very easily, but the ones whom I have, I value." Sheepish eyes gazed at her.

Dropping her head, Carly closed her eyes. God, she felt like an insensitive ass, but on the flip side she did get the response she was after. Nic did care. She could see it in her brilliant eyes. Tentatively, she slid her hand across the table and captured the strong fingers of her companion. "I apologize for that, Nic. That was completely uncalled for." She studied Nic's hand. A few short hours ago, this hand had saved both their lives. "I'll stay wherever you want." Carly rubbed her thumb lightly over the back of Nic's hand. "I won't pretend that I like the idea, but if you think it is best, I'll go along with it." Looking up, she returned the smile she was getting.

"Thank you." She gave Carly's hand a squeeze. "You probably aren't in any danger, but I don't think we should take any chances. Can you keep Harley with you? I can't keep hiding her in hotel rooms."

"Sure. And just where will you be staying?"

Nic took comfort in the contact. The closer they got, the more electrifying it felt. "Since they are after me, I'm not too sure. I'll probably change locations frequently, but I'll still see you here at the hospital."

"And what makes you think they won't try something here?"

"I think the chances are good that they won't, at least not during normal hours. That's the whole point of having Jimmy under twenty four-hour guard. If they try something, it'll be when there are fewer staff and visitors around."

Carly continued rubbing her thumb over the back of Nic's hand. "So are you at least going to tell me your friends' names?"

A smile formed on Nic's face. Carly wondered if Nic knew how beautiful she was, especially when she smiled. "I suppose I can divulge that information," she replied, getting a smile in return. "Susan Blaine and Liz Chandler. Susan and I have been friends since college."

"Is Liz her roommate?" Carly inquired, releasing Nic's hand and picking up her coffee mug.

Nic was not sure how to handle that, so she just went with plain old honesty. "Liz is Susan's significant other." Nic eyed Carly, trying to gauge her reaction. Carly didn't even look surprised by the statement.

"How long have they been together?" Carly had the feeling she was being tested on her responses.

"About four years. I'll give Sue a call when we get back upstairs."

“Sounds good. I can’t wait to meet them.” Carly noticed the raised eyebrow across from her. *Just what is going through your mind, Nicole?*

Chapter Six

RETURNING TO THE ICU waiting room, Nic excused herself to go check on the scum ball they had put in the hospital Friday night. He had been moved to a private room on the fifth floor and was still in a coma. Though he was not on life support, other vital functions were still being monitored. An older police officer sat outside his room and perused the morning paper. Nic flashed her badge as she approached. The officer informed her that no one, other than the nurses and the doctor, had been in to see Gato. She talked with the duty nurse and discovered, to her regret, that the scum ball could be in a coma for God knows how long. Hell, he could wake up in five minutes or five years. Thanking the nurse for her time, Nic slipped a piece of gum into her mouth and started chewing. Spotting a phone on her way to the stairwell, she decided to give Susan a call. After several rings, someone finally picked up.

"Hello." Nic instantly recognized Liz's voice.

"Hi, Liz. It's Nic."

"Hey, Niki. How's it going?"

"Well, let's just say I've had better weekends."

Her friend's tone worried Liz. "Why, what's been happening?"

Nic furrowed her brows. "Haven't you been reading the papers?"

"Actually, Sue and I just got back. We took the train to Philadelphia Thursday morning. I still can't believe I got Sue to take a couple of days off."

"Well, that explains why I haven't gotten a call from you two." An orderly passed, pushing an empty gurney.

Liz wondered just what had been going on. "So fill me in."

Nic thought about where to begin. "Well, let's see. Late Friday night, after Jimmy and I busted up a drug deal going down in a warehouse on the south side, Jimmy was shot."

Liz was so stunned she nearly fell into the chair that sat next to the phone stand. It took a few seconds for the statement to register. "Is he all right?"

"He's in the hospital," Nic replied. She ran her fingers over her forehead and through her hair. "He took two bullets, but the doc says he's gonna make it." She heard the relieved sigh. Nic proceeded to recount the previous evening's activities to a startled Liz. After hearing the disturbing account, Liz readily agreed to come to the hospital and pick up Carly. Sue had gone to the office against Liz's protests, so Liz would come alone. Nic thanked her and returned to the waiting room to find Carly engrossed in an episode of *The Cosby Show*.

Carly didn't even see Nic enter the room, so she noticeably jumped when Nic deposited herself next to her on the loveseat. She admonished Nic with a light slap to the leg. "Don't scare me like that."

A smile curled Nic's lips. "Well, don't get so involved in what you're watching." She snapped her gum in emphasis.

The scent of cinnamon hit Carly. "Hmph." She eyed her friend for a moment. "So did you get everything done?"

"Yeah, more or less. The guy that we busted Friday is still comatose, and I talked to Liz. She'll be over in an hour or so. Have you gone back in to see Jimmy?"

"No. The nurse said we could in half an hour."

"Well, fill me in on what I've missed, since it seems that I'll be watching it." Carly looked into sparkling blue eyes and smiled.

LIZ NAVIGATED THE early afternoon traffic with ease. With only a little more than a month before Christmas, the holiday shoppers were starting to get serious. She parked her cherry red Celica in the lot and immediately spied the black Xterra parked a few spaces away. Though she didn't care much for SUVs, the Xterra was a sharp looking beast with its sleek black exterior, and it was a perfect compliment to its owner. Liz was eager to meet Carly, especially when she detected the change in Nic's voice when she talked about her. Liz usually had a sixth sense about these things. She pondered their earlier conversation as she made her way to ICU.

The ICU waiting room was nestled just down the hall from the elevators on the fourth floor of St. Peter's hospital. A small television set, currently tuned to a *MASH* rerun, sat on a TV stand in the corner of the room. A sofa and loveseat in matching blue leather and two straight-backed chairs offered visitors a view of the TV or the spacious grounds at the rear of the hospital. Nic heard the distinctive walk of one perky redhead before she saw her pass the waiting room, headed straight for the nurses' station. "Liz!" Nic shouted, a bit louder than she wanted.

The redhead turned, flashing a brilliant smile. Approaching

with her arms out, Nic rose to greet her. "Niki, I'm so glad you're all right." She squeezed Nic fiercely, and Nic returned the affection. "Sue said to give us a call later, so you two can talk."

Nic stepped back and nearly bumped into the now-standing Carly. "Oops, sorry. Liz, this is Carly Jamison. Carly, Elizabeth Chandler." Carly extended her hand, which the woman grasped with both of hers.

"It's very nice to meet you. I am sorry it is under such disturbing circumstances though."

Carly regarded the slender woman, who was roughly her height. She wore a pair of dark blue Levi's and an oversized gray wool sweater. A serious pair of hazel eyes checked her out as well. "Me, too. But Jimmy will get better, and thank heaven nothing really serious happened to Nic last night."

"Yes, Nic mentioned the excitement you had last night. It must have been awful."

Carly glanced at Nic. "Yes, it was," she admitted. "I was so afraid for Nic." Carly grasped Nic's forearm. Nic's immediate smile not going unnoticed by Liz.

"She's something, isn't she?" Liz swatted Nic in the mid-section. "And, Carly, please call me Liz."

Carly smiled in agreement.

"Okay, why don't we go see Jimmy again before you two head out of here?" Nic placed her hands firmly behind the women and guided them into the hallway.

PAUL MAHONEY AND Tom Sanders sat in Carl Rhineberg's office at the morgue and waited for the fingerprint results on the body that was retrieved from Nicole Stone's house the previous evening. While they waited, they studied the police report that had been filed on the incident.

Sanders tossed the file on top of the cluttered desk. "Not much to go on in there."

"So what else is new?" Mahoney quipped, sipping his coffee while he gazed out of the window at the beautiful day that was forming.

Carl Rhineberg waddled into the room, removing the rubber gloves from his pudgy hands with a snap. He slid a folder out from under his left arm and handed it to Sanders. "Here you go, boys." Dropping into the chair behind his desk, he selected a chocolate glazed doughnut from the box on his desk and started eating. iI took the liberty of pulling up the whole file on your guy to save you some time.i Chocolate morsels fell from his mouth as he spoke.

Mahoney came over from the window and looked over Sand-

ers' shoulder at the opened file. "Thanks a lot, Carl." The partners scanned the document. The body in the other room used to be Salvatore Linetti. He was born in Brooklyn in 1957, and the last known address was Secaucus, New Jersey.

"Now all we have to do is figure out where he might have been staying while he was in our fair city." Sanders closed the folder and stood. "Sorry we had to drag you in here this morning, but if we don't get somewhere on this case fast, Raimis is gonna have our hides."

Carl bit into a jelly doughnut, squirting some of the berry contents onto his lab coat. He waved his hand at the retreating duo. "Don't worry about it. Anything I can do to help."

Back in the car, Sanders turned the engine over. "Let's go back to the station and make a copy of this photo. Then we'll hit some of the local joints and see if anybody recognizes him."

"Sounds like a plan," Paul agreed.

LIZ AND CARLY traveled eastbound on Highland Avenue. Having a tendency to drive fast, Liz made the Celica zip in and out of the two-lane street with ease. Carly had barely said a word since they'd left the hospital a few minutes ago. Liz knew she was worried not only about her brother, but about Nic as well. She had given Nic a hug, insisting that she call Susan later to let them know that she was okay. In the years that she had come to know Nicole, Liz never remembered her being so willing to accept affection or give in to demands as she seemed to be with this young woman. She glanced at the blonde who was staring out the window at the passing brownstones. Nic's cat was snoozing on Carly's lap.

"So, Nic tells me you're a photographer."

Carly blinked several times, returning herself to the present. Her thoughts had drifted back to last night and the lovely dinner she and Nic had shared. She was concerned for her new friend. "Yes, for National Geographic."

Liz's eyes widened. "Wow, that's a plum job, I bet."

"It has its ups and downs like any job."

"Yeah, but you get to travel a lot, right?"

"I've traveled some, yes. As a matter of fact, I just flew in from Australia."

"That would certainly explain your tanned complexion." Liz looked at her with serious eyes. "So might I ask, what are the so-called 'downs'?"

Carly chuckled. "Well, there are some, believe me." She thought for a moment. "Like when you spend all day on a boat trying to locate a pod of whales and then you find them with little

daylight left, so you know you'll be back out the next day doing it all over again."

Liz sped the car up to beat a changing traffic light, only to be forced to stop at the next one. "I guess that would qualify."

"So what do you do?" Carly asked, rolling down her window to let some of the warm afternoon air into the car. For November, it was a gorgeous day. The temperature had to be around seventy. A slight breeze was blowing while a handful of puffy white clouds were scattered across a bright blue sky.

"I'm a computer programmer. I work for an electronics company here in Larson."

"That sounds interesting," Carly admitted. "What type of programming?"

"All types, really. I do both front end and back end stuff, usually in C++, though I prefer front end."

Carly held up her slender hand. "Whoa, you lost me already. What's front end and back end?"

Liz grinned. "Front end is the stuff a user would see, like when you are running an app like Microsoft Word or Excel. Back end is what's going on behind the scenes, what's actually making the thing work. In my company's case, back end is when we are working with external equipment, specifically."

"Oh, I see." Carly nodded.

Liz pulled the car into the driveway of a two-story townhouse. "Well, here we are."

Carly emerged from the car and surveyed the area. The yard was average in size and nicely landscaped. A newly planted birch tree was tied in place on the front lawn. Beige siding covered the exterior with dark brown shutters accentuating the windows. "This is a nice place you have here."

"Thanks, we like it. Come on, I'll give you the two-cent tour." Liz grabbed one of Carly's bags while Carly handled the cat, which was not too thrilled at being disturbed.

THE BLACK XTERRA drove slowly down Krenshaw, its driver searching for a parking space along the crowded street. Several small shops and a few bars occupied the street along with the Arcadia Hotel, a run-down establishment that catered to individuals with questionable reputations. Many a night, Nic and Jimmy had spent casing this place, waiting for a suspect in the dark hours of the morning. Parking the vehicle a few doors down from the hotel entrance, Nic activated the car alarm and strolled up the sidewalk, scattering leaves with every stride. It had gotten so warm; she had removed her leather jacket, which was now flung over her shoul-

der. Her faded blue jeans and Polo shirt made her feel quite comfortable in the unseasonable heat. She passed The Rat's Nest, a topless bar and haven to many of the city's night dwellers. Its red neon light was now dark in the Sunday sun. Upon entering the hotel, her nose crinkled at the unmistakable stench of smoke and urine. A skinny gentleman with a bad toupee and thin mustache was stooped over the counter, idly turning the pages of the morning paper. A cigarette dangled from his lips, making Nic wonder how he managed not to ignite the paper; the ashes hanging dangerously close. The man did not even bother to raise his eyes.

Nic slid her badge under his gaze and waited for the response. Gradually, his bloodshot eyes made contact with her penetrating blue ones, causing the man to stand up straight. "Yes, what can I do for you, detective?"

Nic liked it when they showed respect, especially when it went against every fiber of their being. "I'm looking for someone." She pulled Linetti's wallet from her back pocket. After she had shot and killed him, she'd managed to go through his pockets before Carly had entered the room. She had been quite pleased when she'd found his wallet, knowing that it would give her a head start at getting to the bottom of this. The cops at the 45th or even Sanders and Mahoney, if they'd get contacted, would have to wait for a fingerprint ID. She had little doubt that the man she had shot had a rap sheet. He looked the type. Opening the wallet, she pointed to the driver's license photo. "Do you recognize this guy?"

The man put on a pair of wire-rimmed eyeglasses and inspected the picture. "Nope, haven't seen..."

Before he could finish the sentence, he felt himself being lifted right over the counter. Nic brought him to within inches of her now fierce eyes. "Listen to me and listen closely. Don't jerk me around, okay?" She held him by the collar of his shirt, which she tightened her hold on, causing him to choke. "I've had a bad weekend. Now I'm gonna ask you one more time, have you seen him?" Reaching into her pocket, she extracted a matchbook bearing the name of the hotel they were in and stuck it into the man's pained face.

"All right. Just...let go." He struggled for his breath as Nic released him, and he dropped to the counter.

Returning the matchbook and the wallet to her pocket, she commented, "That's better. Now stop choking, and tell me what I want to know."

The desk clerk tugged his shirt back into place and shot her an angry glance. "He came in on Wednesday and rented a room." Nic raised an eyebrow. "It's room 212. He paid through Monday, but I haven't seen him since yesterday morning." He handed her the

room key, which she hadn't even asked for, yet.

"Was anyone else with him?"

"Yeah, some guy half his size. He was real nervous and jerky, if you know what I mean."

She turned the register around and flipped the pages back to Wednesday. She realized they probably didn't use their real names, but she had to check anyway. "Do you remember which ones were theirs?" she asked, tapping her finger on the page.

The skinny man started to snicker. He looked up into a menacing pair of eyes and stopped instantly. His heartbeat fluttered from the fear that she might drag him over the counter and beat the crap out of him just for the hell of it. He looked at the page and thought for a second. He pointed to two poorly scribbled names in the middle of the page. "John Brown" and "Tom Jones" were the names the desk clerk pointed to. Nic smirked, clearly not surprised, though "Tom Jones" wasn't one you ran across a lot.

"Did he get his own room?"

"Yup. 214." He handed her the key to that room, too.

"Thanks for the help." She climbed the stairs, twirling the keys around her index finger on the small rings that held them.

CARLY FOUND LIZ in the kitchen after she settled herself in the spare bedroom upstairs. The kitchen was bright and cheerful with glistening white appliances and walls covered in a subtle pattern of daisies and violets. A white wood table sat in the center of the room surrounded by four chairs with seat cushions that picked up the wallpaper pattern. A teakettle was whistling on the stove. Liz was busy preparing a salad, which Carly assumed was for the evening meal. To avoid startling Liz, Carly cleared her throat upon entering the kitchen then preceded to deposit the cat on the floor.

Liz greeted her with a smile. "All unpacked?"

"Yes, thanks. Where should I put Harley's food and water dishes?"

"On the other side of the refrigerator would be great."

Carly took the bowls and filled one with water and the other with dry cat food then placed them where Liz had indicated. Harley sauntered over to inspect her food, rubbing against Carly's leg as she did.

"This is an interesting picture. What is it exactly?" She looked at the odd circular picture, divided into sections with an animal at the top of each one. Each pie piece had a series of numbers assigned to it.

Liz turned to find Carly studying the picture that hung next to the refrigerator. "Oh, that's a Chinese astrological chart."

"Chinese horoscopes?"

"Yes. Have you ever heard anyone talk about it being 'The Year of the Dragon' and such?" Liz asked, returning to the salad.

Carly thought about it for a second. "Yes, now that you mention it."

Liz took a ripe tomato and began slicing it. "Well, that refers to Chinese astrology. See those numbers on the chart?"

"Yeah."

"Find your birth year, and that will tell you which animal ruled that year."

"According to this chart, it was a rabbit."

"Ooh. That's interesting," Liz exclaimed.

Finishing the salad, she cleaned up the counter top and placed the salad in the refrigerator. "Would you care for some tea or something?"

"Tea would be great. Let me help."

"Okay. The cups are in the cupboard above the toaster. What do you take in your tea?"

"Some honey, if you have it."

"Sure do," Liz replied. "I have tea every afternoon. The guys at work bust me all the time about it." Liz prepared the cups, placing a teaspoon of honey in Carly's and a drop of milk and some sugar in her own. "Let's have this in the sunroom, and I'll tell you more about this stuff, if you want."

Carly cheerfully replied, "Yes, please do." She followed Liz into a small room that faced the backyard. The exterior wall was lined with floor to ceiling windows. Ferns, ivies, a Norfolk pine, and African violets were throughout the room. The sun was no longer hitting this side of the house, yet comfortable warmth filled the room. A white wicker loveseat and sofa faced each other, providing only the occupants of the sofa with a view of the backyard. Carly sat on the sofa. The navy, tropical design of the seat cushions were a nice contrast to the white wicker. Liz sat down across from Carly, kicking off her loafers and curling her legs up under her.

Carly sipped her tea. "So I take it that these horoscopes are a hobby of yours?"

"Yes they are, as a matter of fact. I made a couple of trips to China for my company and became friends with a woman over there who really hooked me onto the whole thing. It's really quite fascinating."

"I'd love to hear all about it."

Liz cooed, "A topic Sue will tell you I have no problem discussing for hours on end." The two women giggled. Liz filled Carly in on the background of Chinese astrology and how it was used in the Orient for thousands of years. Both systems were divided into

twelve segments, the Zodiac cycle completing in twelve months, while the Chinese system took twelve years. "According to Far Eastern philosophy, luck has little to do with our destinies. Instead, it is the 'animal that hides in our hearts' that truly explains our characters and fortunes."

Carly was so engrossed in what Liz was saying that she hadn't even noticed that Harley was now perched on her lap. "Go on," she pleaded.

Liz drank some tea and continued, "For example, people, like you, who were born under the Sign of the Rabbit, make good writers, musicians, artists, diplomats..." she paused to think, "therapists and doctors, too."

"Wow! My degree is in journalism. That's amazing."

"Yes, you'd be surprised. Chinese astrology can tell you things about yourself that will indeed amaze you. You will find things that you agree with and some that you don't."

"Like what?"

"Well, I'm an ox, and ox people make good scientists and engineers, which is right on the mark for me, since I have a computer engineering degree. On the other hand, ox people are said to be less than gregarious, and I find that to be completely false for me."

"So, what you're saying is that some things will apply and others won't?"

"Right," Liz affirmed.

"In the kitchen, when I told you my animal sign, you commented that it was interesting. Why?"

Liz considered her answer. "Because one of the many things the signs can tell you is who will make a compatible partner."

"Oh." Carly was afraid to ask the question that instantly popped into her mind. But she desperately wanted to know, so she bit her lip and asked anyway. "Do you know what sign Nic is?"

The hesitant look on Carly's face did not go unnoticed. "She's a dog. Gosh that sounds awful." Liz laughed a little. Liz sensed Carly wanted to know more, but she was holding back. *I'll give her a little nudge*, Liz thought. "Just in case you were curious, your sign and her sign are highly compatible, and not just as friends."

Though her cheeks flushed with embarrassment, Carly's heart started to soar.

SAL LINETTI'S ROOM at the Arcadia Hotel was Spartan at best. A single bed, four-drawer dresser, and single-drawer nightstand were the only furnishings in the tiny room. A red plaid bedspread lay in a heap on the floor. Matching curtains, that looked like they had been there for years, were drawn over most of the

window, perpetuating the room's dismal appearance. A suitcase stuffed under the bed offered her little assistance. She wasn't even sure what she was looking for, but she'd know it when she found it. All of his things were still in his suitcase. Nothing was even hanging in the closet.

A small, metal trash container sat next to the dresser. Nic emptied the contents onto the floor and pushed through the small pile with her pen. An empty cigar box with no price tag, two crumpled napkins, an empty plastic cup from McDonald's, a white lunch bag, also crumpled, like you'd get from a takeout joint, and an empty matchbook. Nic picked up the last piece and turned it over. "Lorenzo's" was spelled out in bold, black ink. "Well, it's not a lot, but it's something," Nic mumbled. Sliding the trash back into the basket, she removed each drawer from the dresser and turned it over to check for anything that might be taped to the underside of the drawer. She repeated this with the nightstand. Nothing.

The bathroom didn't offer anything, either. A can of shaving cream, a razor, roll-on deodorant, toothbrush, and toothpaste were the only items in there. No medicine cabinet, just an oval mirror hung above the porcelain pedestal sink. She checked the tank before she left. Still nothing.

She opened the man's wallet and stared at the New Jersey license photo. "Well, Mr. Linetti, I'll give you this, you sure travel light." She replaced the wallet in her pocket and closed the door behind her.

She moved on to the other man's room next door. It was nearly identical to the one she just left. This guy at least unpacked, though he only had enough clothes with him for about a week. Two suits were hanging in the closet, and one was lying across the back of the only chair in the room. Searching the pockets, she produced a cocktail napkin from Sammy's Bar & Grill. She knew that place. It was on the south side, near the new bridge that had been built three years ago. On the back of the napkin, a phone number was scrawled in red. She smiled. The rest of the room came up empty, but she had two places to check out, so this trip had not been a waste. Closing the door, she strolled back downstairs, whistling a happy tune.

CARLY ASKED LIZ a hundred questions about both her sign and Nic's. She wasn't surprised to learn that dog people made excellent police officers after Liz had filled her in on the characteristics that were an inherent part of their nature. Even though she had known Nic for less than forty-eight hours, she could see in her the traits that Liz described. Nic was indeed an unselfish and altruistic soul, with a high regard for loyalty and honesty. A smile

crossed her lips when she thought about her; a smile she didn't even realize was there.

"Carly, excuse me for being a bit forward here, but I sense that you are starting to really care about Niki?"

Carly nearly choked on her tea. "What makes you say that?" *Come on, Carly, it's as plain as the nose on your face. You've never been good at hiding your feelings and you know it,* she chastised herself.

Liz gave her a knowing look. "I think it has something to do with the instant smile that appears on your face whenever you say her name."

"Oh." Carly felt a warmth creep up her neck. "I guess I am becoming rather fond of her. Is there a problem with that?" she asked, hesitantly.

The front door opened and the sound of footsteps could be heard coming from the foyer. "We're in the sunroom, Sue," Liz yelled. Liz looked into Carly's inquisitive green eyes across from her. "No, there isn't a problem with that. I just don't want to see Niki get hurt, so please make sure this is what you want, okay?"

A bolt of anger shot through her, until she realized that Liz was just being a protective friend. The anger subsided when she'd realized that. Carly was actually glad that Nic had a good friend like Liz. "I will."

"Hi there." A tall brunette dressed in casual slacks and a button down shirt strolled into the room. "You must be Carly," she presumed, extending a hand.

Carly moved the cat onto the sofa then stood, and shook the woman's hand. The woman was almost as tall as Nic with similar features, except she had soft, brown eyes. She was quite beautiful with her dark brown hair tied back in an intricate French braid that went past her shoulders. "And you must be Susan. Nice to meet you." Harley stretched, arching her back. With a flick of her tail, she jumped off the sofa and traipsed out of the room.

"Liz filled me in on what's happened the last couple of days. I was shocked. How is Nic doing, and how is your brother?" Susan sat next to Liz, giving her a kiss on the cheek as she sat down.

Carly sat back down, running her hand through her hair. "Jimmy's doing okay. He's going to be moved to a private room, hopefully tomorrow. Nic seems to be handling everything fine."

Susan nodded her head. "Yes, Nic is a very capable person. Wouldn't you agree, Liz?"

Placing her hand on Susan's back, Liz gently rubbed it. "Yes, I would. Sometimes she's a little too capable, if you ask me."

Carly studied the pair. *They're a cute couple,* she thought. "Susan, Liz tells me that you are an assistant DA. That must be a challenging career."

"Oh, yes it is. That's why I was in the office on a Sunday, of all times. I have a case starting tomorrow that's gonna be a real bear."

Liz collected the empty teacups and stood. "I'm going to excuse myself and go start dinner. Can I get either of you anything?"

"A glass of white wine would be great," Susan answered. "What about you, Carly?"

"Nothing for me, thanks. Maybe with dinner though."

Liz retreated to the kitchen. She returned a minute later with Sue's wine then retreated again. Sue was not sure what to talk about with Carly. According to Liz's report, Nic was acting strange about this woman, and apparently Carly was acting strange herself. Sue knew Liz was rarely wrong about these things, so she was naturally concerned about her friend getting hurt. Nic hadn't been involved with anyone seriously in a long time, and with Carly being her partner's sister, Sue could see problems ahead. Sure, Jimmy knew that Nic was a lesbian but accepting that was a whole lot different from accepting that your partner was involved with your baby sister.

Carly broke the awkward silence. "So you and Nic were college roommates?"

Sue laughed at the memory. "Yeah, but that seems like a lifetime ago. We've been good friends ever since, and I suspect we always will be."

"My brother told me that Nic has been a cop for almost ten years. Did she drop out?" Carly watched the woman fidget as if she was uncomfortable discussing this topic. Before Sue could answer, Carly interjected, "If you don't feel we should talk about this, that's okay."

Sue sipped her wine. "No, it's not that. I guess there are certain things you don't know about Nic, and I understand your curiosity." Carly wondered what she had started. Was there some grave secret she would regret learning about? Suddenly, this whole thing seemed rather ominous. "I don't know how much Jimmy knows about Nic's past, maybe everything, maybe nothing. Nic has never confided that to me. When Nic was twenty and we were in our second year at the University of Maryland, her parents were killed in an accident."

Carly's face turned ashen. She gasped, bringing her hand to her mouth, her eyes mirroring her shock. "Oh, my God! Jimmy never told me that. How awful." Carly's heart sank at the pain that she could almost feel in her heart for this woman whom she barely knew yet wanted to know so much more. She wished she were here, so she could hug her if only to console herself. "What kind of accident was it?"

Sue looked at Carly and started to see what Liz had described. She pulled her legs onto the loveseat and crossed them under her, resting her elbows on her knees. "It was a car accident, a terrible one. Nic was convinced, however, that it wasn't an accident."

"Why?" Carly asked, bewildered.

"Well, Nic's father was a prominent prosecutor here in Larson, and at the time, he was in the midst of a very high-profile case. Nic was sure he was eliminated, which caused the case to be turned over to his second chair. Two weeks later, that man lost the case."

"What did the police say?"

"Nic went to them, and they checked into that angle, but there was no evidence to support her accusations. That's when Nic decided to become a cop. From that day forth, she was determined to find whoever was responsible for her parents' deaths."

"Did she?" Carly asked, hoping that she had.

"Yes, she did. That's how she got her gold shield." Sue sipped more wine then returned the glass to the table that sat between the sofa and the loveseat. "Two men who worked for the man her father was after were responsible. Nic spent all of her spare time for years hunting down any lead she could find. When she gets on something, she's very single-minded."

Liz entered the room and announced that dinner would be ready in five minutes. Liz noticed Carly's pale expression with concern. "Is everything okay?" her question directed at Carly.

Sue answered, "I just told her about Nic's parents."

Liz shot her lover a stern look. "I leave the room for a few minutes, and you go and get our guest all upset." Liz sat next to Carly and patted her knee. "You look a little pale. Are you all right?"

Carly covered Liz's hand with her own. "Yes, I'm fine. It was just a shock, that's all. I really had no idea. I just feel so bad for Nicole." She didn't quite understand the depth of pain that she felt at hearing that horrible news. It was as if it had happened to her that was how real the pain felt. Bracing herself, she said, "Come on, I'm fine. Let's go eat." The trio did just that and decided to turn their dinner conversation to lighter topics.

SINCE IT HAD been way too early for her to go to either Lorenzo's or Sammy's, Nic went to the precinct to do some investigating. Someone was out to get both her and Jimmy, and she needed to find out who and why as quickly as possible. The place was quiet, which was not uncommon for late Sunday afternoon. After pouring herself some of the lethal coffee they brewed around the clock in the bullpen, the office the detectives occupied, she sat down at her desk and reviewed all the old cases she and Jimmy had

worked on. Mostly everyone they had taken down was either dead or doing time downstate. She called the parole officers of the few who did not fall into that category, but their charges were all accounted for both evenings. That left the Friday night fiasco as the only other possibility she could think of. Walking over to Tom Sanders's desk, she sifted through the files until she located the one from Friday night. Before returning to her desk, she snatched a doughnut from box by the coffeepot. Opening the report, she studied the contents. More information had been added, including identifications of two assailants that were shot and killed during the bust. Nic studied the sheets.

Charles Fong:

Height: 5'11½ - Weight: 310 lbs. Nationality: Chinese

Hair Color: Black Eye Color: Brown

Residence: 51 James Street

COD: Fatal gunshot wound to the chest

DOB: 4/15/1975

City of Birth: Xian, China

Next of Kin: Lao Fong - Father

Residence: Xian, China

Thomas Murphy:

Height: 6'1½ - Weight: 185 lbs. Nationality: American

Hair Color: Blonde Eye Color: Blue

Residence: Wilford Apartments Apt. 510, Connolly Street

COD: Fatal gunshot wound to the chest

DOB: 9/22/1978

City of Birth: San Francisco, California

Next of Kin: Carol Murphy - Sister

Residence: 69 Lincoln Avenue

Louis Gato:

Height: 5'8½ - Weight: 135 lbs. Nationality: American

Hair Color: Black Eye Color: Brown

Residence: 221 Lexington Avenue

DOB: 2/08/1975

City of Birth: Brooklyn, New York

Next of Kin: None

Residence: N/A

Nic jotted down their addresses and turned the page to view their rap sheets. They had all been arrested for several minor offenses, including petty larceny and attempted assault. Murphy must have had a good public defender because he had beaten every charge. Charlie Fong hadn't been so lucky. He spent two years in prison on a drug possession charge and had only been out for six

months. She neatly placed the paperwork back inside the folder and returned it to Sanders's desk. Just as she was sitting back down, the office door swung open and Tom Sanders and Paul Mahoney entered the room. Nic scowled as she sat back down in her chair. It wasn't that she disliked the duo; she just wasn't in the mood to deal with them. Though, she admitted to herself, she did like Paul more than she liked Tom. She especially didn't like the way Tom treated his partner.

"Hey, look who's here, Paul. Just the person we need to talk to."

Nic responded without turning around. "And just what can I do for you two?"

Paul Mahoney leaned against the desk opposite of Nic's, while Sanders sat down in the chair next to her desk and gave her an even look. "For starters, what the hell happened last night?"

"Since you know something happened, I would imagine you know what happened," she stated flatly.

Sanders scratched his chin and chuckled. "Very funny, Stone. Paul and I would like your account of the incident. After all, we are trying to help." He looked to Paul, who nodded his head in agreement. "You know, as well as we do, that Jimmy's shooting and the attempt on your life have to be connected."

Nic digested this. She knew he was right. *But what was the connection*, she wondered. If they hadn't put Carly in danger she'd attempt to go at this alone, but now she considered working with these two, at least a little, to speed things up. She doubted they knew where Linetti had been staying, but she'd do a little fishing to find out for sure. "Okay, Sanders, what do you want to know?"

"Did you know the guy that you shot last night?" He briefly looked away from the angry stare that was directed at him the minute the remark left his lips.

"No."

"You didn't recognize him from anywhere?"

"Did 'no' confuse you, Tom?" Nic asked with a sly grin. The question forced a laugh from Mahoney.

"Do you want to know who he was?"

He was baiting her. He knew her natural instinct was to always have one up on him, but she suppressed the urge. "And how is it that you know?"

"Paul and I got Carl Rhineberg to come in and do the prints. The man's name was Salvatore Linetti. We pulled him up on the system. No priors in Larson, but he did do time down in Jersey." Nic listened with an unimpressed look on her face. "Mostly numbers running, a couple of larceny charges, one assault with a deadly weapon, that kind of stuff."

"Interesting," Nic commented.

Sanders narrowed his gaze. "Now, why do you suppose he'd be trying to kill you and Jimmy?"

"How do you know he's the one who shot Jimmy? Did ballistics match his gun with the bullets we recovered?"

"No, there wasn't a match. But that doesn't mean that he wasn't an accomplice."

"True," Nic agreed. "So was this guy living up here?"

"Don't think so. His last known address was Secaucus." Nic just smiled. "Paul and I are gonna get some copies of his mug shot and check out some of the local joints."

"What about the two guys who got killed during the Friday night bust? Did you look into their backgrounds at all...family connections, revenge motive, that kind of thing?"

"I think I know how to cover all the angles, Stone. Besides, Raimes said you shouldn't get involved."

Nic slammed her fist onto the desk, startling Sanders so much he nearly fell out of the chair. "Well, I just got involved! I tend to take offense when someone tries to kill me, especially in my own home."

Sanders raised his hands, palms out. "Okay, okay. I'm sorry. I'm just trying to follow orders." He took a deep breath in an attempt to get his heart rate under control. "The guy who got away, can you give us a description?"

Nic settled back into her chair, fully aware that she could rip Sanders's head off if she didn't calm down. "No more than what I told the police last night. It was too dark to really see much of anything. The guy was small though, and thin."

"Terrific. Well, maybe we'll get lucky." Tom shot a glance at his silent partner, who was still leaning against the desk in a casual pose, his arms folded across his chest. "Paul, why don't you get us some of those mug shots, and we can get going." Paul strolled out of the office with the folder they had acquired at the morgue. The department copy machine was just outside the door. Returning his attention to Stone, he noticed she was glaring at him. "What?" he asked, hands raised.

"He's not your secretary, you know."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I really don't need to explain that, do I?" Nic asked, arching her brow. Sanders got up in a huff and stalked off to find Paul. "Guess not," she replied to herself as she exited the room on her way to Sammy's Bar and Grill.

Chapter Seven

SAMMY'S BAR AND Grill was another dive among the many that peppered the south side of Larson. Nestled between a boarded-up factory and a pool hall, the bar held little in the way of ambience. A Molson Golden sign blinked annoyingly in one of the two front windows. Four men were loitering outside, even at this early hour, smoking cigarettes and debating the new football season. Nic parked the Xterra in front of the building and slid out to the whistles and catcalls from the loiterers. Proceeding around the vehicle, she headed for the front door when two rather good-sized men blocked her path.

"Hey, what's a fine fox like you doin' on this side of town?" The beer belch that followed almost knocked her over. She didn't think opening up a beer vat could possibly be as potent.

"Listen, boys. I don't want to play any games tonight. All right?" She eyed the taller of the two men. He was about two, maybe three inches taller than she was, with greasy black hair and an unkempt beard.

"Is that right, sweetheart? Well, when would you like to play some games, huh?" The man poked his buddy in the ribs with his elbow then began to chuckle loudly. Nic rolled her eyes. She really didn't have time for this, and she doubted the lieutenant would be too happy if she wound up killing anyone else before Monday morning.

"Let's see," Nic spoke slowly so everyone could follow the conversation, "that would be the twelfth of...never."

"Hey! That's not very nice," the smaller man to her right declared. Two of the four men eased themselves behind her in an attempt to eliminate an escape route. Nic smiled at the thought. Like she would even consider retreating.

"Now, why don't we take a little walk and talk about how you should treat gentlemen like us?" Before he could grab her wrist, she reached out, grabbed his, and tugged, throwing the smaller inebriated man off balance. He stumbled forward, tripping on her

extended leg and crashing to the pavement. His taller companion, at first shocked by the woman's sudden movement, clamped his hand down on her left shoulder, grabbing a handful of her jacket as he did. Calmly, Nic reached up with her right hand and firmly grasped his wrist, twisting it toward her. The man had no choice but to cooperate since the pain from her action was excruciating. Her keen peripheral vision, not to mention her uncanny senses, told her that the men behind were advancing. She shot a quick back kick to the man on her left, catching him in the midsection and doubling him over then turned instantly and elbowed the man on her right, causing him to groan loudly from the contact. She still held on to the biggest man's wrist. He winced in pain. Feeling like his wrist was about to break, tears began to roll down the man's cheeks, and he spewed pleas of "Let go, lady. Come on, let goooo!"

Nic complied, but not before she brought her knee up, catching the bent-over man in the face, knocking him unconscious. The first man who had gone down now stumbled back to his feet. He was astonished to see his much larger friend incoherent on the sidewalk. The other two men were still groaning in pain. The small man backed up several steps then turned and ran. Nic gingerly stepped over her unconscious victim and entered the bar.

A few people were at the windows watching the entertainment outside and were now staring at the woman who had just taken down four guys in a matter of seconds. The bar immediately quieted when she entered. Several patrons were perched atop barstools, while others were huddled in the booths that lined the wall opposite the bar. As if on cue, all heads in the place turned to see who was entering their domain. The tall, dark-haired woman strode over to the bar and slid herself onto an available stool at the end. The woman was strikingly beautiful, and everyone there knew that she wasn't a regular. The bartender, a short, middle-aged man with a potbelly, greeted her. "What can I getcha?"

"Scotch and water on the rocks." Nic slid a dish of peanuts closer and snatched a handful of the salty treats. The bartender placed a glass down, tossed in some ice cubes, filled a third of it with Johnny Walker Red, and the rest with water from a pitcher he had behind the bar. Nic thanked him and took a long sip. It had been awhile since she'd had one of these. She'd almost forgotten how good it tasted. After refilling some drinks at the other end, the bartender returned, Nic presumed, for some idle conversation.

"Well, I have to admit, I don't get customers as gorgeous as you in here very often."

Nic thought, *If this is your best line, you must never get laid.* "Is that so?" She sipped more of her drink.

"You bet. So, what are you doin' in a place like this?"

"You make it sound like this isn't such a good place to be." Her blue eyes twinkled, almost mesmerizing the man.

"I'm not blind, lady, and neither are you. I know what kind of place this is, and I know what kind of people to expect in here. 'Fraid to say, you ain't one of 'em, not that I'm complaining." He leaned on the bar with his elbow, wiping the top of the bar with the rag in his other hand.

"What's your name?" Nic inquired.

"Joe. Joe Malone."

Reaching into her jacket pocket, she produced a picture of Sal Linetti that she had enlarged at a photo shop prior to going to the precinct. "Joe, have you ever seen this man before?"

The barkeep laughed. "Oh, now I get it, you're a cop or PI, right?" *Too bad*, he thought. He looked at the photo of the cherubic man.

"Yeah, something like that. So has he been in here?"

Malone scratched the top of his sparsely covered head as he studied the picture. At first he wasn't sure, but the longer he looked at it, the more familiar the face became. "Come to think of it, he was in here a couple of nights ago."

"Was he with anyone else?"

The bartender wrinkled his brow in thought. "Yeah, there was another guy. He was smaller than this one, and he seemed to be a very nervous fellow."

"What did he look like?"

"He was shorter than you, that's for sure. Maybe he was five six or seven. He was thin, too. I remember him and the fat guy reminded me of Laurel and Hardy, except the thin guy was the one with the mustache."

"Hair color?"

"Brown."

"Any scars or distinguishing marks?"

The bartender's eyes shifted as he thought hard about the pair. "I seem to recall some kind of tattoo on the back of his hand, the left one, but I can't remember exactly what it was."

Nic jotted some notes on a pad that she produced from her pocket. "Do you remember the fat guy calling the other guy by a name?"

"What was the fat guy's name?" the bartender asked.

"Salvatore," Nic replied.

"I think he called the little guy Leo."

Nic showed the bartender the cocktail napkin she had found at the hotel. She turned it over, pointing to the phone number scrawled on the back. "Do you recognize this number?"

He chuckled. Lowering his voice, he said, "There isn't a gam-

bler in town who doesn't." A dark brow rose. "Listen, I don't want any trouble from those guys, you know?"

Dark lashes batted at sky blue eyes. Nic looked around to see who was paying attention to their conversation. The other bar occupants were involved in their own conversations, thankfully. The bartender walked away to refill some drinks and collect some cash from an exiting customer. When he returned, Nic said, "I understand. Just tell me if anyone can use this or is there some code involved?"

He thought about it for a second. He was a sucker for a pretty face, and hers was one of the prettiest he had ever seen. "Tiger lily," the bartender offered.

Nic smiled. She downed the remainder of her drink and slid a twenty across the bar as she stood. Winking, she said, "Keep the change and thanks."

He snatched it and returned the wink. "Hey, if I ever need a bouncer, can I give you a call?"

Nic laughed as she closed the door. She noticed no one was standing around in front of the bar anymore. She had half-expected one or more of the guys that she had disposed of to come into the bar after her. There was nothing like a good bar fight. Shrugging her shoulders, she got into her car and started it. In her rear view mirror, she spied a pair of lights farther down the block that appeared the moment she pulled away from the curb.

THE DINNER CONVERSATION had definitely been lighter, raising Carly's spirits. While they ate boneless chicken breasts with mushroom stuffing, salad, and broiled red potatoes, they had discussed everything from Susan's new case to Carly's adventures in Australia. After two glasses of wine, Carly had felt much more relaxed. Sue and Liz were engaging hostesses, and Carly found herself liking them both a lot.

"So what did you do when that whale just showed up?" Liz asked.

"Well, after I was sure I wasn't having a heart attack, I took her picture," Carly replied casually, causing both Sue and Liz to burst out laughing.

Liz cleared the empty dishes from the table while Sue gathered the glasses. Before Carly could protest, Sue held up her hand. "No you don't. We'll take care of this." Sue looked at her partner. "Shall we have dessert in the living room, dear?"

Liz slid her hand around Sue's waist. "Sounds good to me. Carly, would you like some coffee with dessert?"

Carly rolled her eyes. "Wow, dessert on top of that wonderful

meal?" She smiled. "Sure, why not?"

"Great." Liz turned to the coffeepot and poured out three cups. "Why don't you two go on in the living room, and I'll bring in dessert?" Sue and Carly obliged, and a few seconds later, the three of them were comfortably seated in the spacious living room. Sue relaxed into a mauve recliner while Carly and Liz positioned themselves on the sofa. Liz sliced the turtle cheesecake and passed a plate to each of them.

Carly took a bite and moaned. "God, that tastes fantastic." Liz and Sue were busy consuming their own slices, but both nodded in agreement. "Do you two eat like this every day?"

"Desserts are usually a weekend thing," Liz answered, "when I have more time to prepare them. During the week we usually eat things that are easily re-heatable." She glanced at Sue, who wiggled her fingers in a mock wave.

"Let me guess, someone doesn't keep regular hours?" Carly chided, getting a smile from Liz.

"It's not my fault," Sue defended. "I'm a DA, for heaven's sake. You know the workload they put on us."

"I know, hon. We're just teasing you." Liz placed her plate on the coffee table and leaned back against the cushions she had piled into the corner.

Carly enjoyed the last morsel of cheesecake before doing the same on her end of the sofa. "So, Liz, tell me some more about the Chinese astrology."

This got a look from Sue, who stretched her arms and yawned. "When did you two get into that topic?"

"This afternoon, before you came home. Carly was fascinated, weren't you?"

Carly nodded. "Yes, quite fascinated. I still want to know where the twelve animals came from?"

Sue excused herself, after giving Liz a kiss on the top of her head as she exited the room. She had several papers to go over for the case in the morning, so she retired to her office upstairs to get some work done. Liz told Carly the tale of how Buddha, before he left this world, invited all the animals to join him at a great feast. "Of all the creatures in the land, only twelve came. For their loyalty, they were rewarded by having a year named after them in order of their arrival to the feast."

"I wondered how the order was determined," Carly admitted. "Liz, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure."

"When you met Sue, did you know she was the one?"

"Yes, I think I did. It's hard to explain, but there was a strong connection that I'd never felt before." Carly felt relieved, and it

showed as her face relaxed upon hearing the answer. "Is that how you feel about Nic?"

Carly shook her head in bewilderment. "It's the craziest, most wonderful thing I've ever felt. At the same time, all I keep thinking is that I barely know this person, yet I feel like she is whom I belong with."

Liz moved closer to Carly, placing a gentle hand on her knee. "Carly, have you ever been romantically involved with another woman?" She knew this was an awkward question, but she needed to know. Carly seemed perfectly comfortable around her and Sue, so she guessed that maybe she had.

"Yes, I have. It was a college fling that lasted a little over a year." Carly felt at ease talking about this with Liz, so she continued, "I had my share of boyfriends in high school and even some in college, but when I met Sarah, it was very different. The emotional connection was much more intense."

Liz nodded, knowing precisely what Carly was talking about. "And what happened?"

"Sarah's parents found out and pulled her out of school. I never saw her again," Carly answered sadly. "As much as I felt for Sarah, what I already feel for Nic seems so much stronger."

"So have you said anything to her, yet?"

"We really haven't had time to talk. With Jimmy and then the break-in, it's been crazy. Besides, I wouldn't know what to say. I mean, Jimmy talks about Nic all the time, so I feel like I know her, but we really only met yesterday."

"How long you know someone is not the issue."

"Well, emotionally, I feel like I've lived a lifetime in the past two days."

"I strongly believe in destiny," Liz said. "And I believe that when you meet the person you are destined to be with, you'll know it."

Carly was pondering that statement when the phone rang.

THE PLAN HAD been to go from Sammy's to Lorenzo's to see what she could dig up there, but she had picked up an obvious tail, so she decided to drive around town for awhile. After fifteen minutes of toying with the other car, Nic decided to pull into the Burger King drive-thru to grab a bite to eat. A few minutes later, she was nibbling on the salty French fries as she parked her car in an open spot. Noticing the time, she decided to call Susan before she started chowing down. Someone picked up on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Sue. Nic here."

"Nic! How are you? Where are you?"

"Right now I'm in the Burger King parking lot, and I'm fine, thanks." Nic could barely see the other car. It was parked across the street in the movie theater lot.

"Nic, you always say you're fine. I'm serious. How are you really? Carly has filled us in on the past two days, and it all sounded exhausting."

Nic sighed. "It has been, believe me. But I really am okay. How is Carly?"

"Oh, she's fine. She and Liz are downstairs chatting about the astrology stuff Liz loves so much. Those two certainly became fast friends."

Nic smiled. She was glad that Carly was okay and that she and Liz had hit it off. "Good. Thanks for letting her stay with you two. I would have been worried about her staying alone at a hotel."

"Do you really think she's in any danger?" Sue propped her feet up on her desk and started twirling a pencil with her fingers.

"Not really, but I just want to make sure she's safe. I wouldn't want anything to happen to her." An image of Carly flashed through her mind, bringing an instant smile to her face.

Sue debated broaching the subject then decided to anyway. "That's not just because she's Jimmy's sister, is it?"

That was the same question Carly had asked her earlier, Nic remembered. "No, it's not." She sucked some soda through the straw, her mouth suddenly very dry.

"Nic, you just met Carly, and I know she's Jimmy's sister and all..." Sue wasn't sure how to continue.

"Yeah? What are you getting at, Sue?"

"Just that you have both been through a very emotional couple of days and you should be careful, that's all."

Nic could hear the concern in her friend's voice and though her first reaction was one of anger, she realized Sue was simply concerned about her. "If I'm reading you right then you're presuming that I'm getting attached to her in some way?"

"Something like that, yeah."

"Sue, she's Jimmy's sister. Besides, she's gotta be straight, and I'm not about to get involved with my partner's straight sister. I just care about her, that's all."

Sue listened to her friend, but she didn't quite buy it. She knew Nic believed what she was saying, that made the tone of her voice that much more indicative that she felt the opposite. "What if she isn't straight?"

Now Nic's mind was racing. Just what had they been talking about over there? She considered Sue's question, but she didn't come up with any quick answers. She felt something strong for the

young woman, that she was sure of, but whether she would pursue that feeling was another question. "She's still Jimmy's sister, and that would make life complicated. Way too complicated."

Sue didn't go any further. They talked about Nic's plans for figuring out who had tried to kill her and why. Sue filled Nic in on her upcoming case, and then they decided it would be nice for the four of them to get together when things were a little calmer, maybe on Thanksgiving. Nic informed Sue that someone was following her, and as long as the possibility of that continued, she wouldn't be by the house because she didn't want to endanger any of them. Nic, who was extremely stubborn in these types of matters, dismissed Sue's attempted arguments to the contrary. Realizing she was getting nowhere with her friend, Sue called downstairs for Carly to pick up the phone.

Carly sprang off the sofa and practically ran to the phone in the hallway. "Hello?"

"Hi there," Nic said, cheerfully.

"Nic, are you all right? Where are you?"

"Those are the same two questions Sue asked me, so I'll give you the same answers. I'm fine, and I'm at Burger King."

Carly sat down in the chair next to the table. "Well, at least you remembered to eat."

"I think your brother has told you a few stories, hasn't he?"

"Maybe, just a few. I seem to recall something about someone who was very focused, single-minded, driven—"

"Okay, okay, I get it. When I see Jimmy, I'm gonna slap him for that," Nic promised. "So, how are you doing?"

"I'm great, thanks. Liz and Sue have been wonderful. You have very good taste in friends."

Nic thought about that for a second then in a low tone, she said, "Yes, I do."

Suddenly, Carly understood what Nic meant and blushed a little. She wanted to be so much more than a friend, but she wondered if she'd ever have the courage to tell her that. "Where are you staying tonight?"

"Oh, I'll find someplace. I'm not sure yet, but I'll see you at the hospital tomorrow."

Carly was happy to hear that. "I'm going to call a cab to get over there. Liz was going to take the day off, but I told her I would be fine. It took a little work, but I got her to agree."

Nic snatched more fries and gobbled them down. She hadn't realized how hungry she was. "That's a major accomplishment. Liz can be pretty stubborn." Nic wasn't thrilled with the cab idea, but she couldn't come up with any other suggestions.

"How's your arm?" Carly asked.

"Not bad. In a couple more days, you won't even know that I got cut."

"I don't know, Nic. That cut was pretty nasty. It may take more than a couple of days before it's gone."

"Yeah, maybe. But I heal pretty fast. I always have, for some reason." Tearing open a ketchup pouch, she squirted some liberally over the remaining French fries. "I called the hospital earlier, and they said that Jimmy is doing really well."

Carly grinned. "Yeah, I called a little while ago. They said he'd get moved to his own room tomorrow, which is great."

"Yes, it is. Well, I better get going. I still have some things to do before I can call it a night."

Carly saddened at the thought, but she reluctantly agreed, "Okay. Goodnight, Nic. See you in the morning."

"Yeah. Goodnight, Carly. Maybe we can grab some breakfast at the hospital?" she asked, hesitantly.

"Sure, that sounds great. See you then." Before she ended the call, Carly added, "And Nic, please be careful."

"I will." Nic heard the phone disconnect, so she hit the 'END' button on her cell phone. Fishing the Whopper out of the bag, she unwrapped the sandwich and took a bite. The car that had been following her was still in the lot across the street. She grabbed her night-vision binoculars from the glove compartment and zeroed in on the plate number. A smile crossed her face. As she continued eating, her thoughts returned to Sue's question, "What if she's not straight?" *Yeah, what if*, she thought as she took another bite of her burger.

VICTOR MARCONE WAS mildly enjoying his second glass of Chardonnay in the comfort of his library, where he spent most of his time. The lavish house was just too large, he admitted. Unless he was entertaining guests, he found that his bedroom and the library were his favorite rooms. A Mozart symphony was playing on the stereo. Irene, his housekeeper, had just scurried from the room after having delivered it and cleared the dinner dishes. He had become accustomed to taking his dinner in the library. When you dined alone, what was the point of sitting in a monstrous dining room all by yourself? He preferred to read while he ate, and what better place to have peace and quiet? A knock at the door took him by surprise. "Enter," he commanded.

Frank Torelli dutifully walked over and stood before his boss. He was still wearing the suit he had put on nearly twelve hours ago. His boss, on the other hand, had traded his suit coat for a paisley silk smoking jacket. Victor looked at the dour expression on

Frank's face and instantly knew that Frank's report would not be good. "Go ahead, Frank."

"I've had the boys checking all over the city. They haven't turned up anything. Two guys are still staking out the Arcadia hotel, where he checked into a room last Wednesday when him and Sal got into town, but he hasn't showed there." Frank waited for his boss to respond, but he said nothing. He just nodded his head and sipped his wine. "Someone did turn up at the hotel though."

"And who might that be?" Marcone asked.

"The lady cop Sal and Leo were supposed to take care of."

Marcone put his glass on the table. This news did not please him. "How the hell did she know where they were staying?"

"I don't know, boss. Eddy said that she wasn't in there long. He sent Tony up to check the rooms out after she was gone. Tony said there wasn't much in there, so maybe she didn't find anything." Frank hoped that that was true.

Marcone stroked the thin line of a beard that outlined his jaw with his thumb and forefinger. "Or maybe she found something." Marcone was referring to anything that could tie Sal and Leo to him. "Tell me, Frank, how is it possible, with all the manpower we're putting on this, that we can not turn up one guy?"

"I don't know, boss." Frank shrugged his shoulders. "We've checked every bar, strip joint, and flea bag motel in this city, and we haven't found him. He could have left town already, in which case it's gonna be real hard to find him. Since Sal is the one who brought him in, we don't know much about him." Frank knew his boss wouldn't like hearing the facts anymore than he liked telling him.

Marcone stood and folded his hands behind his back, looking straight into Frank's eyes. "If Sal filled Leo in on the reason they were hired, he may be a liability we need to eliminate." The tall man walked over to the French doors that led to the balcony. He opened them, letting the cool evening air infiltrate the room. "If the cops get him and he knows anything, he'll squeal, we can be sure of that. And he won't get far in a stolen car, either, so he's got to be in town or close." He turned to face Frank. "Tell the boys to keep looking. He's got to be somewhere. And we still need to take care of those two cops!"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Marcone," Frank affirmed. With a wave of his boss's hand, Frank was dismissed. Outside the library, Frank contemplated the next few days, and with a sinking dread, he knew that they would not be good days if they didn't find Leo Tolstrom.

SANDERS AND MAHONEY had been sitting in an unmarked, gray sedan watching the black Xterra that was parked in the Burger

King lot across the street. Mahoney didn't like tailing Stone. He didn't like it because it was a dangerous thing to do, but his bull-headed partner insisted she knew something, and this was the only way they would find out what that was. Stone was a sharp cop, and Mahoney would bet his life that she had already spotted them.

Sanders looked at the sullen expression on his partner's face. "What's eating you?"

"You know what! She drove us around the city for nearly twenty minutes. She's onto us and you know it, Tom."

"Paul, get over it. I told you, she knows something. She was a little too smug at the station. We've got no other leads in this, and we both know how Stone is."

"Whatever, Tom. Listen, I need some coffee. Do you want some?"

Sanders waved his hand at his partner, his attention focused on Stone's car. "No, thanks. And hurry up, in case she takes off."

"Yeah, yeah." Mahoney reached up and disengaged the dome light before opening his door. Slipping out of the car, he crept between several parked cars until he was safely in the shadows of the buildings along the street, where he picked up his pace. A coffee shop was just around the corner.

Sanders tapped the steering wheel with his hands, trying to calm his nerves. Deep down, he knew that his partner was right. Stone wasn't someone to be toyed with. But Sanders reasoned that they were trying to help. It's not like they were being malicious or anything. Checking his watch, he was surprised at the time. Stone had been in the parking lot for twenty minutes. He wondered what the hell she had been doing all this time. A popping sound outside made him jump. Rapidly, he checked all of the mirrors then turned his head around, surveying the vicinity. Nothing. *Probably just an alley cat or something*, he thought. His heart skipped a beat when he saw the Xterra's lights come on. "Shit," he said. "Where the hell are you, Paul?"

The car door jerked open, and Mahoney dropped into the seat. "I'm right here."

Tom grabbed his chest. "Jesus, are you trying to kill me?"

"Not exactly. Hey, she's moving." Paul pointed at the car, which was now entering the street.

Sanders stepped on the gas and a "thump, thump, thump" was heard coming from the back wheel on the passenger side. Sticking his head out of the window, Paul spotted the problem. "We got a flat."

Sanders slammed his hands on the steering wheel. "Damn it!" He watched the Xterra fade into the darkness, and he could have sworn he saw a hand wave at him from the driver's window.

NIC STRODE INTO the busy Italian restaurant, turning several heads in the process. A young woman in her twenties dressed in a bright red blouse greeted her. "Welcome to Lorenzo's. Table for one?" she inquired, her thin dark brows elevated in question.

"No, but I would like to ask you some questions."

The woman looked confused until she saw the badge. "Oh! Well we're kind of busy right now. Could you come back?"

Nic pursed her lips. "No, I'd like to talk now." She tapped her finger on the face of her wristwatch.

Scowling, the woman peered around Nic and counted four couples that needed to be taken care of. She threw up her hand, flagging down a tall man in a waiter's uniform. He was carrying a tray of empty glasses. "Yes, Lucinda? What is it?"

"Anthony, please take my place for a few minutes. This woman would like to speak with me."

The waiter looked Nic over from top to bottom then returned his attention to the young woman. "Certainly, Lucinda."

"Come with me," the woman said, weaving her way through the cluster of tables, each filled with people eating, drinking, and conversing. Nic followed her to a small office at the rear of the restaurant. She took a seat in one of the tattered chairs that sat in front of a wooden desk, which took up most of the space in the tiny, windowless room. The woman sat down, resting her elbows on the desk. "All right, what can I do for you?"

Nic pulled out the photograph and dropped it in front of her. "Have you ever seen this man before?"

The woman picked up the photo and eyed it, pensively. "No, I've never seen him before." She looked up into probing, ice blue eyes. Gulping, she reiterated, "Really, I haven't."

Nic slipped a piece of gum into her mouth and began chewing. Rubbing the tiredness out of her eyes, she leaned forward and in a low voice said, "It's late. I'm tired. And I don't have time for the usual nonsense that I would normally find amusing. So, let's cut the crap. Now you obviously know him, I can see it in your eyes, so spill it."

At first, the woman didn't utter a sound. She just sat there staring at the seriously angry expression on the cop's face. Her mind raced, but she couldn't think of a way out of answering this woman's questions. Finally, she replied, "He knows my uncle. He was in here last night. I remember it was early, at least an hour before our normal dinner hour customers."

Nic smiled. "That's better." She relaxed into the chair. "Does your uncle own this place?"

"Yes."

"Is he here?"

"He's in the kitchen checking on the supplies."

"Well, then I want you to get him in here, so I can talk to him."

The young woman frowned. Her uncle would not be happy about this. The last thing he wanted was any trouble with the police. She tapped a button on an intercom unit that was attached to the wall. "Charlie, is my uncle in there?"

A scratchy reply came back, "Yeah, he's here."

"Send him to the office, okay?" The voice on the other end complied. Seconds later, a man entered the room. He had salt and pepper hair and had a dirty white apron tied about his trim waist. Nic had expected a portly man, considering the Italian food and all.

"Lucinda, what is it?" He glanced at the beautiful woman who was sitting across from his niece.

"Uncle, this is..." she faltered, realizing she didn't even know the woman's name.

Nic rose from her chair. "Detective Stone, Larson Police Department." She shook the man's hand.

"Lorenzo Ciccone." He regarded her quizzically. "What seems to be the problem?"

"No problem," Nic said. "I just have some questions." Her eyes traveled to the photograph still lying on the desk. Lorenzo's eyes followed hers and rose when he recognized the picture.

"What sort of questions?" he asked.

"Your niece tells me you know this man?"

Lorenzo shot a stern look at his niece, who recoiled and diverted her eyes. "Yes, I know him. Is he in some kind of trouble?"

"I'm afraid he's dead."

The man's eyes glazed over, a stricken look clouding his face. "How? When?"

Nic opted to leave out the details, like the fact that she was the one who had shot him. "He was shot last night when he tried to kill a cop." Lucinda gasped, bringing her hand to her mouth. Lucinda stood, giving her uncle the chair. He slumped into it, looking like someone had let the air out of him. "How do you know him?"

"We grew up together, here in Larson. I've known him a very long time."

"He didn't live here anymore, did he?"

"No. Sal moved away years ago. I think he was living in Jersey."

"Do you know why he was in town?"

"Listen, detective, Sal was not the most upstanding person in the world. I know this. He wouldn't endanger my establishment or me by informing me of why he was here. I have a clean record and so does my place."

Nic looked deeply into the man's narrow eyes. "Does he have

any relatives still in the area?"

"Not that I know of. His family moved back to Brooklyn after his father died."

"Was anyone with him last night when he was here?"

"Yeah, a scrawny little guy was with him," Lorenzo answered.

"Did you happen to catch the other guy's name?" Nic asked.

Lorenzo concentrated on the question. He did remember Sal introducing the little guy. Finally, it came to him. "Leo Tolstr... Tolstrom, I believe."

Gotcha, Nic thought, triumphantly. She wrote the name down in the pad she carried with her. "Do you know where they were headed when they left here last night?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't. As a matter of fact, I didn't even get to say goodbye." The man's expression darkened. "Someone screwed up the food order, and I had to run to the market for fresh garlic. When I returned, they were gone."

Nic stood. "Thank you both for your time, and I'm sorry about your friend." She closed the door behind her, and with a new lead to follow, she headed for her car.

AFTER THIRTY MINUTES of tossing and turning, Carly was still wide-awake. She had helped Liz clean up the living room and then excused herself for the night. Truth was, she was so over tired she couldn't seem to get to sleep. She couldn't stop wondering where Nic was and what she was up to. She was less worried about Jimmy since the hospital reported that he was doing very well. At least she knew where he was, and he was under police protection. Nic, on the other hand, was who knows where, and she was alone. Carly turned onto her side and stared at the slivers of moonlight that filtered through the blinds on the window. Last night, with Nic in the next bed, she had dozed off rather easily while watching television. Tonight, she was curled under a fluffy comforter with Harley snuggled between her knees, snoring peacefully, and she couldn't sleep at all. She found herself wishing it was morning already. Harley stretched her front legs out laying them across Carly's calves, trapping her in her current position. Reaching down, she scratched the top of the cat's head. "I'm glad one of us can sleep."

Liz finished tidying up the kitchen then checked all the doors before moving upstairs to coax her partner to bed. Poking her head into the office, she was surprised that it was unoccupied. Continuing down the hallway, she entered the master bedroom. Sue was lying on the bed in her usual oversize Dallas Cowboys jersey, legs crossed at the ankles, back propped up against the ornate head-

board. "Here you are," Liz stated. "You never cease to amaze me, you know that?"

Sue winked mischievously while pointing her finger at her chest. "Who, me?"

Liz kicked off her fuzzy pink slippers and slowly slid out of her Levi's. "Yes, you." She knew she had her lover's complete attention.

"Is our guest all tucked in for the night?" Sue's eyes were fixated on the redhead's well-toned and curvaceous body.

"Yes. And, if you ask me, she's got it bad for our friend."

"Liz, they don't even know one another. Maybe we're just jumping to conclusions."

Grabbing a brush from the dresser, Liz stroked her curly locks. "Did you happen to talk to Nic about it?"

Sue tossed the documents she'd been reading onto the floor, laced her hands behind her head and slunk down into the bed. Uncrossing her long legs, she gave her partner a reason to hurry with her nightly grooming ritual. "Yes, and she insisted that she couldn't possibly get involved with her partner's sister."

"Doth protest too much, if you ask me." Finished with her brushing, Liz stood at the front of the bed, dressed only in her gray wool sweater, which unfortunately hung past certain enticing parts. She let a slow, sexy smile curl over her face as she lifted the sweater up and over her head, eliciting a low moan from her partner. Sue willingly extinguished the bedside lamp as her lover crawled onto the bed and captured her lips in an intimate kiss.

NIC STEPPED FROM the steamy shower and reached for one of the cotton towels hanging next to the sink. After fifteen minutes in the hot bliss of the shower, she felt relaxed enough to get some sleep. It had been a long, hard day, but it had also been a successful one. At least now, she knew the name of Linetti's accomplice, and tomorrow, she'd run a check on him and see what that turned up. Wrapping the towel around her, she ran a comb through her long, dark hair. She wiped the condensation from the mirror with her hand and looked at her reflection pensively. Small bags hung under her clear, blue eyes, indicating just how tired she really was. She brushed her teeth then swished some peppermint mouthwash around before spitting it into the sink. Removing the towel, she hung it back on the rack and killed the light as she exited the bathroom.

A way-too-happy TV weatherman was going over the forecast for Monday, grinning from ear to ear as he pointed at the area map. Nic grabbed the remote and surfed several channels before she set-

tled on one. *The Honeymooners*, starring Jackie Gleason, Art Carney, Audrey Meadows, and Joyce Randolph. Nic smiled as she slipped a nightshirt on and settled herself under the covers. She had ended up in a Quality Inn that was not far from Lorenzo's restaurant. When she left the restaurant, she had flirted with the idea of returning to the station to run a check on Leo Tolstrom, but she had quickly realized that she was way too tired to drive back across town.

She watched the old black and white program with interest. If Carly liked it, then there must be something to it. Ralph and Norton were certainly an amusing pair, but it was Alice, Ralph's wife, whom Nic found she liked the most. She stood right up to Ralph without fear, even when he did threaten to "send her to the moon." She liked a woman who didn't back down or take any crap from anyone. Back in the fifties, that was an unusual thing to see. She found herself liking the show, despite herself, and she found herself wishing that Carly were here, so they could watch it together. Closing her eyes, she pictured her wistful smile and vibrant green eyes. Her eyes grew heavy as her thoughts drifted back to her earlier conversation with Sue. *She's still Jimmy's sister, and that would make life complicated. Way too complicated.*

Chapter Eight

AN OLD CARDBOARD box provided Leo Tolstrom with little protection from the early morning rain that peppered the alleyway. He tucked as much of himself into the large box as he could, knowing that he'd have to find a more suitable shelter if the rain continued. He opened the bottle of scotch that he had purchased the night before and slugged down a mouthful. Instantly, it warmed his belly, almost to the point of burning. He hadn't eaten since Saturday night at the restaurant with Sal, and now, his stomach grumbled in protest. Pulling the collar of his suit coat up around his ears, he peeked out into the dim light of dawn. Several other residents were asleep or passed out in similar makeshift homes amid the garbage cans that were scattered throughout the alleyway.

A rather large rat scurried out from under a huge garbage bin on the other side of the alley. Stopping next to Leo's box, it looked him in the eye, twitching its nose in curiosity. Leo jerked his head into his box and wildly waved his bottle of scotch at the creature in an effort to scare it away. It merely stood there, eyeing him. Then without a second glance, it continued on its journey up the alleyway.

Leo let out a dejected sigh. He had not anticipated winding up like this. When Sal had approached him about a job, he had eagerly accepted it. As far as Leo had been concerned, it should have been an easy job. All they needed to do was knock off one of Marcone's former employees, and grab the incriminating evidence that he had on Marcone. But before they could do the job, Marcone's nephew had to go and get himself nearly killed and that simple job he had hired on for had suddenly become a big pain in the ass. So here he sat in a stinking, filthy alleyway, starving, broke, and as desperate as he remembered being in a long time. He needed a plan if he was going to survive this unfortunate turn of events, and as he sat listening to the rain, he began to formulate one.

CARLY GAZED AT the sea blue sky and the few puffy, white clouds that floated in the vastness above her. She was lying on her back in a meadow, her hands resting on her midsection and her head on something soft and warm. An old wooden swing was hanging from the branch of a large apple tree just off to her left. The sweet scent of wildflowers permeated the air. Carly inhaled deeply, enjoying the aroma. *Heaven couldn't possibly be better than this*, she mused, her sense of peace so profound. Feeling her pillow stir, she rotated her head back and was captured by a pair of piercing blue eyes held in a strong, angular face. The eyes were bluer than the sky that surrounded them. Silky black hair fell casually about broad shoulders, which were exposed by a tank top. Carly felt her heart skip a beat at the sight of this gorgeous, enticing woman. Dropping her head, Nic teased her with a kiss that Carly melted right into. It was as if their passion had fused their lips together. Carly slipped her hands around her companion's neck, pulling her closer. The intensity grew until all Carly knew was this kiss. Then it started to fade and was replaced by a loud purring in her ear and a wet nose. Carly struggled to get it back, but the purring continued until it awakened her completely. Grudgingly, she cracked open her left eye and was greeted by a warm nuzzle. "Do you have any idea what you just ruined?" The black cat leaned against her, rubbing its face into hers. Carly propped her head on her hand and yawned, stroking the cat's back, causing it to arch in response. Noting the early hour, she scowled at the feline. "Maybe some food will quiet you down," she said as she lifted the cat up and stalked out of the bedroom.

The hallway was quite dark, forcing Carly to navigate it slowly in order to avoid bumping into anything. Thankfully, the kitchen was much brighter since it faced east and was catching the first rays of dawn. Carly put the cat down and watched it scamper over to the food dish. She hoped Liz wouldn't mind her preparing a pot of coffee. She knew she'd only lie in bed and stare at the ceiling, so she might as well stay up. After searching out the morning paper and finding it lying, nicely rubber-banded, on the front steps, she returned to the kitchen and settled herself on one of the kitchen chairs. She thought about what Sue had told her last night about Nic's parents. That, more than likely, explained the reclusive nature Jimmy had told her about. It also explained how she could live in such a lavish residence on a detective's salary. Carly felt a profound sadness when she thought about what Nic must have gone through. To lose one parent was hard, but to lose both, and in such a tragic and violent way, must have been devastating. She wiped a tiny tear from her cheek and spread the paper out on the table and began reading.

LIEUTENANT RAIMES STROLLED into the already busy precinct at his usual seven-thirty hour. The desk sergeant, a trim, middle-aged man with varying degrees of gray in his rather full head of hair, handed the lieutenant his messages on his way through to the bullpen. Raimes wasn't surprised to find Stone at her desk, intently studying something on her computer monitor. "Stone! My office, now!"

Nic heard the bellow from behind her and rolled her eyes. She had just pulled up Leo Tolstrom's rap sheet and was eager to read it, but now that would have to wait. She cleared the computer screen with the click of a button. Gulping down the last of her coffee, she headed to Raimes's office, discarding the Styrofoam cup on the way. Raimes was waiting for her with the door open. "We need to talk, Stone."

Nic dropped into one of the chairs. Leaning back, she propped her left foot onto her right knee and asked, "About what, Lou?"

Raimes shook his head as he sat down on the corner of his desk and looked her in the eyes. "Let's see. How about what I read in the Sunday paper?"

She gave him a lopsided grin. "Yeah, how about that Mets game?"

"Stone, cut the crap. You know damn well what I'm talking about! What the hell happened Saturday night?"

Nic massaged her forehead with her fingertips and let out a sigh. "What do you want me to tell you, Lou? Someone tried to kill me, that's what happened. Probably the same bastard who tried to kill Jimmy."

Raimes softened his tone, saying, "Well, you didn't let it happen, that's what's important. I haven't seen the official report yet, but the paper said one of the perps got away?"

"Yeah. Scrawny little shit got out while I was scuffling with his buddy."

"What about the one we managed to keep?"

"He's from Jersey, I guess. Somebody up here obviously hired him and his friend. The question is who and why?"

Raimes studied his detective. He had known it was going to be hard to keep her out of the Jamison investigation, but now that someone tried to kill her, too, it was going to be impossible. The phone rang and Raimes lifted the receiver. "Raimes." Picking up a pencil, he jotted down some notes on a piece of scrap paper. "Okay, I'll relay the message. Thanks." He handed the paper to Nic. "You need to report to the department psychologist today at one o'clock."

Nic's rolled her eyes. "For what?"

Raimes walked around the desk and sat in his chair. "It could

have something to do with the two men you've killed in the last forty-eight hours." He held up his hand to halt her protest. "I know they were clean shoots, but from a psychological standpoint, you've been under a great deal of stress, so it can't hurt to go talk to her. Okay?"

Nic stared at the name and number. Dr. Denise Carter 17 Cranston Avenue 882-6923. "Fine. I'll go see her, but it's a waste of time." She hesitated for a second, then added, "Lieutenant, I have some time built up, and I'd like to take a few days, if that's all right?"

Raimes eyed her suspiciously. He didn't want her going after these people, whoever they were, alone, but he doubted he could stop her, either. "All right. When?"

"I'd like to take the rest of the week."

Raimes contemplated that for a second, then acquiesced. "Normally, I would say no, but since your partner is going to be out for awhile I'll grant your request. Tell the desk sergeant when you leave."

"Thanks, Lou." Nic got up and opened the door.

"Stone?" Nic paused in the doorway and half turned to look at him. "Don't get in over your head." Nic grinned at her boss as she closed the door behind her.

Weaving her way through several pairs of back-to-back desks, she returned to her own and sat down. After tapping several keys on her computer, the information on Leo Tolstrom that she had been scrutinizing earlier appeared. Hitting the print button then quickly closing down the screen, she walked over to the printer to retrieve her copy. She wanted to get the information and be gone before Sanders and Mahoney showed up. She figured they were pissed about the flat tire she had given them last night, and she was in no mood to go into it this morning. Folding the paper up and tucking it into her back pocket, she returned to her desk and pulled open a drawer, extracting the Larson phone book. After leafing through several yellow pages, she finally found what she was looking for. She dialed the number and waited.

"Quality Home Security," a woman stated, cheerfully.

"Hi, I need to have a security system installed in my home as soon as possible."

"Well, ma'am, you may want to stop down so that we can show you the different systems. It's kind of hard to determine what you need over the phone."

Nic flinched at the "ma'am" comment. Suddenly, it made her feel old. "Listen, I want a full security system. Doors, windows, exterior motion lights, keyless entry—the works. Cost is not a factor," her voice deepened. "Do you have anything like that?" she

asked, impatiently.

The woman cleared her throat and answered in her most pleasant voice, "Yes, of course we do."

"Good, when can you get that done?"

Nic heard the pages of a book being turned in rapid succession. "Let me see...I have a cancellation for tomorrow morning. Would that be good for you?"

"That would be perfect." Nic provided the woman with all the vital information and informed her that she would meet the installers at the house at nine o'clock. She turned to the section on carpeting and sought out the number for Carpets R Us. A familiar voice answered the phone. "Hello, Joey. Nic Stone."

"Nic! How the hell are you?"

"I'm doing okay, Joey. And you?"

"Same old, same old, you know how it goes. So, what can I do for you?"

"Do you remember that carpet I bought for my bedroom a couple of years ago?"

A pause on the other end. "Yeah, it was navy, tight weave, real thick."

"Yeah, that's the one. Well, I need the same one, if you still carry it."

The man on the other end scratched his head in consternation. "Geez, what happened to the other one? That should have lasted ten or fifteen years."

"Well, I had an uninvited guest who happened to bleed all over it," Nic replied.

"Oh! I see. Well, then you'll be needing that right away, I guess?"

"As soon as possible. And, Joey, you'll need to move the furniture and everything when you install it."

The man took down some notes as she spoke. "Of course, no problem. If I have it in the warehouse, I can do the job on Wednesday morning, or maybe late Tuesday if I get a cancellation."

"That sounds great, Joey. Thanks a million. Put it on my charge, same as the last time."

They exchanged good-byes and disconnected. Nic closed the phone book and placed it back inside her drawer. She cleared off the top of her desk and then made her exit, notifying the desk sergeant on her way out that she would be taking some time off.

"Good morning."

Carly turned to see a perky Liz and a bleary-eyed Susan padding into the kitchen, wearing matching red velour bath robes with

their initials embroidered in white. "Good morning."

Sue immediately took a seat at the table while Liz poured them both a cup of coffee. "Do you need a refill, Carly?"

"Yes, please." Carly folded up the paper and handed it to Susan, who was rubbing her eyes and yawning.

"How long have you been up?" Liz asked.

"Oh, just a little while. I hope you don't mind me making some coffee?"

'Are you kidding? The aroma is what got us down here.' Liz and Carly laughed. Susan cracked a tiny smile. "You'll have to forgive Sue. She's not a morning person, are you, honey?"

Sue narrowed her eyes, wrinkling her nose at her lover. Liz placed the coffee cups on the table and gave her a kiss on top of her head. They all enjoyed a quick breakfast of cereal, toast, and coffee. Sue read the paper while Carly and Liz chatted about the upcoming holidays. Liz was curious about Carly's parents, but she wasn't sure she should pry. She bit her lip while she struggled with the thought. "Carly, can I ask you something personal?" This got a look from Sue over the top of the newspaper she held in her hands.

"Sure," Carly answered.

"Where do your parents live?"

Carly's face darkened. "I'm afraid my mom passed away a few years ago. and my dad... Well, he left us when Jimmy and I were young, so I don't know what's become of him."

Liz reached over and squeezed Carly's hand. "I'm sorry to hear that."

'Don't be, it's all right. Jimmy and I still have family. My mother's two sisters live in Florida. They both helped raise us, and we're very close to them. As a matter of fact, I need to call them today. They were on a cruise in the Bahamas and should be back this afternoon. I'm so glad that Jimmy is going to be all right. I don't know how I would have broken the news to them if he wasn't.'

"Well, he is, thank goodness." Liz sipped some of her coffee. From the corner of her eye, she caught Sue giving her a reproachful stare. Smirking at her partner, she started clearing the kitchen table. "Listen, Carly, I'm going to go in to work late, so I can drop you off at the hospital."

"Liz! I told you that taking a cab wasn't a problem." Carly wagged her finger at the woman. 'Nic told me you were stubborn.'

Liz rolled her eyes. "Oh, she's one to talk. I think if we had a stubborn contest, I'd come in third," she stated, smiling at her partner, who stuck her tongue out in response. "Do you do that in court?" Liz asked.

Sue smiled. "Only when the jury can't see me.'

NIC DROVE THE Nissan Xterra from the northwestern end of the city, where the 21st precinct was located, to downtown Larson. European influences still abounded in the architecture of the buildings, especially those in the downtown area, where narrow streets, reminiscent of cities like Boston, were a characteristic. The sizable waterfront area in the southern end of the city contained two marinas and numerous warehouses that were owned by several companies in the area. Nic spent the next two hours searching portions of the downtown area with no luck. She decided she might have better luck checking with some of her snitches later in the day. Finding them now would be futile, since they all seemed to shun the daylight. She often wondered if they weren't vampires, their aversion to daylight was so strong. Checking her watch, she decided she'd had enough for now and drove to the hospital.

Arriving in ICU, she entered Jimmy's room. He was awake and looking remarkably better than he had the last time she had seen him. His leg was in a cast and his arm in a sling, but he beamed at her when she entered.

"Well, you're certainly looking much better this morning," Nic remarked, a broad grin crossing her face.

"I feel a lot better, thanks." His eyes drifted behind his partner and a look of disappointment fell across his face. "Where's Carly?"

Nic almost blurted out the answer then realized Jimmy didn't know that Carly wasn't staying with her. "She'll be here any minute."

Jimmy gave his partner a knowing glance. "Spill it. She's not staying at my place is she?"

"No, of course not," Nic answered.

"Then what's going on?"

Nic sat down in the chair that was next to the bed. She played with her ring as she contemplated what she should tell him. "She's staying with some friends of mine. You remember Sue and Liz, don't you?"

Jimmy thought for a second. "Yeah. But I thought Carly was staying with you," he said with a concerned tone.

Nic looked down at her ring, which she continued to fiddle with. "Jimmy, there's something I didn't tell you yesterday." She looked into his soft brown eyes. "Someone tried to kill me at the house Saturday night."

His eyes bulged, then his face reddened with anger. "Who?"

"Two guys. Sal Linetti and Leo Tolstrom. They're from Jersey."

He knitted his brows, trying to place the names but with no success. "Who the fuck are they? You caught them, right?" Jimmy winced as tried to sit up more.

"I never saw them before, or at least I don't remember them. Sal was a big guy, shorter than me, but really heavy. He and I had a little disagreement. He wanted me dead, and I wanted to continue living. Unfortunately, that resulted in his untimely demise. The other guy got away."

Jimmy smirked at his partner, who simply shrugged her shoulders. "Got any idea why?" he asked.

"My guess is they're the same pair who tried to take you out, too. But I don't have a clue who could have hired them or why."

"So that's why Carly's not staying with you?"

"Of course. I couldn't put her in any more danger. I'm just thankful she didn't get hurt the other night, though that piece of shit that got away did slam her into the wall as he made his escape."

Jimmy ran his free hand through his sandy hair. "Well, thanks for taking care of her." He pointed to the water pitcher. "Would you mind?"

"Oh, yes, terribly," she replied, sarcastically. She poured some water into a plastic glass and handed it to him. He drank it all down in one gulp.

Nic refilled the glass and set it on the table next to the bed. "You know, your sister is pretty amazing."

Jimmy furrowed his brows. "How so?"

"Well, she handled the whole thing with you and Saturday's break-in extremely well. Other people would have fallen apart."

Jimmy smiled as he thought of his sister. "Yeah, you're right." He gazed into his partner's eyes and confided, "She means the world to me, Nic. Thanks for keeping her safe. I owe you one."

"Don't be crazy, Jimmy. I'd never let anything happen to her, so you don't owe me a thing."

Just as those words left Nic's mouth, Carly strolled into the room. "Hi, guys." She leaned over and planted a kiss on her brother's cheek. "And what were you two talking about?" she asked, arching a slender blonde brow at the two of them.

"Oh, nothing, really," Nic answered innocently.

Carly gave her an incredulous smirk and then turned her attention back to her brother. "You're looking pretty chipper today." She fussed over him, first straightening his blanket and then tucking it along the sides of his legs.

"I am feeling better, though completely helpless."

"You'll be up and about in no time," Carly assured him.

A short, perky nurse entered the room and waved at the two women. "Would you both please step out of the room for a second? I have to administer a shot to this handsome fellow."

Carly and Nic both suppressed a desire to tease Jimmy and fol-

lowed the nurse's orders. She pulled the curtain around the bed the instant they stepped from the room. Nic looked at the young police officer who was sitting in the chair outside the room. She recognized him as the one whose head she had nearly torn off the other day. She thought she should cut him some slack today. He dropped his magazine the second he realized she was looking at him. "Why don't you take a break? I'll be here for a while."

"Thanks, Detective Stone. I'll just run to the bathroom, and I'll be right back."

"Go grab yourself some coffee, too."

"Are you sure? I really don't need to."

"No, it's fine, go ahead." The young officer headed to the elevators with a quick stride. Nic turned to see Carly smiling at her.

"What?"

"Do you only scare the young ones, or are the old ones intimidated by you, too?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked, cocking her head and leaning against the wall. She noticed how nice Carly looked. Her hair was tied back in a French braid, with short bangs dusting her forehead, and she was dressed in a pair of khaki Dockers with a crimson sweater vest over a white button-down shirt.

"I'm just teasing you, Nic," she retorted, touching Nic's arm for emphasis before taking a seat in the vacated chair. "So, what have you been doing this morning?"

"Oh, this and that. I stopped by the station for a while, and I ordered a home alarm system that is going to be installed tomorrow morning."

"Wow, you got someone to install it that soon?" Carly thought about what she'd just said and almost giggled out loud. Nic probably got whatever she wanted.

"Yes, I did. Oh, and I get to go see the department psychologist this afternoon, too," Nic said in a mock tone.

Carly gave her a quizzical look. "Why is that?"

"My lieutenant thinks it has something to do with the recent shootings I've been involved in," she replied, sheepishly. The nurse exited the room and informed them they could return.

"Is that the normal procedure?"

"More or less. They just want to make sure my head is screwed on straight," Nic remarked.

"Well..." Carly blinked coyly at her, "if it's any consolation, I think your head is just perfect."

Nic felt a warm sensation rising up her neck as she followed Carly back into Jimmy's room.

FOR THE NEXT half-hour, Carly told Jimmy about her trip to Australia while he eagerly listened. Nic enjoyed the story as well. She told them about shooting the pod of whales and the two days they spent on the open ocean just searching for them. A run-in with some tiger sharks sounded frightening, but Carly seemed to be unaffected by it, though Nic's eyes bulged during that part of the story. Carly could weave a story, and she was very animated when she spoke. Lots of hand gestures, eye movements, inflections, and such.

The perky nurse returned and informed them all that Jimmy was scheduled for some additional tests and that they would have to leave. Nic was starting to acquire a dislike for this woman. Carly propped her hands on her hips and looked at Nic, sensing her irritation. "I seem to recall someone inviting me to breakfast last night."

Nic turned her attention to her partner's sister. "Well, then, shall we?" Nic stood and in a mock gesture offered Carly her arm. Jimmy watched this with some amusement and, for a moment, thought he saw something more. Maybe it was the gleam in his sister's eyes or the fact that she absolutely beamed when she took Nic's arm. Then he noticed the way his partner watched Carly's every move. As the orderly wheeled him out of the room, he watched them walking down the hallway, and he contemplated the possibility all the way to radiology.

THE CAFETERIA WAS mildly crowded for a mid-morning Monday. A handful of interns were circled about a table, discussing the latest in medical advances. Another table of nurses chatted about an upcoming hospital social. A few odd pairs of visitors were scattered over the rest of the room. Nic and Carly picked up two empty trays and proceeded down the line, picking up juice and coffee as they went. Nic decided on bacon and scrambled eggs while Carly opted for the French toast. Carly insisted on paying, halting Nic's protests with a severe look. They chose a table in the corner, away from the other, louder groups in the room. Carly dug into her meal, smothering the French toast with butter and maple syrup.

Nic nibbled on her bacon and watched her companion with keen interest. "Hungry this morning?"

Carly looked up through pale lashes. "Maybe, just a little." She liked the outfit Nic was wearing today. She looked great in her navy chinos, white silk shirt, and black leather vest.

"So how do you like Sue and Liz's place?"

"It's beautiful. I love their sunroom. Liz and I chatted in there yesterday afternoon, and it was so cozy." Carly dabbed a forkful of

toast in the syrup, then devoured it in one bite.

"Yeah, Sue mentioned you two got into the Chinese astrology stuff."

Carly's eyes sparkled. "That stuff is amazing. You know I was born in the year of the rabbit?"

"Really?" Nic asked.

"Yes. And you were born in the year of the dog, according to Liz." Carly smiled.

Nic twitched her lips. "I seem to recall her telling me that before."

Carly finished her breakfast and placed her plate on the side of the table. "Sometime I'll have to explain the significance of that." This got her an intrigued look from her companion. Grabbing her coffee mug, she wrapped her hands around it, warming them while she sipped the hot brew. "I really like them both. You're very lucky to have such good friends, Nic."

Nic reflected on that then affirmed, "Yes, I guess I am." Finishing off her eggs, she slid the plate into the middle of the table and wiped her mouth with her napkin. "So...um...how long will you be able to stay here in Larson?"

Carly looked into Nic's eyes and could have sworn she sensed another question lurking there. "Well, originally I had planned on staying till Black Friday, but that was before Jimmy's injuries. Now, I'm not too sure." She looked out the expansive floor to ceiling windows that were behind Nic. A gray sky made it seem much later than it really was. "I'm thinking about taking a leave of absence while Jimmy recovers."

Nic's pale blue eyes brightened a bit at the answer. "That's probably a good idea. Maybe you'll be able to return to my place in a couple of days then?"

Carly gave her a demure smile. "Sure, if that's what you want."

"Well, I mean, you don't have to if it's not what you want." Nic felt her heart soar then fall in the same second. *Why can't I just tell her that I like spending time with her? After all, that wouldn't complicate my life, would it? Besides, Carly is just a friend, and I can certainly stand to have more friends. Right, Nic?*

Carly reached over and placed her hand over Nic's. "I'd love to stay at your place, Nic. I just don't want to be a burden."

Nic wondered how this vibrant, beautiful woman could ever think she could be a burden. "You could never be a burden to me," she said it with the utmost sincerity, and Carly felt it, her sea green eyes almost glistening. Deciding to lighten the mood, Nic said, "You know, I don't think your brother told me where you're living right now."

Carly removed her hand and reclaimed her coffee mug, sip-

ping down the last of the beverage. "DC. I've been there for a little over a year."

"That must be an interesting place to live."

"I imagine. I really haven't had a lot of time to spend there. I've been traveling quite a bit, and when I'm not, I usually work pretty long hours, since I'm still learning the ropes."

Nic nodded her head in understanding. "It's always tough when you're learning. I barely remember any life at all for the first four years I was on the job."

Carly laughed at the remark. She looked into Nic's eyes and remembered what Sue had told her yesterday. She pondered whether she should broach the subject.

"Carly? Is something wrong?" Nic asked, concerned.

Carly smiled and patted Nic's hand. "No, I'm fine. It's just..."

"What? Tell me?"

"I don't want to upset you, but Susan told me about your parents, and...I just wanted to tell you how very sorry I am."

A dark shadow clouded Nic's normally brilliant eyes. A pain that would never heal still lingered there, just beneath the surface. "Thank you." Nic peered into the green eyes across from her, feeling Carly's compassion simply through their ocular connection. "It was the worst time of my life, and I still feel the pain of that loss as if it were yesterday."

Carly reached over and grabbed Nic's hands, soothing Nic's obvious tension with a gentle circular motion of her thumb across Nic's knuckles. "I can't imagine how awful that must have been for you and your sister."

"I hope you never know that kind of pain," Nic stated.

Carly rubbed the back of her hand on Nic's cheek, causing her to close her eyes and lean into the hand. "You know, I don't think you ever told me your sister's name."

Nic's eyes opened slowly. "It's Jessie."

"That's a nice name. How old is she?"

Nic's eyes rolled up in thought. "She turned twenty-four in April."

A curvy blonde nurse strolled by with a cafeteria tray in her hands. She eyed Nic from head to toe, but Nic didn't give her a second glance. A sudden possessiveness came over Carly as she witnessed the nurse's blatant ogling. The woman took a seat at a table not far from them but turned away upon noticing Carly's scorching green eyes. With a sense of victory, Carly said, "Well, I'd love to meet her someday."

"Maybe you'll get to," Nic replied as she stood and grabbed their dishes. "Why don't we see if Jimmy is back?" Carly helped her clear the table then the two headed up to Jimmy's room.

LIEUTENANT RAIMES PACED in his office while Sanders and Mahoney recalled the previous evening's activities. Occasionally, he scowled and grunted as he listened to the two detectives.

"Then Paul has to get a cup of coffee. I had my eye on her car the whole time, but I swear she's the one who let the air out of my tires," Sanders said.

"If I knew you couldn't handle being alone for a lousy five minutes, I'd have stayed in the damn car!" Mahoney shot back.

"That's enough, you two. I've heard all I want to hear about this." Raimes waved his hand in the air as he slumped back into his chair. "What the hell did you two think you were doing tailing her in the first place?" He managed to suppress his laughter.

Sanders cleared his throat. "Well, I think she knows something."

Raimes raised an eyebrow at his detective. Sanders, for the most part, was a good cop, but he had a chip on his shoulder that prevented him from being a great cop. "Sanders, Stone knows a whole lot. So what's your point?"

"No, Lou, I mean she knows something about what went down Saturday night. Something she's not telling us."

"And you think tailing her is going to help you find that out?"

"What else are we supposed to do?" Sanders asked.

"I hate to agree with Tom on this one, Lou, but it's not like Stone was going to tell us anything. You know how she can be," Mahoney added.

Raimes rubbed his forehead to try to soothe the throbbing headache he'd had all morning. "Yeah, I know how she is, but you two are going to have to find another avenue to pursue. Stone has requested some time off, so who knows where she'll be."

"Great," Sanders grunted.

"You two better start digging into Linetti's past, pronto. He must have some connection to this city, so get out there and find it."

DR. CARTER'S OFFICE was located on Cranston Avenue along with a plethora of other offices, mostly occupied by physicians, chiropractors, and psychiatrists. Nic parked the Xterra in the lot at the rear of the building and walked around to the front entrance. Thankfully, the morning rain had not carried into the afternoon, although a cold, damp chill remained. Once in the building, she located Dr. Carter's office from the directory and proceeded there. A middle-aged woman in a blue sweater sat at a desk behind a glass window. She slid it open upon seeing Nic enter the room.

"May I help you?" she asked in a pleasant voice.

"Detective Stone. I have a one o'clock appointment with Dr. Carter."

The woman glanced at her appointment book and nodded. "Yes, it'll just be a minute or so. Please have a seat." She slid the glass door closed and resumed her paperwork.

Nic surveyed the empty waiting room, finally settling in a chair next to a stack of popular magazines. She removed her leather jacket and started sifting through the pile. She selected last week's issue of *Newsweek* and began leafing through the pages. Waiting for anything was one of her least favorite things to do. She started reading an article about the president's latest political blunder when the inner office door opened and a woman wearing a gray pinstripe skirt with a matching gray blouse stepped out.

"Detective Stone?"

Nic dropped the magazine back on the table and sauntered over with her jacket thrown over her shoulder, hooked by one finger.

The woman extended her hand. "I'm Dr. Carter. It's nice to meet you."

Nic accepted her hand and shook it firmly. "Same here."

The pair entered the office, and Nic took a seat in one of the plush chairs that sat in front of the doctor's expansive desk. The woman studied her as she walked around the desk to her chair and sat down. Nic studied her as well. She was actually younger than Nic had expected, or at least she looked young. She was African-American and quite beautiful. Her dark hair was short and layered, accenting her cheekbones and full lips. Nic thought she could have easily been a model, if she hadn't pursued a career in the medical profession.

"How are you doing, Detective?"

Nic gave her an even stare. "I'm doing fine, thank you."

The doctor slipped on a pair of eyeglasses and picked up a pen. "Well, that's good to hear. I understand you've been involved in a couple of rather tense situations in the past few days."

A feral grin slid across Nic's face. "That's an interesting way to put it."

The doctor returned the smile. "Well, then, tell me how you would 'put' it."

"Hmm...let's see. In the past seventy-two hours, I've shot and killed two men and wounded one. My partner's lying in the hospital, lucky to be alive, and someone tried to kill me Saturday night, and I haven't got a clue why."

"You certainly don't mince words, do you?"

"I find that in my line of work the direct approach is best."

"I can see that must work well for you. The direct approach, I

mean." She scribbled some notes on a pad of paper. "Well, the purpose of this meeting is for you to be able to express your feelings, frustrations, anger, or whatever. I'm here to help you deal with the stresses that are part of your job."

"Dr. Carter, I am going to be honest with you. Talking about my feelings is as hard for me as shooting someone probably would be for you."

"First, please feel free to call me Denise. I like to keep things personal. Second, I can understand what you are saying. You are certainly not the first cop whom I have spoken with who does not enjoy being here."

"I've just never been very comfortable talking about my feelings," Nic admitted, finding herself liking the woman, in spite of herself. "And you can call me Nicole, or Nic, if you like."

Chapter Nine

WHEN JIMMY HAD returned from the tests, Nic and Carly were waiting for him in ICU. The three of them had spent an hour chatting about a variety of topics, including the current basketball season, since both Jimmy and Nic were huge New York Knicks fans. When the orderlies had come to move Jimmy, Nic had excused herself in order to make her appointment with the psychologist. The private room that Jimmy was now settled into was located on the third floor in the west wing of St. Peter's hospital. Carly and Jimmy had spent the last thirty minutes flipping through the television channels trying to find something worth watching.

"So how do you like my partner?" Jimmy asked, taking Carly by surprise.

"She's great. Just like you described." She held the remote and continued surfing.

Jimmy regarded his sister with a skeptical eye. "Yeah, she's something, isn't she?"

"She sure is," Carly agreed. "I don't know what I would have done the last few days without her." Turning to face her brother, she continued, "Jimmy, she was really there for me. I don't think I would have handled this whole thing very well, if she hadn't been here."

Her brother grabbed her hand and squeezed it. "I'm glad she was there for you. She's a good partner and a good friend."

"She seems to be very focused." Carly held onto her brother's hand. "Has she ever been involved with anyone?"

Her brother reflected on the question. Nic had never mentioned anyone. "Not as long as I've known her. Why?"

"I was just curious." She shifted her eyes away from her brother's gaze. Releasing his hand, she moved to the top of the bed and began fluffing his pillow.

"Carly, are you falling for Nic?" She nearly choked when she heard the words. She wasn't sure how she should respond, so she continued fluffing his pillow. "Carly?"

"If I said yes, would you hate me?" she asked, hesitantly.

Jimmy tugged her arm, pulling her back into his view. Jimmy looked up at her. "Why would I hate you? Carly, you're my sister and I love you."

"But Nic is your partner, and I don't want to do anything that would jeopardize that."

"Sit down," he demanded. "If you're falling in love with my partner, who happens to be one of the best people I've ever known, that's not going to jeopardize anything."

Dropping her chin to her chest, she said, "It could make things uncomfortable for both of you. And what if she doesn't feel the same way about me?"

Jimmy lifted his sister's sunken chin with his finger, forcing her to look at him. "I have a feeling my partner just may feel the same way." He smiled as he watched his sister's eyes light up.

NIC HATED TO admit it, but she actually felt a little better after talking with Denise. She liked the woman, which amazed her. After her parents were killed, she had seen several psychologists and such, and she had hated them all. Nic had never imagined she could have a conversation with one again without wanting to rip the person's head off and spit down his or her throat. *Life is funny*, she mused. Before returning to the hospital, she went in search of one of her more reliable snitches, who could usually be found in Fenton Park.

The five hundred acres of Fenton Park ran along the eastern edge of the downtown area, providing a splendid view for those fortunate enough to have offices overlooking the park. Bike trails wound themselves through grassy hills and subtle valleys. Two ponds were on opposite ends of the park and home to a variety of small fish, snapping turtles, and several waterfowl. During the summer, free concerts were held in the center of the park, including a Jazz festival, which ran for three days in July and was one of Nic's favorites.

After parking her car, Nic strolled into the park through the North entrance, pulling her collar up against the cool afternoon breeze that had come up out of nowhere. The gloomy gray skies had kept most of the park's walkers at bay, so she was primarily alone.

As she approached the pond, she spotted a figure sitting on one of the benches. She smiled at the predictable nature of one Freddy Finnoch, or Freddy the Finger to most who knew him. For as long as she had known him, which must have been at least five years, Freddy would come to the park to feed the ducks and geese

that called it home. Freddy was a small man, weighing probably no more than one hundred and twenty pounds, Nic figured. He had a pockmarked complexion, and his face was noticeably drawn from years of drug addiction. He was clean now, thanks to Jimmy and Nic. When he had helped them crack a tough case almost two years ago, they had made sure he got into the best drug rehabilitation program in the state instead of doing time. Freddy had sworn he'd be forever grateful, and from time to time, he had proven to be a valuable source of information to them.

Nic approached the bench in her normal soundless manner. The man continued tossing pieces of bread into the water, attracting the attention of four ducks that eagerly gobbled up the offering. Once Nic was directly behind him, she dropped her hand on his shoulder, causing him to jump a foot off the bench, grabbing his heart as he did.

"What the..." He turned to see Nic giving him a lop-sided grin.

"Hiya, Freddy. How's it goin'?"

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! Stone, are you trying to kill me or somethin'?"

Nic patted his shoulder then walked around to the front and sat down next to him. "Course not. Why would I do that?"

Feeling his heart resume its normal beat, he answered her, "Cause you probably get your kicks that way!"

"Calm down, Freddy. You're fine." Picking up some of the bread, she tossed several chunks into the water. Two ducks immediately swam over to the largest piece, fighting over it while a third came in and snatched it away from both of them.

"So what can I do for you? I know this isn't a social call."

Nic placed her palm across her chest. "That hurts, Freddy."

"Can the jokes, Stone. We both know I only see you when you think I can be of some help."

Brushing her hands together, Nic sat back against the bench. "That's probably true of most cops and their snitches."

"Ouch! Now look who's hurting who?"

"Well, come on now, Freddy. If it walks like a duck—"

"Okay, okay. 'Nuff said."

Nic extracted Leo's picture from her jacket pocket and showed it to the man. "I'm looking for this guy. Have you seen him around?"

Freddy studied the picture with narrowed eyes then he scrubbed his grizzled face with his palm. "He looks familiar, but I can't place where I've seen him. Could be that he just looks like a lot of guys that I run into."

Nic opened her notepad and reviewed the pages. "He's got a tattoo on his left hand, and he's a gambler."

Freddy furrowed his brow. "Wait a minute. Yeah, I did see him. Over at The Cage."

Nic knew the place. It was a dive on Trumble that was taken down at least twice a month for racketeering. "When?"

"Early this morning, I seem to recall."

She showed Freddy the number she had taken off the cocktail napkin. "Recognize this?"

He looked at it and nodded. "Sure. That's the number to reach the bookies that work the joint downstairs. You need a code name to get through, though. They only take bets; they won't know where your guy is."

Fishing a fifty out of her pocket, she handed it to him. "Thanks a lot, Freddy. I appreciate the info."

"Don't be such a stranger, Stone. I miss seeing your pretty face." He gave her a toothy grin.

As she walked back to the path, she said, "Take care of yourself, Freddy."

FRANK TORELLI SAT in the limousine and waited patiently for his boss. He had just received a call from one of the men who was stationed at the hospital, and he knew his boss would be happy. Light drizzle was falling, adding further chill to the cold November day. The cemetery was mostly deserted at this hour, especially on Monday, when Victor made his weekly pilgrimage to his sister's grave. The trees were almost completely devoid of their foliage, which caused the normally green grounds to appear in a multitude of red, gold, orange, and brown. Frank laced his hands together on his lap and peered out into the fading afternoon light. The sound of footsteps made him turn in time to see Victor Marcone approaching the car. The driver jumped out immediately and opened the door for his boss.

"Mr. Marcone, I have good news," Frank declared.

"What is it? God knows I could use some good news."

"Pete just called. They moved the cop to a private room this afternoon."

A slow grin slid across Marcone's angular face. "That is good news, Frank. What about Tolstrom? Has anyone located him, yet?"

Frank unconsciously tightened his jaw muscle. He was highly disappointed in his men. They should have found that scum sucker by now. "No, sir."

Marcone scowled, then leaned forward and tapped the glass that divided the driver's seat from the passengers. "Let's go, Eddie." The car instantly began moving through the narrow cemetery lanes. "Get Tony, Pete, and Vince to the house tonight, Frank."

We need to go over our plans for Mr. Jamison, and this time, I want no screw-ups."

"AUNT ROSE, DON'T worry, please. I told you, Jimmy is doing much better, and they've moved him out of ICU, so isn't that proof that he's going to be okay?"

"Yes, dear, but I still think Irene and I should come up. What about when he comes home from the hospital? Who's going to take care of him?" the elderly woman asked.

Carly pulled at the phone cord in frustration. She loved her Aunt Rose dearly, but she was overprotective, more so since Carly's mother passed on, and a bit high-strung, too. Aunt Irene, on the other hand, was much more relaxed. "I told you, I'm going to take a leave of absence and stay here and take care of Jimmy." *Plus, it'll give me time to get to know Nic better*, Carly thought.

"Dear, do you really think that's a good idea? Maybe they won't let you. You know you have only been with them for...what's it been now...six months?"

"Over a year, Aunt Rose, and I'm sure they'll let me take the time." She loved her aunt to pieces, but sometimes she could be so rigid Carly felt like she could just scream.

"Did our flowers arrive? Did they brighten his room?"

"Yes, they did. They're lovely." Carly spotted a familiar tall, dark, and gorgeous figure exiting the elevator. "Aunt Rose, I have to go now. I'll call you and Aunt Irene tomorrow, okay?"

Nic had seen Carly hold up a hand indicating she wanted her to stop, so she leaned against the wall and waited. She noticed Carly had taken her braid out, letting her hair fall evenly over her shoulders, making her look remarkably sexy.

"All right, dear. Send Jimmy our love, will you?"

"I will. Bye." Looking at Nic, Carly suddenly felt the urge to explain whom she had been talking to. "That was my aunt."

"I think Jimmy's mentioned them before."

Carly walked beside Nic as they made their way down the hall. "I'm sure he has. They are both very sweet and dear to us, but sometimes they're just so..." Carly ran a hand through her hair in frustration, "overprotective."

"They care about you, so it's only natural that they would be."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. Hey. Guess who sent Jimmy flowers today?"

Nic thought about the question for a second. "Who?" she finally asked.

"Sue and Liz. It's a beautiful arrangement, too."

"That was sweet of them," Nic commented.

Jimmy was watching the news when they entered the room. "Hey, you're back."

Nic immediately noticed the three huge, colorful bouquets of flowers that sat on the window ledge on the opposite side of the room and asked, "Nice flowers. Who are the other two from?"

Jimmy gestured at the bouquets, "Aunt Rose and Aunt Irene sent the one on the right, Sue and Liz are the middle, and the guys at the office sent the other one. Pretty nice, huh?"

"I'll say." She sat in the chair at the foot of the bed, while Carly took the one next to it.

"So, how was your meeting with the shrink?" Jimmy asked.

Nic twitched her lips. "Not too bad, actually." Carly and Jimmy both had looks of surprise plastered to their faces. "What?"

Carly answered, "Nothing." Jimmy just sat there wide-eyed.

Nic rolled her eyes. "Would you two have preferred hearing that I broke her into tiny pieces and flushed her into the sewer system?"

Carly couldn't help but chuckle at the mental image that question created. "No, of course not, Nic. I'm glad you were...okay with it."

"Yeah, me, too. I just wouldn't have believed it if I wasn't hearing it from you," Jimmy stated honestly.

"Very funny, you two. You make me sound worse than Genghis Khan."

Jimmy laughed, then groaned from the pain the laughter caused. "I hate to do this to you guys, but I'm feeling kind of beat, and I know you," he looked at Carly, "must be tired of sitting around here all day." He turned to Nic. "Why don't you take my sister out for a nice dinner, and I don't mean in the cafeteria."

Nic looked at Carly, who seemed very receptive to the idea, her green eyes sparkling in the fluorescent light. "Sure, I'd love to. We could go to Garcia's. They make the best fajitas in town."

"That sounds perfect. It'll give you some time to catch a few winks and not feel guilty about me being here." She shook her finger at her brother, who just smiled back at her. Carly had a feeling her brother had other motivations for his suggestion, but she wouldn't pursue that now.

DAYLIGHT EXCHANGED PLACES with its other half, and the rain, which had fallen in varying degrees throughout the afternoon, was now gone, leaving a musty scent in its wake. Garcia's, a reproduction of a plantation home with an enclosed veranda filled with lush hanging plants and fig trees, was a short drive from the hospital. Nic walked behind Carly and held the door for her once they

scaled the stairs. Inside, Mayan sculptures, pampering waiters, and strolling mariachis abounded. A young Hispanic man, dressed all in white with a colorful sash tied about his waist, escorted them to a cozy corner table bathed in soft candlelight. Their waiter, a slightly older man with a gentle smile and dark hair, appeared instantly, and they both ordered margaritas and quesadillas for an appetizer.

"This is a nice place," Carly commented.

"Yeah, it's pretty popular, especially on the weekends." Nic gazed at her companion across the table, the candlelight throwing varying highlights into her golden tresses.

"Well, thanks for bringing me here." She glanced at the menu, which was spread out in front of her. "So, what are you going to have?"

Nic surveyed her own menu. "Steak fajitas, I think."

"That sounds good." Carly's eyes drifted over the menu. Everything sounded delicious. "I think I'll have the Chimi de Pollo, or the taco platter, or..." Nic smiled at her companion's indecision.

The waiter returned, placing their drinks in front of them. "Your quesadillas will be out in a minute. Are you ready to order?"

Nic looked at Carly, who was still engrossed in her menu. "Can you give us a second?"

"Certainly, senorita. I will return in a few minutes."

"Thanks." Nic watched her friend go through the menu from cover to cover three times before the waiter returned. When Carly announced "chicken fajitas" as her choice, Nic started to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing really. It's just that I wouldn't have guessed that you would have picked that, since you didn't mention you were considering it."

Carly batted her hand at the air. "Oh, I do that all the time, just ask Jimmy. He's always surprised at what I actually order."

The appetizers arrived, and they each dug into them, smearing salsa and sour cream over the tortillas before gobbling them down. The soft sounds of the mariachis drifted in from the other room, adding an air of authenticity to their surroundings. Carly glanced at Nic, who was busy looking at the various decorations that lined the walls. She was glad that her brother had pushed them into dinner away from the hospital. Taking a sip of her drink through the salty rim of her glass, she watched her dinner companion. Nic's eyes were constantly moving, as if they were perpetually searching for something. Not a single person passed by the table that Nic did not observe in some way or another. *Maybe, Carly thought, it was part of her inherent nature to be observant, as well as cautious. After all, she is a cop, and a damn good one from everything my brother has ever*

told me.

Nic finished off the last of her quesadillas and pushed the plate aside. The restaurant was mildly busy for a Monday evening, but the table they were occupying was fairly isolated from the rest of the restaurant's patrons. Nic noticed Carly was picking at her plate, seemingly lost in thought. "Don't you like them?" Nic asked.

"They're delicious," she replied, dipping a forkful into the salsa. "I guess I was just admiring the surroundings."

"You look a little tired. Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine, really, but yes, I am a bit tired. I was up rather early this morning, and it's been a long day."

Nic idly played with the wooden napkin rings, twirling them on her finger. "I'm sorry to hear that you didn't sleep well."

"Oh, I slept fine. Your cat, on the other hand, decided that the break of dawn was a perfect time to wake me up." Carly took in a mouthful of the cheesy delight and chewed contentedly.

"I should have warned you about that. Sorry." Nic shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly.

Carly shook her fork at her friend. "I'll get you for that."

Nic caught sight of the restaurant's owner, a stocky little man in his fifties, with a full, round face and a thick, black mustache. Waving his hand at her, he approached the table with a purposeful stride. "Nicolita, it is so good to see you again."

"Hello, Manuel." Nic smiled as she offered her cheek.

Leaning over, he placed a kiss on her cheek then gave an approving glance to Nic's dinner companion. "And who is your lovely friend?"

"Manuel Garcia, Carly Jamison." Carly smiled and lifted her hand, which, to her surprise, the man grasped and brought to his lips.

"It is a pleasure to meet you," the man said, his black eyes twinkling in the candlelight.

"Likewise," Carly responded.

The man straightened and turned to Nicole. "Now, why is it you have not been here in such a long while, Nicolita?"

"It hasn't been that long, Manuel."

"That is where you are wrong, my friend. Every day that passes is like an eternity." He realized that their glasses were empty, so he clapped his hands twice and instantly the waiter appeared. "Get them another drink, and there is no charge for their dinners, either."

"Manuel..." Nic groaned. "We've talked about this before."

He waved his hand at Nic. "I know, Nicolita, but I cannot allow you to pay for dinner. Do not argue with me, por favor." His eyes implored her to cooperate.

Carly sat there and watched them. The man was very charming and obviously taken with Nic, though who could blame him. Nic looked at Carly and smiled. "This is the last time. Do you hear me, Manuel?"

"Si, I hear you." He wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Now, enjoy your evening, please." He bowed to them then walked away.

"Wow. What was that all about?" Carly asked.

"Oh...I was in here last year when a disgruntled employee burst in and threatened everyone with a gun. I took care of it, that's all." The waiter arrived with two new drinks in hand. Nic thanked him and took a sip of hers. The wide-eyed stare she was getting from Carly almost made her spit her drink out.

"That's all? I'd say that's quite a lot. How did you do it?"

"It really wasn't as bad as it sounds. Body language and eye contact can mean the world when you're trying to defuse a situation like that. Then it's just a matter of getting close enough to disarm the perp."

With a dumbfounded expression, Carly stated, "It's no wonder he adores you. Hell, I adore you, and I barely know you." Carly almost swallowed her tongue when she realized she had said the last part out loud.

"Huh? What did you just say?" Nic put her glass down and searched the green eyes across from her.

"I said that you probably floored him...with your abilities and all."

Nic shook her head slowly. "That's not what I thought I heard."

Carly dropped her eyes and stared at the table. "I...umm...I said that...I...adore...you." Carly had to tug the words out. She was so nervous she twisted her napkin into knots, which looked to her a lot like her stomach felt.

Nic reached across the table and stopped Carly's fidgeting hands. Carly refused to look up. "Carly?" She continued to stare at the table, too afraid to look into those incredible blue eyes. "Carly, look at me, please?" Slowly, she complied until her eyes were held in Nic's gaze. "You adore me?" Nic still couldn't believe her ears, even when she said it.

This time Carly didn't look down. "Yes. I'm falling in love with you, Nic." Their eyes never wavered. "I know that sounds crazy. We hardly know one another and all, but that's how I feel."

Nic digested the words, words she never thought she'd want to hear from anyone. A joyous smile crept across her face. "Well that's good to hear." Her eyes sparkled. "Because I think I'm falling in love with you, too."

Carly looked catatonic. She wasn't even sure her heart was still

beating. Jimmy was right. This woman, this absolutely gorgeous, exhilarating woman, said she felt the same way. Carly wanted to leap right out of her chair and kiss Nic right then and there. A mile-wide grin appeared on her face, just as an odd sound behind her caught her attention. Their waiter had returned with two sizzling platters of steak and chicken that smelled amazing. The pair reluctantly released their hands allowing the waiter to deposit their food. "We'll have to continue this conversation after dinner," Nic said with one eyebrow raised.

Carly eagerly nodded her head. Looking at her plate, she realized her hunger for food had completely dissipated. Though it certainly looked and smelled enticing, it couldn't compare to the woman across from her.

CARLY MANAGED TO make a decent stab at her dinner, though she spent a good deal of that time gazing intently at Nic, who was pretty much doing the same thing.

Brushing some errant strands of hair back behind her ear, Nic polished off the last vestiges of her fajitas. She figured the two of them must look like a pair of lovesick puppies to anyone who watched them for more than a few seconds. Inside, she chuckled at the thought. *Nicole Stone, in love and with someone I've known for less than a week. Didn't I tell Susan that there was no way I would complicate my life, and certainly not with a straight woman?* A low chuckle rumbled up, getting an interesting look from her dinner companion. *There must be something in the water,* she mused.

Back outside, the night air was cold and still. Leaves, soggy from the earlier rain, were plastered everywhere, making the sidewalk somewhat slippery. The mass of clouds that had blanketed the city for much of the day had parted, allowing the moonlight to stream down, which cast odd shadows over the sidewalk and street. Carefully, the duo walked to Nic's car, which was in the parking lot across the street. Nic started to open the passenger door when Carly abruptly turned and faced her. "What you said inside...you meant it, right?"

Nic peered into Carly's eyes, their normally green hue much darker in the moonlight. "Yes, Carly, I meant it."

"So, you weren't trying to just get through dinner, before you let me down easy?"

Pursing her lips, Nic replied, "No."

"Cause I would—" Before she could get anything else out, Nic lowered her head and captured the Carly's lips and her heart in an intense kiss. Instinctively, Carly laced her hands around the back of Nic's neck and urged her closer. A low groan escaped her as she felt

Nic's strong hands moving up and down her sides. Their passion grew to a feverish pitch before Nic broke the contact, getting a complaining moan from Carly.

"Now, you were saying?" Nic asked, an impish grin crossing her face.

Carly could barely breathe let alone talk. She also realized she couldn't feel her legs either, and they began to buckle, but a strong arm curled around her waist and effortlessly lifted her up. "Hey there. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

With her arm still firmly around Carly's waist, Nic opened the door and before Carly knew what was happening, she was deposited, ever so gently, on the seat. "There you go. How's that?"

As Nic started to duck her head back out of the car, Carly placed a tender hand against Nic's cheek, causing her to stop in mid-motion and turn her head toward Carly. Carly leaned closer and pressed her silky smooth lips against Nic's, instantly re-igniting their fire. Nic could have spent the rest of the night, hell, the rest of her life in that moment. She breathed in deep the scent of wildflowers and sunshine that just radiated from the woman she held so firmly in her arms. Carly's fingers tangled in Nic's hair, the scent of leather and musk infiltrating her nostrils and furthering her excitement. Both their bodies tingled with desire. Reluctantly, Nic broke the kiss. She was out of breath, but she managed to mutter, "Whoa. We need to slow down."

Carly batted her green eyes at Nic, out of breath herself. "Why is that? I thought things were progressing rather nicely."

"Well, for one thing, I'm going to have a hard time dropping you back at the hospital if we don't." She lightly kissed the tip of Carly's adorable little nose, getting a smoldering smile in return.

"I'm still unclear on the problem," Carly remarked, sliding her hand up Nic's arm, feeling the taunt muscles that shifted beneath the surface of the leather jacket.

"You know very well what the problem is. You have to go back to the hospital, and I have some work to do tonight." Nic wondered how on earth she was going to accomplish anything this evening. She was so totally distracted she could hardly think at all. "Besides, I think we should take things slow. We've both been through a lot this weekend, and I feel as if my head is spinning."

"Okay, okay. I don't want you driving off a bridge or anything."

"Thank you, I guess." Nic closed the passenger door then walked around and got into the driver's seat. Starting the car, she eased it into the street and pointed them back toward the hospital. Before they were out of the parking lot, Carly slid her hand onto

Nic's thigh, resting it there. Feeling the hard muscles just beneath the material made her heart skip a beat.

Nic reveled in the warmth and the contact of Carly's hand. Placing her own hand over top of the Carly's, she wrapped her long fingers around the smaller ones and smiled, on the inside, as well as the outside. Suddenly, Nic realized what song was playing on the radio and the lyrics echoed in her head.

All I wanna do is make love to you
Say you will
You want me too
All I wanna do is make love to you
I've got lovin' arms to hold on to

Visions of her and Carly swirled in front of her, causing her heart to noticeably speed up. Reaching over, she quickly turned to the jazz station.

"Hey, what did you do that for? I liked that song," Carly admonished.

BY THE TIME they reached the hospital, Nic was wishing with all her heart that she could just take Carly and run away somewhere, but she was also afraid. Afraid that tonight had been a dream and that she'd wake up alone like she always did.

"Nic? Do you believe in destiny?" Carly asked, so quietly that Nic almost didn't hear her.

"I don't think I did much, at least not until now." She squeezed Carly's hand and raising it, brushed her lips across the woman's knuckles, sending a chill right through her friend. She drove into the hospital parking lot and immediately spotted Sue's BMW. Pulling into the space next to Sue's car, she killed the engine then half-turned to face Carly.

Carly took a deep breath, "I thought maybe I was just being crazy or something, but I've felt this connection between us since I met you at the airport." Carly peered into Nic's penetrating eyes. *I could get lost in there for a lifetime*, she thought. "God, that was only three days ago, yet it feels like a lifetime in some respects."

"I know what you mean," Nic assented. "If you think about what we've both faced in the last few days, it's kind of incredible really."

"Nic, I want you to know something." Her eyes turned serious. "I have never felt this way...this strongly about anyone else in my whole life."

Nic absorbed the words. "That puts us on even ground then

because I, most definitely, have never felt like this before."

Carly smiled. Not just because Nic felt the same way, but because she had a sense that this was bigger than both of them. There was a deep, wondrous bond between them. They could both feel it pulling them together as if some cosmic magnet was at work. In some ways, it was actually frightening. *Maybe when you find the person you are meant to spend your life with this is how it feels*, Carly mused. "Nic, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"What sort of work do you have to do tonight?"

Nic considered her possible answers. She didn't want to needlessly worry her friend, but she didn't want to lie to her either. "This afternoon I got a tip on where I might find our skinny friend who tried knocking you through the wall."

"Really? Can you tell me where?" Carly knew she had little right to interrogate Nic on her work, but if she had some idea what she was going to be doing, she'd worry less, hopefully.

"It's a place called The Cage." Nic regarded Carly, who now had a troubled look on her face. "I'll be careful, I promise."

"I know." She regarded Nic with pensive eyes. "Come on, let's go inside. Visiting hours will be over soon." Carly opened her door and was out of the car before Nic could blink. Carly's abrupt departure concerned Nic. She wondered if Carly could get used to the career that was so much a part of her now that it defined her. She fretted at the thought as she exited the car and caught up with Carly.

SUE, LIZ, AND Jimmy were all conversing when Nic and Carly entered the room. All at once, three pairs of eyes tracked to them. They both felt like a pair of deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car.

"What?" Nic asked, eyebrows raised.

Sue and Liz exchanged glances before Sue answered, "We were just talking about you two." Sue was still dressed in her work attire, a black suit coat and matching tailored skirt, accented with a bright red silk shirt.

"Yeah. How was dinner?" asked Liz, who was seated next to Sue at the foot of Jimmy's bed. She looked much more comfortable in a pair of black denims and a violet sweater with a snowflake design across the chest.

Nic walked over to the window and half-sat on the heater, which was comfortably warm. "Dinner was good." She looked at Carly, who sat on the chair by the bed looking as innocent as a schoolgirl caught smoking in the bathroom. "Didn't you think so, Carly?"

Carly nodded. "Yes, it was splendid."

Jimmy gave his sister a suspicious look then followed it up with a question. "So, what did you have?" A three-day growth of sandy hair was covering his face, making him look rugged.

"We both had quesadillas and fajitas. They were delicious," Carly answered, intentionally avoiding his eyes.

"Hmm. Sounds better than what I had. Chipped beef on toast."

"Oh, it was, believe me," Carly assured him with a coy twinkle in her eye.

This got a knowing look from both Sue and Liz, who in turn eyed Nic curiously. Nic just smiled and steered the conversation in another direction. For the next thirty minutes, they all chatted about their day, until a pudgy nurse in a tight white uniform waddled in and abruptly informed them that visiting hours ended in five minutes. The nurse then gave Jimmy his medication in a small paper cup, which he dutifully swallowed. Sue and Liz said their good-byes and filtered out into the quiet hallway.

"I'll see you tomorrow, partner. Get some rest, okay."

"Yes, Mom," Jimmy retorted, getting a raised eyebrow along with a smirk from his partner as she left the room.

After fluffing her brother's pillow and tucking in his blankets, Carly placed a kiss on his cheek. "I can't tell you how happy it makes me to see you looking better. Do you need anything?"

Jimmy mulled the question over then responded, "Maybe something to wear besides this," he said, pulling at his hospital gown. "And my shaver would be great, too."

"You got it. I'll see you in the morning." She leaned down and gave him a hug, being careful of his injured chest. "Goodnight."

"Night, squirt." Jimmy smiled at his sister and closed his eyes, the day finally taking its toll.

OUT IN THE hallway, Nic was speaking with the officer on duty, instructing him that no one should enter this room if he didn't recognize them. Sue and Liz were standing by the elevators with Sue talking on her cell phone, occasionally waving her hand in the air in what appeared to be frustration. Carly walked over and leaned against the same wall Liz was supporting.

"It was nice that you guys got to go out to dinner. You must be tired after spending most of the day here?" Liz asked.

"Yeah, I am kind of beat today. How was Harley when you two got home?"

"The little angel was sound asleep on the sofa. Of course, she did munch on two of my African violets, knocked the napkin holder off the kitchen table, spilled her water dish—"

Carly held up her hand. "Okay, I get it. I shouldn't have asked."

Once Nic arrived, Sue ended her call and the foursome rode the elevator to the lobby. "Could you two give us a second?" Carly asked.

Sue interlaced her hand with Liz's and they started for the car. "Sure, we'll be in the car." Both women held odd expressions on their faces as they walked away.

Carly turned and placed her hand on Nic's arm, stress lines etched across her fair brow. "Promise me you'll be careful tonight."

Nic wasn't quite sure what had come over her, but without hesitation, she wrapped her long arms around her friend, who willingly accepted the embrace. "Don't worry. I promise I'll be very careful." She felt Carly's breath catch and knew she was fighting the urge to cry. Gently, like a feather on the wind, Nic kissed the top of her head and whispered, "I promise."

NIC WAS PREOCCUPIED with thoughts of Carly the entire drive through the downtown area to the West Side. Trumble was one of a half dozen streets in the lower West Side that was known collectively as The Pits. Mayor Tomson, having also reduced the lighting in this part of town, improved things for the nocturnal predators who called The Pits home. One more reason the police department was not his biggest fan. Nic parked the Xterra at the end of the block, away from the cadre of streetwalkers, drunks, vagrants, and other miscreants. She put full clips in both her regular gun and her backup, which she had in her leg holster, before she exited the car.

Nic strode with her usual confidence about half a block before two curvaceous women in spiked heels approached her. "Hey, baby. You lookin' for some love tonight?" a tall redhead asked.

Her partner, a shorter brunette, who was wearing a hot pink jacket over a black leather skirt, added, "Yeah, honey. The three of us could have a REAL good time."

Without slowing her pace or turning her head, Nic responded, "LPD. Back off!"

Both women took a disappointed step back. "Too bad, honey. You look mighty fine. We could have had us some fun tonight."

Her lips curled into a lascivious grin at the thought of her and Carly, and what they could have been doing this evening. She shook the thought away, knowing she was already far more distracted than she could afford to be, especially in this part of town. Still, she felt a noticeable tug at her heart when she thought of the woman. Holding Carly in her arms felt incredible, so much so that

Nic wondered what making love to her would be like. Her grin returned but dissipated just as quickly when her destination came into view. The Cage was a medium-sized brick building with green neon lights over the door promoting the bar.

Nic strolled up to the front door and stepped inside. A square bar sat in the middle of the room with a large metal cage suspended above it holding two scantily clad women who were gyrating to the pulsating sounds that boomed off the walls. Two men, who could have easily passed as WWF contenders, manned the crowded bar. The room was filled with a motley assortment of men and very few women. To say that Nic stuck out was an understatement, but that didn't stop her from sidling up to the bar.

She hated these types of establishments, wall-to-wall drunks all looking for something they would never find anyway. After enduring what seemed like an eternity between two foul-smelling men, one taller than her and one remarkably shorter, the bartender acknowledged her.

"What can I get you?" he shouted.

"Scotch and water, on the rocks." The bartender nodded and began filling her request. She was surprised at how busy the place was for a Monday night.

"Here you go."

Dropping a ten on the bar, she grabbed the glass and downed it in one gulp, feeling her tensions ease as the alcohol did its work. When the bartender laid her change on the bar, she quickly grabbed his wrist, surprising him with her strength. Steel blue eyes engaged him. "I need to speak with you for a minute."

The man looked at her with lustful eyes. He was well over six feet tall and must have weighed around two hundred and eighty pounds, Nic figured. Glancing at his watch, he responded, "I'm on break in ten minutes."

"This will only take a second."

"I don't know who you been talking to, but I last longer than that." He leered at her.

Her impulse to smack that look off his face was hard to curb, but she managed to. "Listen, asshole, I'm not in the market for a lay, okay? I just want you to look at a picture for a second."

The leer was replaced by a snarl. "You're a fuckin' cop, aren't ya?"

Before the man knew what was happening, Nic had her right hand firmly attached to his esophagus. His eyes bulged. "Now what kind of language is that? Do you talk to all your customers that way?" The man murmured something unrecognizable. Nic noticed his right hand balling into a fist. "I wouldn't do that if I were you. Assaulting a police officer is never a good idea." Nic

wiggled her left index finger at the man, who was fighting to breathe. Everyone on her side of the bar had abruptly backed away in anticipation of a bar brawl. The other bartender made steps in their direction, but she froze him in place with an icy glare. Returning her attention to the man she was choking, she said, "Now, I want you to look at a picture, and tell me if you've seen this man in here, okay?"

The burly bartender nodded his head as much as he could. This woman was half his size, yet she held him firmly in place, and he imagined she could pull him right over the bar if she wanted to. Releasing him, Nic sat down on a barstool and waited for the man to catch his breath. "Everyone, go back to what you were doing. Show's over."

"He doesn't...look familiar to me," the bartender choked out. His face was red and beads of perspiration dotted his forehead.

"Are you sure?"

"Listen, lady, I haven't been on duty since Friday, and I don't recall seeing this dude, okay?"

Eyeing the other man behind the bar, she smiled and motioned for him to approach. "What about you? Have you seen him?"

Tentatively, the other man stepped close enough to see the picture. "Yeah, I've seen him in here."

"When?"

"Last night, real late, had to be around four or so."

"Was he alone?"

"Yeah. He was also drunk out of his mind and flat broke, or at least that's what he was telling everyone."

"Do you have any idea where I might find him?"

"Beats me, lady. I'll tell you one thing though."

"What's that?"

"He smelled pretty bad, like he'd been living in an alley or somethin'."

"Thanks for your time, boys." Dropping a twenty on the bar, she headed for the door.

Chapter Ten

FOUR SOMBER MEN were seated in high-backed chairs around a rectangular dining table. Four sets of laced hands were resting on the table. Four pairs of eyes stared blankly at their counterparts across from them. Frank Torelli stood by the door, back erect, eyes focused in front of him, while Victor Marcone paced around the table, where he occasionally punctuated a sentence with his fist. "Does everyone understand the plan that I have just laid out?"

Four heads nodded in unison.

"Good. Now this is going to go down flawlessly, or each one of you will see a wrath like you could never imagine." Marcone scrutinized each man, looking for a sign of uncertainty. He found none. "You're dismissed."

The four men stood in one fluid motion and retreated from the room without saying a single word.

THE LIQUOR STORE, which was just down the street from the bar that he'd gotten completely wasted in the other night, would be closing in another thirty minutes. Leo stood in the shadows across the street from it and had been for the past hour, watching and waiting. The plan he had formulated that morning was not a great one, but he knew it was all he had. So after getting some courage up, he decided to go through with it.

Sal was dead. Leo had read that in the paper, and Leo was most definitely screwed unless he could get the hell out of this city. But he needed money to do that, and this was the only way he knew how to get it. With both the cops and Marcone's goons looking for him, his time was running out faster than water on a hot griddle. Steeling himself, he checked his pistol then strode across the street and entered the now-empty liquor store.

UPON EXITING THE bar, Nic surveyed the street to determine where she should start looking for the little man. He could be anywhere in the six blocks that defined The Pits, or he could be in some other part of the city. Figuring her best bet was to start around the bar, she took the first alley, a dark, foul-smelling passage that separated the bar from a two-story building that housed a tattoo parlor on the second floor and a pool hall on the first. A dim light over a door near the rear was the alley's only illumination. Carefully, Nic maneuvered through the alley, avoiding the numerous garbage cans that peppered the small space. Several cans were lying down, their contents spilled onto the ground. The rotting garbage created a pungent stench, causing Nic to crinkle her nose and wish she had a gas mask. Up ahead, she spied some large objects that she decided to check out, but first she removed her gun from her holster, and with it raised near her right ear, she approached as soundlessly as possible.

The sound of scampering claws could be heard with each step she made, making her sorry she didn't have her night goggles on so she could blow away the filthy creatures. Her thoughts turned to what she could have been doing tonight, and she cursed silently. *Now is not the time to lose focus*, she scolded herself. The two objects, which had been unidentifiable at the mouth of the alley, turned out to be cardboard boxes, both uninhabited. With a swift kick, she launched one into the brick wall at the back of the alley causing a flurry of scampering feet and screeching sounds to echo off the walls. An almost overwhelming desire to unleash a few rounds at the disgusting creatures that scurried away came over her. Gritting her teeth, she made her way back out of the alley and into the mildly brighter street.

"I'm definitely showering as soon as I get out of this hell hole." Sliding her gun back into her holster, she leaned over and brushed her pants off. When she straightened back up, she noticed a man crossing the street a few buildings away. He walked with a purposeful stride in the direction of the liquor store across the street, and he certainly matched the physical characteristics of one Leo Tolstrom. Following her instincts, Nic proceeded in the same direction.

LEO CASUALLY STROLLED around the liquor store to make sure it was empty, except for the night cashier, who barely even looked at him when he entered. A slow smile eased across his face as he checked the last aisle and found no one there. *This was going to be easy*, he thought. He picked up a bottle of Jack Daniel's, opened it, and slugged down some of the liquid before he reached the

front, where the cashier was busy reading a magazine. Leo slipped the gun from the pocket of his suit coat and shakily pointed it at the unsuspecting man behind the counter.

"You! Open the drawer now!" Leo shouted, grabbing the man's attention instantly, his eyes bulging from their sockets.

"Dios Mio! Do not shoot, por favor!"

"Get the drawer open and I won't!" Leo bellowed, then took another drink of the liquor.

The cashier grabbed the bills from the register and stuffed them into one of the brown bags that sat on the counter. His hands were shaking so bad that he dropped several bills on the floor.

"You're droppin' my money, asshole. Be fuckin' careful, will ya?" Leo waved the gun at the man, which only caused him to shake more.

AS NIC WAS about to enter the liquor store, she heard a man shout inside. Immediately, she drew her weapon and crouched out of view of the front windows. Call it instinct or call it experience, but when you were in this part of town and someone in a liquor store started shouting, it usually only meant one thing: a hold up.

She reached for her cell phone and then remembered she'd left it in the car. "Shit." Peering up over the windowsill, she spotted the man she had been following. He was standing in front of the counter, one hand wrapped around a pistol, the other wrapped around a bottle of liquor. Her eyes darted to the cashier, who looked like he might have a heart attack at any minute. Ducking back down, Nic contemplated her options. If she waited, the perp could wind up killing the cashier. If she barged in, she put both of them at risk. She heard the perp shout again, and without hesitation, her decision was made. Both hands firmly on her gun, she shouldered the door open and went inside.

THE TINY THREAD of patience that Leo had had when he entered the store was now gone. The cashier was screwing up the simple task of handing over the cash, and he had just about had it. He cocked his gun and leveled it at the man who was still fumbling with the bills, which were now scattered over the counter top. "I'm gonna count to three, and if you don't have all my money in that bag when I'm finished, I'm gonna blow your fuckin' head off."

The man nodded incessantly. "Okay, okay, I will hurry!"

"One..."

The man scooped up the bills as fast as he could.

"Two..."

"Dios mio!" Four bills were still on the floor, and he knew he couldn't get them in time.

Just as Leo started to mouth the third number, the front door flew open, and a dark figure bounded inside. The sudden entry completely disrupted Leo's concentration. He didn't know where to point his gun, and before he could make the decision, the figure was right next to him with a gun pressing against his left temple.

"Drop your weapon now or I'll kill you." The command was given in a cool and oddly relaxed tone, but Leo knew that the person meant every word. Leo did as instructed, and before he knew what hit him, the bottle of Jack Daniel's was crashing to the floor. A second after that he was face down on the same dirty floor with a knee stuck in his back.

He heard the jingle of handcuffs as his wrists were being bound.

"You're under arrest."

Leo was in shock when he heard the voice. A woman! A woman had just taken him down? His eyes almost fell from their sockets when he was hoisted up and found himself staring into the cool, blue eyes of the woman he and Sal tried to kill two nights ago. "Shit!" was all he said.

A feral grin spread across the detective's face when she realized her instincts were right on target. "Hello, Leo."

The cashier crawled out from behind the counter, tears of relief streaming down his bearded face. "Muchas gracias, senorita! Muchas gracias!"

BY TEN-THIRTY, Nic and Leo were at the precinct, having waited thirty minutes for a patrol car to come and process the attempted burglary. Nic had requested that Leo be brought from his second floor holding cell to one of the interrogation rooms. She sipped some of her coffee as she made her way there, accepting congratulations from officers whom she passed in the hallway.

The windowless interrogation room was at the far end of the hall. A two-way mirror offered an observation point from the adjacent room. Nic had asked Mike Flanners and Joe Trinotti to sit in there, just in case Leo tried to cry police brutality or anything like that. She checked the observation room and got the thumbs up sign from Mike and Joe before she entered Interrogation Five.

Leo was handcuffed to the table and didn't even bother looking up when he heard the door open. He knew his life was over, and at this point, he really didn't give a shit.

Nic strolled over to the chair opposite Leo and sat down, placing her almost empty coffee cup down on the table, along with a

folder holding Leo's extensive arrest history. "Well, Leo, it sure looks like you've kept yourself busy for the past twenty years."

Leo grunted but refused to look at her.

"Hmph. I see we aren't feeling very talkative this evening. That's a shame, really. 'Cause if I were you, I'd be spilling my guts right about now." Leaning back, she balanced the chair on its back legs and placed her own legs on the table.

Leo thought about what she said and wished he had eaten his gun instead of trying to rob that liquor store.

Nic waited. She could be patient in matters like these. The man was obviously tired and quite hungry. She figured he must have been hiding out since Saturday, and alleys didn't make the best accommodations.

"What do you want to know?" Leo mumbled at an almost inaudible pitch, head bent and eyes staring glumly at the worn table.

"For starters, why don't you tell me why you and your friend tried to kill me the other night?"

Leo sat in silence, deciding what he wanted to do. The amazon bitch would wait it out. He could tell that from the smug look on her face. Finally, he looked up and asked, "If I talk, can I have a cigarette and something to eat?"

"I think that could be arranged," Nic replied, shifting her eyes to the mirror and nodding her head. Mike instantly exited the observation room to fill the request.

"Okay. Well, Sal and I were brought up here to do a job for someone, and we kinda got forced into knockin' off you and your partner."

"Forced by whom?" Nic asked, her probing eyes boring into his beady ones.

"Are you kidding? If I tell you that, I'll be dead for sure."

"Now, Leo, who could possibly scare you so much that you think they could get to you inside here?" She was baiting him, and she hoped he fell for it.

The little man shook his head wildly. "I'm not fallin' for that. Let's just say it's someone I don't want to mess with."

Mike arrived with a plate of food from the all-night diner down the street and a pack of cigarettes. He deposited everything on the table directly in front of Nic, giving her a wink and closing the door behind him when he left. Leo's ravenous eyes tracked the food the second he smelled it at the door, and they never left it. Nic smiled, knowing this would be her leverage point.

CARLY WAS FINALLY nestled into the bed in the spare room at Sue and Liz's place. After returning there from the hospital, the

trio had enjoyed a cup of soothing chamomile tea while they discussed some of the day's events at the kitchen table. Harley had been waiting for them at the door and immediately wound herself around Carly's legs. This had gotten her picked up and carried into the kitchen, where she was treated to a bowl of milk.

Now she idly stared at the picture of a pastel-colored seascape that hung on the pale pink wall across from her. The nightlight was on and a barely started book was lying face down across her lap. She had made several attempts at reading the pages, but each time her mind drifted back to Nic and the kiss they had shared in her car. Leaning her head back against the headboard, she closed her eyes and transported herself back to that moment. *A moment of utter splendor*, she mused. *Where are you right now, Nic? Are you safe? Are you thinking of me, too?* These questions and a thousand more swirled around in her head until she surrendered her exhausted body to the sleep that it craved.

"THAT'S WHAT I said," Leo stated firmly.

"You're telling me that Victor Marcone, of Marcone Imports, ordered the hit on me and Jimmy?" Nic asked incredulously.

"Are you deaf?" Leo asked, receiving a biting glare from the woman across the table from him.

"For what reason?"

"It's personal." Leo munched on the burger and fries that sat before him. "You two are responsible for his nephew being in the hospital."

Nic's eyes widened at the information. "Gato is his nephew? We checked into his background. There was no connection to Marcone in anything we found."

Leo grinned. "I don't know the whole story, Sal did. But they're related, I know that. And that's why we were supposed to take you out. Marcone wouldn't stand for anyone hurting a member of his family."

"Son of a bitch," Nic declared flatly. It all made sense now. Now it was clear why Gato had never done time. Marcone was the man she and Jimmy had been after for the past few months. One of the wealthiest men in the city was a drug smuggler disguised as an upstanding businessman. She laughed at the thought. *Wait 'til Jimmy hears about this!* She wished she could tell him right now, but looking at her watch, she knew she'd have to wait till morning.

Leo puffed out a swirling cloud of white smoke. "You know, if you want to make a deal, I have some other info that may be of use to you."

A slender dark eyebrow rose in question as a salacious grin made its way across the detective's face.

NOT QUITE AN hour later, Nic had garnered more information from Leo than she could have imagined. Back at her desk, she typed up everything he had told her. Sal and Leo had been hired to retrieve some sensitive information from one of Marcone's former employees, then they were to eliminate that person and dispose of the body. Apparently that employee was blackmailing Marcone, and Marcone didn't want anyone easily traceable to him involved in the murder. If what Leo said was true, they would need to get a warrant in the morning to retrieve that information. With that in hand and with Leo's testimony, they would be able to take Victor Marcone down. She printed a copy and left it on the lieutenant's desk with a note that she'd call first thing in the morning. Tomorrow would be the day of reckoning that she'd been longing for, and with that thought firmly in her mind, she strolled out of the station in search of a hot shower and a warm bed.

THE PHONE RANG, awakening the room's silent occupant. A weary, blue eye blinked open and scanned the dim room for the source of the sound. Finding it, a hand clamped down on it and yanked it from its resting-place. "Yeah."

"Good morning, Ms. Stone. This is your requested wake-up call," the cheerful voice said. "Would you like anything from room service this morning?"

Nic grumbled a response then slammed the phone back into its cradle. The clock on the nightstand told her it was exactly 6:00 A.M. Reluctantly, she dragged her pillow over her head and sighed. She struggled to summon up the dream she had been reveling in prior to the phone call, but each attempt failed. She could only seem to retrieve fragments of the dream, in which Carly was a prominent participant. *Why is it so hard to get dreams back after you've woken up?* she wondered. Abandoning any further attempts to rekindle it, Nic pulled the covers off and stretched her long frame before dropping her feet to the floor and sitting upright. Padding over to the window, she parted the drapes and peered out into the darkness, pleased by the absence of the rain that had drenched the area the day before.

After rummaging through her bag and retrieving her toiletries, she stepped into the bathroom. Switching on the light, she reflexively squinted at the fluorescence that illuminated the small room. She grimaced at her reflection. Her hair was a tousled mess, and

she noticed a faint darkness under her eyes, evidence of the lack of restful sleep she had had in the past few days. "A hot shower will perk us back up," she said to her reflection. Reaching into the shower stall, she started the water running. Within seconds, steam engulfed the room, obscuring her image in the mirror. Satisfied the water was to her liking, she stripped out of her sleeping shirt and stepped inside.

Hot water cascaded down her lithe form, reviving her as she stood face first in the pulsating jets. She remained there for several seconds, allowing the steam to seep into her pores. She was actually looking forward to the day and could hardly wait to tell Jimmy it was Marcone who was behind everything. After washing her hair in a fragrant floral concoction, she scrubbed her body from head to toe then emerged completely refreshed and ready for some hot coffee to ignite her insides now that her outside had been taken care of.

She wrapped a heavy, pastel colored towel around herself and grabbed a second one to dry her hair with. With her palm, she wiped off a circular area on the mirror and gave herself the once-over. "See, I told you we'd feel better." She toweled off her hair then ran a comb through the long dark strands, giving them order once again. Winking at her reflection, she opened the bathroom door, the coolness of the outer room scattering goose bumps all over her exposed flesh.

A knock at the door indicated that room service had arrived. "Just a second," she called. Quickly, she pulled on a pair of black jeans and teal crew neck sweater then opened the door. A young man wearing a neatly pressed pair of slacks and a white jacket smiled as he entered the room while balancing a large circular tray on his right hand. He took a deep breath at the sight of the woman. She was tall and drop-dead gorgeous, with hair as black as coal and the most incredible blue eyes he'd ever seen.

"Good morning, ma'am. Shall I put this on the table?"

"Yes, please." Nic followed him into the room, leaving the door open. The familiar and welcome aroma of freshly brewed coffee hit her senses, igniting a dazzling smile. The man turned and handed her the bill, which she signed, adding a healthy tip, as well.

"Thank you." He blinked several times before he continued, "When you're finished, you can leave the tray in the hall. Have a good day." As he turned, he nearly walked right into the edge of the open door but managed to sidestep it at the last second. Nic stifled a chuckle and closed the door behind him. Returning to the table, she clicked the television on and began nibbling a crispy slice of bacon while she poured herself some of the rich, dark brew she'd been waiting for.

BY SEVEN O'CLOCK, Nic was on her way to the precinct. The sun was just beginning to peek through a cluster of clouds that dotted the horizon. The air was refreshingly crisp and still. Traffic, though initially mild, started to increase as she proceeded farther downtown, but it was still more tolerable than the mid-day traffic. While she was eating breakfast, she had decided to go talk to the lieutenant in person instead of calling him on the phone.

Her keen sense of smell detected the faintest whiff of Carly's perfume. Brilliant blue eyes darted to the unoccupied seat next to her, causing an involuntary sigh as the memory of last night's encounter skipped through her mind.

Parking the Xterra on the street, Nic activated the car alarm and strode into the station.

Several people, some of them civilians, were milling about the first floor. Three uniformed officers were busy escorting two hookers and one drunken man to the holding area. Both women were mouthing off at the officers, who simply ignored them. The desk sergeant looked up and waved at Nic, who waved back and pointed up the stairs. He knew what she was asking and shook his head, then pointed at his watch. Glancing at her own timepiece, she realized she'd gotten here sooner than she thought. Lieutenant Raimes arrived each day promptly at seven-thirty, and it was only seven-fifteen. Giving the desk sergeant the thumbs-up sign, she continued up to the second floor.

AT PRECISELY SEVEN-THIRTY, Lieutenant Raimes entered the station, retrieved his messages, and proceeded to his office. When he walked into the bullpen, he was surprised to find Stone at her desk having a conversation with one of the other detectives. He ambled over and interrupted, as was his prerogative. "Stone, what are you doing here? I approved your week off."

The detective looked up. "Yeah, I know, but something came up last night that I really need to talk to you about."

He furrowed his bushy brows. "All right, let's go."

Nic excused herself and followed her lieutenant into his office. He dropped his briefcase on one of the empty chairs while Nic sat down in the other. "Am I gonna need a cup of coffee for this?" he asked.

"No. I've got good news. You really shouldn't worry so much, boss."

"Who says I'm worried?" he grunted.

"I think that scowl on your face is an indication," Nic remarked, smiling sweetly.

"Hmph." Sitting down behind his desk, he laced his hands

together and placed them on the cluttered surface. "Well, spill it."

Nic cleared her throat. "Last night, I arrested the other man who was involved in the attempted murder of me and my partner."

The lieutenant's eyes widened then quickly narrowed. "You weren't on duty last night, just like you're not on duty right now. So tell me how in the hell you found this person when the two detectives that are working this case couldn't?" He ran his palm over his face in frustration then added, "And what the hell is his name, anyway?"

"His name is Leo Tolstrom, and I managed to get a lead the other night, which helped me locate him."

"Dammit, Stone!" He slammed his fist down hard on his desk. "You're doing it again. Where the hell did you get a lead from?" As quickly as he asked it, he held up his hand to stop her. "No. Never mind. I don't want to know. But dammit, Stone, you should have let Sanders and Mahoney in on it."

"Lou, I wanted to follow up on this myself. After all, they did try to kill me." She hadn't been in a sharing mood that night anyway. And she was determined to get to the bottom of this herself. The last thing she needed was those two getting under foot. She began playing with her thumb ring, sliding it on, then off her finger. She knew she wasn't a team player, at least not when it came to some people. That was a realization that had come to her many years before when she alone hunted down the people responsible for taking her parents away from her and her sister. An image of Jimmy flashed into her mind. They were a good team.

"So, what's this guy's story? Who hired him?"

"You're not gonna believe this, Lou," Nic stated, shaking her head slowly. Then looking him straight in the eye, she said, "Victor Marcone."

The lieutenant leaned back in his chair, a slow smile seeping onto his wrinkled face. "That's very funny, Stone."

"I'm dead serious, Lieutenant."

He digested her statement, still not quite able to believe that one of the most prominent figures in Larson was behind this ugly mess. Nic filled the lieutenant in on the entire story. At times, his eyes went wide with surprise, especially the parts where she explained Marcone's connection to Louis Gato and that he was a major player in the waterfront drug trade. The lieutenant agreed that they needed to get a warrant to obtain the evidence against Marcone and then he added something she knew was inevitable.

"We have to bring Sanders and Mahoney in on this."

"I know," she acknowledged.

Raimes walked to his door and peered out, spotting Paul Mahoney at his desk but no Sanders. "Mahoney, get in here."

Paul Mahoney entered the office. A look of surprise flashing onto his face at the sight of Stone sitting in front of the lieutenant's desk. "What is it, Lou?"

"Where's your partner?"

"He called in. He's going to be a little late."

"Well, sit down. Stone has uncovered something big. When Sanders gets here, we'll fill him in." They brought Mahoney up to speed and decided that he and Sanders would get the search warrant this morning, then the three of them would work together in gathering the evidence. Mahoney wasn't pleased with the fact that Nic hadn't let them in on anything that she'd found, but he wasn't as upset as he knew his partner would be. In order to avoid any unpleasantness at the station when Sanders arrived, Nic excused herself, explaining the appointment she had with the alarm system people. After agreeing to report back to the station in an hour, she headed to her house, pleased that in a few short hours they would have Marcone behind bars.

CARLY SOLEMNLY MUNCED on a cream cheese covered bagel across the table from Liz, who was doing the same. Sue, who had already left for work, had hastily slugged down a cup of coffee and had taken her bagel with her since she had an early court appearance.

"You seem a little quiet this morning, Carly. Is everything okay?" Liz asked.

"Yeah, everything is fine." She took a sip of her coffee. "I didn't sleep too well last night. I guess I'm just tired."

"Were you worried about Jimmy? He looked pretty good to me, considering."

Carly hesitated with her answer. She hadn't told Liz and Sue about what happened at the restaurant, and she didn't really want to, at least not yet. "I was a little concerned about Nic."

Liz finished her coffee and started to pour herself another. Peeking into Carly's cup, she added some of the hot liquid to hers as well before she sat back down. "Why?"

"She mentioned she'd gotten a lead on the guy that got away the other night, and she was going to check it out."

"Nic's a big girl, Carly. Believe me, she can take care of herself."

"Oh, I know that. Hell, I've seen proof of that. But that doesn't stop me from worrying."

Liz suspected there was more, but Carly left it at that. The red-head had an impulsive desire to pursue the matter, but the haggard look on Carly's face told her that wasn't a good idea. Maybe she

would find out more later. The pair finished their coffee, tidied up the kitchen, and returned to their rooms to get ready for the day.

NIC LISTENED TO some soft jazz as she pulled into the Fairfield Hills development. Bundles of raked leaves rested along the curb on both sides of the street waiting for the sanitation workers to retrieve them. The street was empty except for the occasional dog walker or jogger. Several homes were in the process of being decorated for Christmas. She liked this neighborhood. Her father had been one of the first people to purchase a home here nearly eighteen years ago. She could still hear him telling her mother "This will be a great place for the girls." That seemed like a lifetime ago. Jessie was only seven then, and Nic was just heading into her tumultuous teen years. In some ways, she wished she could go back to that time. A time of blissful ignorance. Her most significant concern in those days had been basketball, and it all had gone by too quickly, she reflected.

Turning onto Kingston Drive, she noticed a white van was already parked in front of her house. As she approached, she saw the red letters, QHS, emblazoned on the side of the van. Suddenly, she realized that she more than likely didn't need an alarm system if they were successful in arresting Marcone later today. But if Carly would be staying with her, she'd feel better leaving her alone if there was an alarm system. Having settled that, she stopped the car at the bottom of the long driveway and greeted the two men who exited the van. Both men wore white jumpsuits with QHS across the back. Both men were of equal height; the driver had dark hair with a tinge of gray dusting his neatly groomed beard. The other man was younger with long blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail.

"Ms. Stone?" the dark-haired man questioned.

"Yes, pleased to meet you," she answered, extending her hand, which he grabbed and shook firmly.

"We're here to do your alarm system installation." He glanced at the clipboard he was holding. "Looks like you're getting the full package. It's probably going to take all day to get this done. Will that be a problem?"

Nic shook her head. "Not at all. Just lock up everything when you're done."

"You're not going to be here all day?"

"No. I'm afraid I have a pretty full schedule for today. I just came to let you in and answer any questions you might have."

"Oh, I see. Well, we will need to go over the placement of some of the system components, and we'll need to demonstrate how to

activate and deactivate the system." He paused. "We also need you to pick out the code you want to use."

"Can we do that now?"

"Sure." He instructed his partner to pull the van in the back then start unpacking it while he and Nic did a walkthrough, starting with the front door.

NIC WAS BACKING the Xterra out of the driveway when she saw the familiar Carpets R Us van drive past. Joey Santalone got out and began walking toward her, waving his hand. The man was one of the friendliest people she had ever met. "Nicole, glad I caught you."

Nic hung her left arm out of the window. "What are you doing here? I thought you couldn't get to this until later today at the earliest?"

"Two people postponed their installations until next week, so suddenly I was free. And as luck would have it, I had your carpet in stock." The stocky man gave her a toothy grin.

"Great. I've got two other guys already inside installing my alarm system."

"Not a problem. My assistant will be meeting me here in few minutes. I called the station looking for you and they told me you were here, so I jumped in the van and came right over."

"Thanks a lot, Joey. The sooner I get the room back to normal, the better."

"Glad to do it. You have a good day, Nic."

"You too, Joey," Nic said as she backed into the street. Picking up her cell phone, she punched in the number for the hospital and requested Jimmy's room when the receptionist answered. A familiar, cheerful voice said, "Hello?"

"Hi, Carly. It's Nic."

A sigh on the other end. "It's good to hear your voice. Are you on your way here?"

"I'm afraid not. Last night turned about to be pretty successful, so I have a few things I need to take care of this morning."

The tone changed to one of disappointment. "Oh. Well, I'm glad everything worked out last night." Carly couldn't wait to see Nic. She wanted to talk some more about what they had revealed to each other last night.

"Me, too. How's Jimmy feeling today?"

Carly glanced at her brother, who was chowing down his breakfast as if he hadn't eaten in days. "He's doing pretty good."

"Listen, I should be over there around noon. I'd like to fill Jimmy in on what's been going on. Would you be interested in

grabbing a bite?"

This put a widening smile on Carly's face. Lowering her voice, she replied, "If it's a bite of you, you're on." She peered over her left shoulder and found a pair of brown eyes, brows lifted, staring back at her. A warm sensation began to creep up her neck.

Nic swerved the car. "Carly!"

"Sorry. Just wishful thinking. Yes, I'd love to grab some lunch with you."

"Okay. You can't be saying stuff like that when I'm driving."

"Why not?"

"Well, it sort of distracted me, and I almost ran down a sanitation worker." A burst of giggles resounded on the other end.

"I'll be more careful in the future. See you at noon, Nic."

"Yeah, see you then."

THE THREE OF them sat in the car, not saying a word to one another as Sanders drove them to McClellan Avenue in the north-western part of the city. When Nic had returned to the station, she'd received only an ugly glare from Sanders and not much more from Mahoney. She had expected as much. After all, she had stepped into their case and made more progress than either one of them had made. Now, Nic was in the backseat idly glancing out of the window at the passing apartment houses, some new, some old, separated by a few Laundromats and the occasional pharmacy. This morning the sky was clear; the clouds that had been out a few short hours ago had since disappeared. She marveled at the gradient blue that deepened as she looked further up into the sky. It was an inviting color. She'd always wanted to soar up there. For a brief time, she had considered the Air Force, but her father had always wanted her to pursue a career in law. That memory put a frown on her face. She wondered if he'd be proud of the choices she made.

"Stone," Sanders barked in a gruff tone.

"Yeah?"

"I'm surprised that you didn't kill that Tolstrom guy last night when you arrested him. He is the man responsible for putting your partner in the hospital." Nic didn't respond. She just continued staring out of the side window. "You must be getting softer, now that you're approaching...what is it gonna be? Thirty?"

Nic knew where Sanders was going with this, but she wasn't going to play this game with him today. "You know, as well as I do, that he was just a means to an end. I want the guy who ordered the hit. The one who thinks he's above the law. Killing Tolstrom wouldn't have helped me in that pursuit."

Sanders looked at his partner and scowled. He wanted to go at

it with her in the worst way because he hated how smug and self-assured she was. Deep down, he knew it was envy that fueled his hatred, but he seldom allowed that realization into his conscious thoughts.

When they reached McClellan, Sanders parked the unmarked vehicle at the top of the block. The apartment building they were interested in was a few doors down. After they all checked their weapons, they emerged from the car and proceeded to the building.

A black sedan was parked across the street, and the two occupants immediately noticed the three people walking toward the apartment building. By the time they were inside the building, the sedan had pulled away.

The apartment where Hector Nuñez lived was on the second floor. The building itself was a fairly new, three-story structure that contained approximately eighteen apartments. The trio entered the building and donned their royal blue Larson Police Department windbreakers before ascending the stairs. After strategically positioning themselves around the door, Sanders announced their arrival with a series of loud knocks.

"Qué?" a man shouted inside.

"This is the police. Open the door now!"

The sound of shuffling feet, closing of drawers, and the flushing of a toilet.

"I said open this door, now!"

The clank of the bolts being released sounded then a squeak as the door slowly opened. A portly Hispanic man peeked out from behind the crack. "What can I do for you, officers?"

Sanders thrust his badge and the warrant up directly in the shorter man's line of sight. "We have a warrant to search these premises." The man's widening eyes ran down the paper. After several seconds, he stepped aside, allowing them to enter. Sanders went first, followed by his partner. Sanders proceeded directly to one of the rear rooms while Mahoney went straight for the kitchen. Stone triple-checked the hallway then stood in the doorway with her back against the doorjamb, which gave her a view of the hallway as well as the inside of the apartment.

"What is it you are looking for?" the Hispanic man asked tentatively.

"Let's not play games, Mr. Nuñez. I think you know exactly what we are looking for," Nic responded, eyes narrowing on the man.

"No, no, I do not." He shuffled his slippered feet as he thrust his hands into the pockets of his red sweatpants.

"Mr. Nuñez...may I call you Hector?"

"Si."

"Hector, we know that you used to work for Victor Marcone." The man's dark eyes shot to the worn carpeting below them. "And a reliable source has told us that you, Hector, have been a bad boy." A delicious smile slid onto her exquisitely chiseled face.

Mahoney stepped out of the kitchen. "Nothing in there. I'm moving to the bathroom."

Hector raised his sullen eyes and was caught by the detective's piercing blue ones. "Surely, you must realize what considerable danger you have put yourself in," Nic stated.

"D...d...an...ger?"

A door opened at the other end of the hallway, and Nic watched a frail old woman ease her way from the apartment to the stairwell then disappear. Nic returned her attention to the man standing a few feet from her. "Yes, danger. Extortion is a serious endeavor with high risks attached to it."

"You are loco! I did not...how did you say? Extortion anyone?"

Calmly, the detective opened a fresh pack of gum and slid a piece out. She proceeded to unwrap the piece then pop it into her mouth. Rolling up the tiny foil liner, she rifled it at Hector, catching him in the cheek. The man flinched. "I said I didn't want to play games, didn't I, Hector?"

"You will not find anything here because there is nothing to find." He looked at her with determined eyes.

Nic pondered her next move. For a fleeting second, she pondered the possibility that Tolstrom had lied about the whole thing to save his skin, but too many of the pieces fit. This man, though he didn't look it, was smart enough to stay alive this long and against a man like Marcone. *He's obviously got the stuff well hidden, and he's probably got a trump card as well, but what is it?*

Sanders emerged from the back hallway, shaking his head. "Nothing."

Nic looked at Sanders and smiled. She stepped into the room completely and closed the door behind her. Hector backed up a few steps until his knees were against the front of the sofa. He watched the tall woman approach like a stalking cat. A long arm reached out and a finger jabbed him in the chest causing him to lose his balance and fall backward onto the soft cushions of the sofa.

"Now you listen to me, Hector. I don't want any more mierda! Now, you're going to tell us what room we need to look in, comprende?" The man looked up at her, his hands now out of his pockets and visibly shaking. He looked at the other detective, who just leaned against the door where the woman, who now loomed over him, had previously been standing. The third detective entered the living room and looked at his partners in turn.

"What's going on?" Mahoney asked.

Nic never lifted her gaze from Hector. "Hector here is going to tell us what room we should concentrate on."

Mahoney flopped into a ragged armchair then plopped his feet on the coffee table that separated the chair and the sofa. "Sounds good to me. I'm tired of looking through all his crap."

"You see, Hector. You will make us all happy if you just tell us what we want to know."

"What, do you think you're going beat it out of me?"

Nic continued her gum chewing, enjoying the spicy tang of the cinnamon. "Accidents happen every day. The home is a particularly *dangerous place*. People get cut with kitchen utensils, slip in showers, electrocute themselves with faulty wiring..."

The man's hands started to shake so badly he had to place them under his weighty legs to keep them still. Nic wondered why Marcone hadn't simply had some muscle come and put pressure on him. The man certainly didn't look capable of withstanding any, yet he was ballsy enough to blackmail Marcone.

Glancing over her right shoulder at Mahoney, Nic said, "Paul, go grab a knife from the kitchen." Mahoney dropped his size twelve feet to the floor with a thud.

"Okay, okay," Hector began babbling. "Look in the bedroom!"

Sanders sneered at the man. "I've all ready done that, mi amigo! There was nothing there."

"I'm telling you, that's the room to look in." He waved a pointed finger in the direction of the room.

"Keep an eye on him, I'll take a look," Nic said.

"What's a matter, Stone? Don't think I'm capable?"

"Listen, Sanders, what I think about you is not something we're going to discuss right now." Nic continued walking toward the bedroom, leaving a grumbling Sanders in her wake. *Besides, I know you're not capable*, Nic thought.

The bedroom was smaller than she imagined it would be, and it was an utter mess, thanks in no small part to Sanders's searching techniques. Pictures were hanging in a haphazard pattern on two of the walls. Upright dresser drawers were lying with their scattered contents on the unmade bed. The room desperately needed a coat of paint. Hell, the whole apartment did. Obviously, Hector didn't like a tidy place. *He might not even clean this up after we leave*, she thought.

Nic donned her rubber gloves then began sifting through the pile on the bed.

Socks, underwear, T-shirts, a half-empty carton of Marlboros but nothing more.

She turned to the dresser with the cracked mirror. "Seven years bad luck, Hector. Not good, not good at all." Carefully, she

searched the dresser from front to back and top to bottom but found nothing.

The small nightstand was next. The single drawer was open and contained nothing more than a lighter, some playing cards, a Snickers candy bar that looked like it had been there a while, some loose change, a few rubbers, and an open pocket knife. Some brown fragments on the knife caught the detective's attention. Picking it up, she examined it more closely. Tiny wood fibers were stuck to the smooth edge of the knife near the tip, as if it had been used to pry something open. Nic scanned the room, looking for a possible match.

The floor was covered with a wall-to-wall deep brown carpet that was worn through in a couple of spots. Squatting down, she stuck her finger through a small hole and pulled at the carpeting to get a look at the floor below. Solid hardwood. Scanning the perimeter for any noticeable track marks, she spied a faint indentation by the corner of the bed, as if it had been moved before, which was not necessarily odd.

Lifting the back of her jacket, she slid out the seven-inch tactical knife she wore in a harness at the small of her back. The double-edged blade was razor sharp and had saved her life on more than one occasion. Grunting, she slid the double bed over a few inches and took a careful look at the floor. Taking the tip of the knife, she parted the fibers and was pleased at what she found. The carpet had been cut and pieced back into place. Using the knife, she pulled up a round piece approximately one foot in diameter, exposing the hardwood floor beneath it. After retrieving Hector's knife with her still gloved hand, she pried up a section of the floorboard. After all, why should she damage her blade? Working the knife around the edges, she pried it free, the board squeaking in complaint and revealing a manila envelope that had been stuffed into the small space.

Nic opened the envelope and perused the documents inside. The evidence was certainly incriminating. Photographs of Marcone dining with known drug dealers, delivery schedules at warehouses owned by Marcone, more photos of wooden crates with false bottoms for drug transport, and the Marcone Imports logo prominently stamped on the side. A mile-wide grin slid across her face as she walked into the outer room and thanked Hector Nuñez for his diligent efforts.

Chapter Eleven

IT WAS ELEVEN-thirty by the time the three detectives returned to the precinct with Hector Nuñez in tow. They were going to need him as a witness, and it had been fairly easy to convince him that he wouldn't be safe in his apartment. Once they had conducted a formal interview with Nuñez and placed him in protective custody, they filled Lieutenant Raimos in on the morning's events. He practically drooled when they showed him what they had found at the apartment. Nabbing someone this big didn't happen that often in the lives of many cops, so when it did, you tried to relish every second. Sanders was miffed that Nic had actually found the evidence, especially when he had searched the room first. As far as he was concerned, it was just one more reason to not like her. Sanders and Mahoney went to get the warrant for Marcone's arrest while Stone checked everything into the evidence room.

Nic stopped by her desk to check her messages before heading over to the hospital. Nothing. This was a good sign. It must mean both the carpeting and alarm system installations were going well. After informing the desk sergeant of her destination, she retrieved her car from the parking lot and pulled onto Maple Avenue. She was looking forward to telling Jimmy all about what they had discovered this morning and what they were about to do this afternoon. He probably would be bummed that he couldn't participate, but at least he'd be happy they were closing down a major drug operation in the city. She was also looking forward to seeing Carly and having some lunch with her. She had thought about Carly on and off all morning, and she wanted to continue to explore this new territory that they had stepped into last night. Nic hadn't felt this way about anyone before. She had come close a couple of times, once in high school and another time in college, but neither time had it felt as strong as it did now.

NIC RODE THE elevator with two doctors, both dressed in green scrubs and chatting about a new surgical technique, and one middle-aged nurse who held in her hand a glass jar containing some sort of bodily fluid Nic was sure she didn't want to know about. Finally, the doors opened onto Jimmy's floor, and she escaped. She hated hospitals, and she'd spent more time in them in the last three days than she cared to remember.

The officer on duty in front of Jimmy's room was leafing through the morning paper, but he stood up the minute he saw her approaching. "Good afternoon, Detective Stone."

"Hi, Stevens. How's everything been?" The cop was a rookie. He wasn't quite as tall as she was, and she figured he'd probably have brown hair if he didn't have a buzz cut.

"Quiet," he replied.

"Good," Nic said as she pushed the door open. Jimmy's eyes were closed, and oddly enough, Carly wasn't in the room. The bathroom door was open, so she wasn't in there. Nic walked further inside, and she felt the strangest sensation. Like something was wrong. Then she spotted it. An envelope with "STONE" scrawled on it in bold red letters. She gulped and looked more closely at her partner. Without hesitation, she rushed to his bedside. No pulse. "Fuck!" Reaching over, she pulled the IV from his arm, blood spurting all over the white blanket that covered his bed. "Stevens!" Instantly, she cleared his throat, plugged his nose, and began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

The young officer heard the scream and caught himself as he nearly fell off his chair. He burst into the room. "What's wrong?" he asked in a frantic voice. Then he realized he didn't have to ask. The detective was leaning over her prone partner puffing mouthfuls of air into his lungs.

In between breaths, she yelled, "Get help!"

The officer turned on his heels and flew down the hall toward the nurses' station. Within seconds, a team of nurses and doctors descended on the room, pushing Nic aside in an effort to get to the patient. Dazed, Nic backed away and watched helplessly as they attended to him.

"Paddles!"

"Clear!"

"Pulse?"

The words reverberated inside her head. She felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned. It was Stevens. Then it happened. Nic snapped. Before Stevens knew what hit him, she had him pinned up against the wall, his feet dangling a few inches from the floor. His eyes were wide with fear. "What the fuck happened? Who did you let in here?"

Her voice was so loud the crash team working on her partner turned around to see what was going on. One of the two attending physicians yelled, "Get her out of here!" The nurses looked at each other; clearly no one was willing to get between the two police officers.

Even in her fury, Nic realized she was distracting the team from their work. Without another word, she dropped Stevens to the floor and dragged him by the collar out of the room. Out in the hallway, she checked the adjoining room and, finding it empty, dragged Stevens inside. The young officer was speechless as he stumbled along behind her. She released his collar. Hesitantly, he looked up into cobalt eyes that were seeping with anger.

"I asked you a question?"

"The only people that have been in his room this morning were his sister, two nurses, and a doctor. I swear!"

Carly! Suddenly, it dawned on her. *Where was she?* "Where is his sister now?"

"I'm not sure. She walked out with the doctor about ten minutes before you arrived."

Somehow, Nic controlled the urge to pulverize the man who stood before her. "Go back in there. In front of one of the flower arrangements there is an envelope with my name on it. Bring it here."

"Yes ma'am." The officer ran to the door.

Nic sat on the bed and tried to calm her breathing. This wasn't happening. A second later, she was tearing open the envelope and reading the letter that was inside.

We have the girl. If you want to see her alive again bring the Nuñez documents and any and all copies to Pier 22 at 9:00 P.M. You will receive further instructions when you get there. COME ALONE. If we see any signs that you are not alone, we'll mail her back to you one piece at a time. Oh, and condolences about your partner, Detective Stone.

"Son of a bitch!" Nic yelled. The officer flinched when she looked at him. He expected the detective to pound him into oblivion. At least he was already at the hospital. "When Carly left with the doctor what direction did they go?"

"They walked toward the elevators."

She was afraid to ask the next question. "How did it look when you were in there?" She pointed to Jimmy's room.

"I don't know. I ran in, grabbed the letter, and ran back out."

Nic listened to the words. It had looked like such a promising

day and now this. A thought flashed into her mind. What about Gato? Maybe they could use him. "Stay outside Jimmy's room. I'll be back in a few minutes." She couldn't deal with the possibility that Jimmy might be gone, so she stalked out of the room and headed for Gato's floor.

As Nic approached Room 505, she noted with some concern that there was no officer stationed in the hallway. Pushing the door open, she interrupted an orderly who was busy stripping the bed. "Where's the guy who was in here?" she asked from the doorway.

Without turning the orderly answered, "Died less than an hour ago."

Nic cursed as she let the door close behind her.

WHAT HAD STARTED out as a glorious day had turned, in the blink of an eye, into a nightmare. The only good thing that had happened in the past two hours was that Jimmy had been saved, in part by Nic's quick actions. He was stable but had not resumed consciousness. Nic had phoned the lieutenant from the hospital with the bad news. They had decided that they would keep it quiet that Jimmy was still alive. Obviously Marcone had someone parading around as a doctor. Stevens had provided a sketch artist with a description of the "doctor," which they circulated throughout the hospital. Extra guards had been assigned to the hospital and a floor-by-floor search was conducted. Two nurses and a man visiting his ailing father had seen the pair get on the elevator, but no one saw them get off. After heading up the search, Nic left both her cell phone and pager numbers with the nurses' station before she returned to the precinct.

Now the lieutenant, Sanders, Mahoney, and she sat in one of the interrogation rooms and tried to sort out their options.

"I just don't get it. How did he find out we had the stuff?" Mahoney asked.

"Who knows. Maybe he had someone watching Nuñez, in case the guy decided to book," Sanders offered.

"Either way, it doesn't matter," Stone added. "We need to figure out how we're going to handle this."

"Stone is right. Maybe we need to get HN involved," the lieutenant suggested.

"No! That'll get her killed for sure." Nic didn't even want Hostage Negotiations to get a whiff of this. "I'm gonna have to go in alone, just like they demanded." Mahoney's eyes shot from his partner's smug expression to Nic's serious one to the lieutenant's incredulous one.

"That's a death warrant, and you know it," Lieutenant Raimés

stated firmly. He removed his tie and loosened the collar of his white shirt.

"I'm serious, Lieutenant. I'm not jeopardizing Carly's life."

"Well, going in alone could get you both killed!"

"I know someone who might be able to give us the edge we need. He's with the Bureau in Washington. Can I give him a call?"

"Hmph," Sanders grunted. "It figures you'd have a friend in the Bureau."

Nic wasn't going to take any more of Sanders's shit. She flew over the table and was on top of him in an instant. Sanders's eyes were like saucers, big and round, as he felt himself helplessly falling backward. Raimes and Mahoney didn't even react for a second, stunned by the cat-like pounce of the detective.

"Listen, you son of a bitch, I've had all I'm gonna take from you!" She was inches from his face, which was turning a brilliant shade of red. Curling her right hand into a fist, she cocked her arm and was ready to deliver the blow when a hand clamped onto her wrist.

"All right, break it up!" Raimes ordered. Mahoney stood next to the lieutenant, seemingly unsure if he even wanted to help his pain-in-the-ass partner.

Nic looked up at the lieutenant then back at the panicked detective she had pinned to the floor with her knee. "The next time you're not going to get off so easy," she said as she stood up.

Raimes wiped his brow with a handkerchief he extracted from his rear pocket. "Sanders, you better learn to keep your trap shut, or the next time I'm not going to stop her." Nic, Mahoney, and the lieutenant retook their seats, none of them offering any assistance to the still prone man.

"When can you contact your friend?" Raimes asked.

"I'll call him right now. Be back in a second." Nic stepped from the room while Sanders dusted himself off and righted his chair.

AT HER DESK, Nic dialed the number and waited. Picking up a pencil, she tapped it mindlessly while she listened to the ringing on the other end. God, it had been almost two years since she'd seen Bill Patterson. He had returned to Larson for a brief visit after he received his requested transfer from the Boston office to the one in DC. They had gotten together for a round of golf followed by dinner. He had looked great, which hadn't surprised her at all. Bill had wanted to be in the FBI since he was twelve years old, and it certainly agreed with him. He was the first friend she had made when her family moved to Fairfield Hills and that friendship had sustained her through some difficult times. The two of them were

practically inseparable during summer vacations. Nic remembered her mother saying, "You two will be quite a handsome couple some day," anticipating that they would one day marry. Bill and Nic knew that would never be the case. They were best friends, for sure, but there had never been any physical attraction to one another.

"FBI, Patterson," a familiar boisterous voice said.

"Hi, Bill, it's Nicole Stone."

"Nic? Wow! How the hell are you?"

Nic didn't answer at first. She hated bothering Bill with this problem, but she didn't have any other options. "To tell you the truth, Bill, I've been better."

"What's the matter? Is it Jessie?"

"No, Jessie is fine. But I need your help, and I need it fast."

Nic explained the entire, ugly situation to Bill, who responded with a series of "I see," "Not a problem," "Glad to help," and "It'll be okay." She actually felt a little relieved talking to him. If she had anyone backing her up in this kind situation, she would want it to be Jimmy or Bill, and Jimmy wasn't available. They hung up with the understanding that Nic would pick Bill up at the airport in two hours. Till then, he outlined a rough plan of attack that she would go over with the others when she returned to the interrogation room.

CARLY OPENED HER eyes, but her vision was blurry, and she felt a bit dazed. She was lying on her back on something soft. She tried to focus on the ceiling above her. It was high and white. After blinking several times, she managed to clear her vision. *Where am I?* It didn't look familiar to her at all. She closed her eyes and tried desperately to remember what had transpired earlier.

She was at the hospital. Jimmy had gotten his lunch, and she was waiting for Nic. Yes. She was going to have lunch with Nic. Then this doctor came into the room and said he needed to speak with her. It wasn't Dr. Austin, but he said that Dr. Austin's office was where they were going. She had followed him to the elevator. They needed to show her some of Jimmy's x-rays, but that was all she could remember. She drew a blank after getting on the elevator.

Opening her eyes again, she looked down and was pleased to find she was still dressed in the blue jeans and lavender sweater she had put on that morning. Turning her head, she looked around the room. This definitely wasn't Nic's house. The room was huge. It was at least twice the size of Nic's bedroom and elaborately furnished. A massive oak dresser sat along the wall to her right. Two more matching pieces, a chest of drawers and a lingerie chest, were

situated on the opposite wall. A beautifully carved armoire was at the foot of the bed, which was covered with a paisley spread colored in rich maroons and deep greens. The beige walls had to be at least twelve feet high. She raised herself up on her elbows to get a better look around, but a surge of dizziness forced her to put her head back down. *What the hell is wrong with me? And where the hell am I? And where is Nic?*

NIC SAT IN one of the plastic connected chairs at Gate 6 and stared at her silver thumb ring, utterly lost in thought. Departing and arriving passengers bustled through the airport, but Nic paid little attention to them. Carly was all she could think about. She prayed that Carly was okay. If Marcone did anything to her, she knew that she'd mentally lose it and what happened after that would be anybody's guess. The stresses of the past three days had been enough, but this...this was going to put her over the top. She had called Liz before she came to the airport and informed her of the awful circumstances. Liz was understandably shocked. But Liz was her usual positive self, and she told Nic that she had complete confidence in the fact that Nic would save Carly. For the first time in her life, Nic felt like she had a weakness and that worried her.

Occasionally, she glanced up at the people who were passing by. If she were a people watcher, she figured this had to be the best place in the world to see a wide range of them. Everyone from the very old to college age kids paraded by in a constant wave of traffic. Out of the crowd, a recognizable face was headed straight for her with a beaming grin, and she rose to greet it. Bill Patterson dropped his carry-on bag and bear-hugged her right in the middle of the aisle. Nic struggled to breathe as she returned the big man's affection.

"Niki, it is so good to see you!"

"You, too, Bill."

Releasing her, he stepped back to get a better look at his friend. "By God, Nic! I wouldn't have thought it was possible for you to get more beautiful, but I can see I was wrong."

Even in her sullen mood, Bill managed to get a smile from her. "Bill, how is it that such a sweet talker as yourself is still single?"

"Many have tried, Niki, many have tried." He picked up his bag and placed a solid arm around her shoulders as they started walking. "I brought everything we're gonna need, and a couple of extras I thought might come in handy." She gave him a wry look, and he winked at her in return. "Nic, I know you're worried about your partner's sister, but we'll get her back."

Before they reached the escalators, Nic stopped. "Bill, there's

something I didn't tell you on the phone."

Her friend removed his arm from her shoulders and looked at her. "What?"

"Carly is more than my partner's sister." She hesitated then looked up into the taller man's eyes. "I think I'm falling in love with her."

"You, Nicole Stone? You're actually falling in love with someone?"

She swatted his bicep with the back of her hand. "Yeah, smart ass, I am." Bill hadn't changed much. He was still three inches taller than she was and built like a linebacker. The smile, the glimmer in the mischievous brown eyes, the infectious sense of humor, it was all still there. The Feds hadn't squashed it out of him and for that she was thankful.

"Well then, let's go save this young lady, because I want to meet the person who's captured my friend's heart."

BACK AT THE station, Nic introduced Bill to Lieutenant Raimes, Mahoney, and Sanders, as well as a few other detectives who were in the squad room when they arrived. They all convened in the lieutenant's office to go over the details of the plan Bill and Nic had come up with. Bill had brought several interesting pieces of equipment with him, which he now laid out on the lieutenant's desk.

"Since Marcone's men will undoubtedly be watching the pier, we need a way to keep track of Nic. That's what this little baby is for." He pointed to a tiny electronic component about the size of a penny. "We attach this to your belt, and we'll be able to monitor your movements within a ten-mile radius with this device." He pointed to a slim, silver notebook computer. "Now we also need to hear and see what is going on, and that's what these two things are for." He picked up a gold necklace with a large medallion hanging from it. "This will give us crystal clear audio transmissions while this ear piece will allow you, and only you, to hear us, so you know where we are at all times." Next, he picked up a pair of black eye glasses with clear, non-prescription lenses. "There are two miniature cameras inside these frames right here." He tapped the two corners. "Nic, when you have these on we'll be able to see everything you see." Nic nodded her head in understanding. "This is the latest in Kevlar vests. It's half the weight of the ones you currently use, which will allow you to have much more flexibility."

"Now, I'm going to need to train someone on how to use the various software packages that will work with these external devices. I'll be monitoring Nic through this unit until we get a fix

where she's going and how many men are involved." He scanned the room. Sanders and Mahoney were leaning against the wall, arms crossed. Nic was standing next to the table, eyeing the equipment with interest. The lieutenant was seated behind his desk. "Once we know that, I'm going to be backing Nic up. Lieutenant Raimes, are there any SWAT guys available?"

Sanders pushed himself off of the wall. "What do we need them for? We can handle this."

"Listen...Sanders was it?" The perpetually angry detective nodded. "We need at least two other guys to go in there with me, plus we need one monitoring the activity inside and another ready to take down anyone who might try to escape. That's a minimum configuration. Now, I'm not saying you and your partner are not qualified, but I've dealt with SWAT guys before, and they are best suited for this type of work."

"Patterson is right, Sanders, so settle down," the lieutenant stated. He picked up the phone and dialed, then waited. "This is Lieutenant Raimes. I need two of your guys for a special assignment tonight. Is anyone available?" He paused, listening to the person on the other end. "Great. Send them up here because we're going over the details right now." He hung up the phone and looked at Patterson. "All set. We'll have two of them at our disposal."

"Okay, then after we fill them in I suggest we all get a bite to eat, sort of get to know one another a little. After that I'll demonstrate the equipment to whoever is going to handle it, and we'll be ready to roll." Bill glanced at Nic who looked a little distracted as she fingered the equipment. "Nic, can I have a word with you outside?"

Nic looked up. "Sure, Bill." The pair stepped out of Raimes's office, getting inquisitive looks from the others.

"Why don't we grab a cup of coffee?" Bill asked, placing his hand on Nic's back and guiding her in the direction of the coffee area that he had spotted when he arrived.

"Okay," she replied half-heartedly.

Bill poured them both a cup of the thick black brew that was a mainstay in every police precinct. "Nic, I know this is a very tense situation, but you have to get focused."

Pale blue eyes regarded him. "I'll be fine."

Placing a gentle hand on her shoulder, he continued, "Nic, we'll get her back."

"You know, Bill, that's all I care about. As long as she's safe, that's all that matters to me."

"I know," he said as he watched the two SWAT guys enter the squad room. "Come on, let's go talk to these two, then get some chow."

THE ROOM WAS much darker now. Carly opened her eyes and could barely make out the ceiling fan that was hanging over the bed. She started to move when she realized she couldn't. Her legs were bound at the ankles and her hands were bound at the wrists. She heard the doorknob turning, and she rolled her head to the side to see who was coming into the room. A tall man entered and switched on the overhead light, temporarily blinding her.

"Who are you and what do you want with me?" Carly demanded with her eyes barely open.

"I don't really think you're in the position to ask these questions, do you?"

After her eyes adjusted to the brighter conditions, she could see the man she was talking to. He was well dressed in a dark suit and white shirt with a bold, red tie. The man had black hair and black, soulless eyes. She noticed a tinge of white around his temples, and he sported a thin line of hair along his jaw line. "I don't give a shit what you think! Why am I here?"

Victor Marcone studied the beautiful young woman. For someone in such a vulnerable position, she certainly was feisty. Frank said he had a hell of a time chloroforming her after she'd woken up early that afternoon. Victor looked at the torn curtains and broken vase on the floor. According to Frank, she had put up a hell of a fight. "You're here because I need you."

A million thoughts swirled through Carly's mind. "For what?"

"Why, to make sure that Detective Stone does exactly what I want."

Carly's face went pale. She felt lightheaded, but she struggled to remain alert. "Who are you? And what do you want with Nic?"

"I don't really want to spoil the surprise." He inspected his fingernails. "Besides, you'll know soon enough. We'll be leaving in an hour. Try to get some rest, will you?" Marcone left the light on as he exited the room. He could still hear her yelling when he made it to the other end of the hall.

NIC WAS STANDING in the locker room performing a last minute check. Black pants, black sweater, black boots. Perfect. She had already donned the Kevlar vest that Bill had brought with him. She secured the tracking device to her belt and threaded it through the belt loops, and she dropped the necklace over her head. Since she had to be unarmed, she decided to take a precaution, so she attached two leather harnesses to her forearms and inserted two throwing knives into each one, then pulled the baggy sleeves of her sweater over her arms. If they patted her down, they wouldn't check her arms. Looking into the mirror that hung on the inside of

the door, she gave herself a confident smile, before slipping the glasses that Bill had given her onto her slender nose. A picture of her parents and Jessie was taped to the door, just above the mirror. "Wish me luck," she said to the picture as she closed the locker door and walked out of the room.

AT EXACTLY EIGHT forty-five, everyone was in place. Bill and the two SWAT guys were dressed the same as Nic, all in black. They were sitting in a van marked "Ed's Dry Cleaning Service" about half a mile from the waterfront. Nic was in her Xterra, peering at the docks through her night vision binoculars. There was no activity anywhere, which probably meant Marcone was going to redirect her to another area, or he and his men were already inside one of the warehouses.

She felt a vibration on her hip and realized she hadn't removed her beeper. It was so much a part of her daily life she sometimes forgot she was wearing it until it went off. She didn't recognize the number, so she grabbed her cell phone and punched it in.

A man answered, "Dr. Austin."

"Doctor, it's Nicole Stone. Is Jimmy all right?"

"Yes, Miss Stone, that's why I wanted you to call me. Jimmy regained consciousness about thirty minutes ago. I've run some preliminary tests and everything seems fine."

Nic was holding her breath, and with the doctor's last words, she exhaled. "Thank God. I can't tell you how happy I am to hear that."

"I'm glad I am able to tell you that. If you hadn't acted so quickly, I don't think the outcome would have been so favorable. Anyway, he's resting comfortably."

"Thanks for calling, Doctor. Have a good evening."

"You, too, Miss Stone."

Nic hit the end button and dropped the cell phone onto the passenger seat. "I hope I do have a good evening, Doc, I really do."

The two-way radio squawked on the seat next to her. "Eagle one, status?"

Nic picked up the radio and fingered the talk button. "All clear."

"Activate all devices."

"Ten-four," Nic responded. Placing the two-way radio on the dash, she flipped the switch on the medallion, activating it, and then she placed the earpiece into her ear. "Testing, testing, do you copy eagle's nest?"

"Ten-four, eagle one. Proceed with caution." Nic heard Bill through the earpiece. It was as if he was standing right next to her.

"Ten-four," Nic responded. She looked at her watch. It was five minutes to nine. She grabbed the valise containing the incriminating evidence the police had against Marcone. Exiting the car, she started walking toward Pier 22.

Sanders was in the van's driver seat tapping the steering wheel in an attempt to release some of his nervous energy. Mahoney, Patterson, and the two SWAT guys were in the back of the van. Bill had just performed a sound check on the audio devices Nic was wearing. As Nic walked to the pier, Bill could see everything in her path, thanks to the well-lit waterfront. A small red dot on the notebook's screen and a continuous beep indicated her position. As soon as she made contact, Mahoney would monitor the situation while Bill and the other two guys would move into position.

Nic walked through the pools of light that peppered the docks from a series of antique lampposts that lined the waterfront area. The sound of her boots on the wooden beams echoed hauntingly over the lightly lapping water. Her eyes were constantly searching for any movement along the building side of the docks. When she reached the front of the pier, she stopped and slowly scanned the area. Without moving her lips much, she said, "V clear?" Nic wanted to know if Bill was receiving a clear video signal.

"Ten-four," came the response.

Nic stepped onto the pier and kept walking, unsure of exactly where she should go. Several fishing boats of various sizes were moored along the pier, which stretched out into the water for about four hundred feet. Halfway to the end, a solitary phone booth sat like a beacon, the silver parts of the booth reflecting the dock lights back onto the inky water below. As she got closer, she could hear the phone inside the booth ringing. She made her way to the booth, popped the door open, and answered the still-ringing phone. "Hello?"

"Detective Stone. I'm glad to see you made it."

Quickly, Nic's eyes darted around the immediate area, but she saw no one. "Listen, Marcone, let's cut the crap and get this over with. And if you've done anything to Carly, and I mean anything, this evening won't go like you planned."

She heard a low chuckle on the other end of the phone. "I don't think you should be making any threats, Detective. Especially if you want to see her again."

Nic tightened her jaw. In her other ear, she heard Bill's voice, "Keep cool, Nic. We don't want to piss him off yet." Nic swallowed her anger. *What makes him think that's a threat?* As far as she was concerned, it was a promise.

"So, Marcone, what do you want me to do next?"

Marcone smiled. "That's better. Cooperation is the name of the

game, Detective. Now walk over to building 16A on the north side of pier 21. Go inside and wait." The phone disconnected before Nic could say another word.

Bill pulled the headset away from his ears to avoid hearing all the foul language Nic was spewing as she did as Marcone instructed. "Okay, guys, once Nic's inside the building, we're going to get into position. We'll be able to hear everything, but only Mahoney will be able to see what Nic sees, so everyone stay on your toes!" The three men double checked their weapons and waited.

Reaching building 16A, Nic slowly opened the heavy door, a loud creak announcing her arrival. She flashed her light inside and found it empty, so she cautiously entered. Three hallways converged on the point where she was standing. The interior was exceptionally dark, so she knew Mahoney couldn't see a thing on the video feed, since she couldn't see much of anything herself. While she waited, several fantasies of how she would personally deal with Marcone danced through her mind, bringing a feral grin to her lips.

Several minutes later, her acute hearing picked up the sound of footsteps approaching to her left, but the darkness provided adequate concealment to the owner. The footsteps stopped several feet away from her. The sound of a switch being flipped, then a dim light appeared at the end of the hallway she was facing.

"Detective Stone, drop the documents on the floor and proceed to the door at the far end of the hall."

"I'm not turning this over until I see that Carly is okay," she stated without turning toward the voice.

Back at the van, Bill and the SWAT guys were scrambling out and heading in the direction of building 16A. They stayed strictly in the shadows since they still didn't know where Marcone's men were located. They wouldn't move any closer to the building until they knew their positions.

The voice mumbled something low, which Nic was able to hear. "She won't give up the documents until she sees the girl." A long pause. "Yes, sir."

"Enter the room at the end of the hall."

Nic smiled, pleased that Marcone recognized her seriousness. As she made her way down the hall, she realized the person she had just spoken to was not following her. Reaching the door, she turned the knob and pushed it open. The light above the door went out, plunging her into a thick-blackness that completely blinded her. Every nerve was on edge as adrenaline surged through her. *Where are you, you slimy son of a bitch?* Almost as if Marcone could read her thoughts, a bright light came on forcing her enlarged

pupils to constrict and reflexively she closed her eyes.

"Welcome, Detective Stone."

Cautiously, Nic opened her eyes, allowing them time to adjust to the brighter conditions. Directly ahead of her, a tall man in a dark suit was standing behind her friend who was gagged and bound at the wrists. Nic's first impulse was to run to Carly, but since she looked more angry than frightened, Nic squelched the urge.

"Do raise your hands, and keep them away from your body," Marcone instructed. "Tony, pat her down."

On command, a man stepped up behind her and ran his hands down her sides and along her legs, patting as he went along. "She's clean." He grabbed the valise from her hand as he stepped back, and without having to look, she knew he was holding a gun on her.

"I'm surprised at you, Mr. Marcone. I thought you'd have had one of your men take me out the second I stepped foot on the docks."

"Well, I wanted to meet you face to face."

"And why is that?" Nic asked in a sardonic tone.

"To see if you were truly as beautiful as my men said you were."

"And what's your conclusion?"

"I think you know the answer to that. You are stunning." He held Carly firmly around the neck with his forearm. Her green eyes were locked onto Nic. Nic had a good sense that Carly was okay, now she needed to proceed with the plan.

"Forgive me if I don't thank you." In her left ear, Nic heard Mahoney's voice. "I've got a good look at Marcone, but where are the rest of his men?" As inconspicuously as possible, she searched the room with minute eye movements to try to locate them.

"I understand. I am holding your friend, after all." Marcone studied the detective. She was a cool one, all right. She hadn't moved an inch since he had flooded the room with light. He imagined she was a formidable opponent, given her size and obvious physical conditioning. "I have to admit that you surprise me. I didn't think you would come alone, but I am pleased that you have. It'll make things much easier."

"What makes you think I am alone?"

"I'm hurt, Nicole. May I call you Nicole?"

"Detective Stone will be fine."

Marcone raised his brows in surprise. Even though he was holding all the cards, this impudent woman was going to deny him, Victor Marcone, his request. *The nerve!* "Fine. I'm hurt that you would think I wouldn't know your every move since you arrived. My men saw you exiting your vehicle and have been tracking you

ever since."

"I guess you're smarter than I thought," Nic retorted. *But not by much*, she thought. Bill's voice came through her earpiece, "Eagle three, check perimeter with night vision scope. Verify two men on adjacent building, one in the boat in the first slip. Neutralize and report."

"By the way, Detective Stone, condolences about your partner."

Carly's eyes widened at the statement, and she struggled under the tall man's grasp. "Now, now, settle down."

"Actually, my partner is doing very well, so there is no need for condolences. However, please accept mine, seeing that your nephew is gone."

A bolt of anger shot through Marcone. He wanted to snap Carly's neck just to make the detective angry enough to charge him, but he controlled himself. He had other plans for her. *Was the detective baiting him?* He had sent Tony to take care of her partner, and Tony never failed him. He decided to play it cool. "Thank you," he said in a calm tone. "My nephew's passing was indeed unfortunate, but life sometimes deals you cards that you'd rather not have."

Nic gauged Marcone's reaction to her statement. She knew she was riling him. The question was, could she protect Carly if the place erupted? There was one man behind her, maybe more, and she spotted two men behind Marcone. One on his left, the other on his right, both partially concealed behind large wooden crates. There were probably more, but she couldn't tell at the moment. In her ear, she heard Bill again, "Eagle two to eagle one, we're ready. Give us a count of ten, then you know what to do." Nic's breath caught in her throat as she mentally began to count down. *Ten*

"I agree. I've received a few hands I'd have liked to turn down myself."

Nine

Eight

Seven

"I know. I'm familiar with your parents' accident." This hit Nic like a baseball bat to the back of the head. For a split second, she lost count. Marcone signaled the man to his right to retrieve the valise from Tony. He complied and handed the valise to Marcone, who released the struggling Carly. "Don't move," he snarled.

Five

Four

Three

This was perfect. Carly was out of his grasp. Nic tried to signal with her eyes that she wanted Carly to slowly step away from Marcone while he was busy inspecting the contents of the valise. She

acknowledged her understanding with two rapid blinks.

Two

One!

The room was plunged into total darkness when Bill cut off power to the building. The instant the lights went out, Nic was on a dead run for the spot Carly had been occupying.

Gunfire erupted in the room, sending flashes of lights where muzzle blasts were going off in rapid succession all over the room.

Shattering glass descended onto the floor from two windows on the wall behind Marcone when the SWAT guys came crashing through.

Nic dove at the spot where Carly had been standing. BANG! She felt a hot blast of pain shoot through her as a bullet struck her upper arm. Ignoring the intense pain, she was relieved when she landed on something small and soft. Instinctively, she shielded Carly with her own body to protect her from the bullets that were flying around the room. She heard Bill shouting into her ear, "Eagle one, status?"

"Eagle one, we're on the deck and clear!" Nic slid one of the knives out of her forearm harness and freed Carly from the ropes that bound her. In the semi-darkness, she pulled the gag from Carly's mouth.

"Nic, thank God!" Carly grabbed her friend and hugged her fiercely.

"Shh! Listen, I have to get you out of here." A bullet zipped past and a man cried out, then landed two feet to their left, blood spilling liberally onto the floor from his gaping wounds. Just as Carly was about to scream, Nic clamped her hand over the woman's mouth. "Shhh. It's all right. Just stay under me, and we'll crawl over to the crates behind us."

"Get them, you fucking idiots!" Marcone shouted from behind a stack of crates, while clutching the valise to his chest. "Tony! Don't let them bitches out of here!"

Nic and Carly started crawling through the semi-darkness. "Eagle two, location?"

"Eagle two, I'm pinned down behind a forklift to the right of the door. I can see you both. I'll give you cover, get moving!" BANG! BANG! Several shots rang out. Nic and Carly picked up the pace until they were safely behind the crates. Carly threw her arms around Nic's neck. "Nic, I'm so glad to see you! Are you all right? What are we going to do?"

"I'm glad, very glad, to see you, too, Carly." She took a second to enjoy the sensation of holding this woman who, without even knowing it, held her heart so thoroughly. It was something she hadn't been sure she'd ever get to do again. "Now, we're going to

get out of here, so don't worry." Nic released Carly and felt around the crates until she located what she was looking for. One of the crates was partially open. The crate was large enough for Carly to get inside. Several larger crates surrounded it, so the chance that a bullet would penetrate it was slim. "I want you to get inside here, and wait until I come and get you, okay?"

Carly wanted to grab Nic and not let go, but she knew better. "Where are you going?"

"I need to help the others. I won't be gone long."

"Promise?" Green eyes implored her.

"Yes, I promise. Now lie down in there and stay quiet."

"Nic?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you." There it was, plain and simple. She wanted Nic to know just in case they didn't get out of this.

The detective leaned down and whispered into Carly's ear, "I love you, too." She placed a soft kiss on her head, and then she closed the crate, crawled away, and tried to pinpoint Bill's position. Grimacing from the pain in her arm, she gritted her teeth and said, "Eagle two, I'm going to give you some help, so hang on!" No response. This surprised her, and she realized her medallion was gone. It must have fallen off while she was crawling to the crates with Carly. "Shit!"

BANG! BANG! Shots were still being fired from several guns; a combination of Marcone's scattered men, the SWAT guys, and Bill.

Peering over the top of one of the crates, Nic saw two muzzle blasts from up in the corner where several crates were stacked on top of each other. Without a gun, she was going to have to rely on her other skills. Easing her way along the wall, she managed to place herself even with the gunman in the corner. She saw return fire from Bill's last known position, which made her feel better. The gunman fired again, and Nic swiftly released one of her throwing knives in his direction. Her aim was good, even with her arm hurting like hell. The gunman collapsed as the knife pierced his throat spraying him with crimson blood.

Nic felt her own blood seeping through her sweater. She fingered the tear in her leather jacket, silently cursing out the asshole that had shot her. Her earpiece crackled, "Eagle one, position?" Without the medallion, she couldn't give Bill her position. *Shit!*

BANG! A shot splintered a crate to Nic's right, forcing her to dive to the floor. She crawled along on her belly until she was in a better position to look around.

Marcone screamed, "Can't anyone turn the fucking lights back on?"

"Not likely, Mr. Marcone. They've cut the circuits!" Frank

Torelli yelled. Across the room, he spotted Nic as she crawled into position against one of his men. Figuring he could come up behind her, he started to make his way through the maze of crates on this side of the room.

"Nic, there's a guy trying to come up behind you to your left. Be careful," Bill informed her.

"Gotcha," Nic replied. In one swift motion, she jumped up and nailed the guy in front of her directly in the upper chest with one knife, and then she pivoted and fired another knife at the guy to her left, catching Frank Torelli in the forehead and dropping him in his tracks.

In the darkness, Marcone saw Frank get hit and start to fall. He screamed, "Noooo!" Then he charged out from behind the crates, dropping the valise and heading straight for Nic. She had one more knife, but she couldn't grasp it with her fingers, which were now slick from the blood that had been running down her arm. Marcone was three steps from her when she heard the shots being fired.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Marcone fell to the floor at her feet. His hand opened on impact with the floor, revealing a large dagger. Nic breathed a sigh of relief as she collapsed to the floor beside him.

"Nic!" Bill saw his friend fall to the floor. "Your boss is dead! Give it up!" he shouted to the two remaining gunmen. Instantly, guns clanked to the floor, and the SWAT guys descended on the two men, pinning them down and cuffing them. "All clear!" Bill yelled, signaling that everyone had been taken care of. He rushed to Nic's side and felt her neck for a pulse. "Get an ambulance here on the double," he barked into the radio that was attached to his shoulder.

"Already on the way," Mahoney answered.

Hearing one of the cops give the signal that everything was okay, Carly kicked the crate door off and scrambled out. "Nic!" Carly called.

"Carly, over here!"

It was a man's voice, not Nic's. *Why hadn't Nic answered her? My God, was Nic okay?* Carly could barely see where she was walking. Suddenly a flashlight shed some light on the area. To her horror, she saw Nic lying on the warehouse floor in a pool of blood. Carly felt like her legs were going to give out, but she managed to get herself over to Nic. Dropping to the floor, a torrent of tears poured out of her. "Nic!" she cradled her friend in her arms. "Is she dead?" she screamed at the large man who was kneeling beside her friend.

"No. I think she may have passed out from the sudden loss of blood. Help me get her jacket off. I think she was hit in the arm."

Bill instructed one of the SWAT guys to keep holding the light on the area.

Carly held Nic's head gently in her lap while the large man lifted her and slipped her arm out of the blood-soaked sleeve. Bill pulled apart her sweater revealing a nasty gash about an inch below her right shoulder. Removing a piece of cloth from one of the many pockets in his jacket, he tied it securely just above the wound to try and slow the flow of blood.

Tears streamed down Carly's face as she cradled Nic in her arms. "Nic, please open your eyes. Please."

Bill laid a hand on the Carly's shoulder. "I think she'll be fine. She's a pretty tough lady, and I've seen a lot of gunshot wounds. This one isn't as bad as it could have been."

"Thank God." Carly plastered a hundred kisses on Nic's damp forehead.

Sanders burst into the room a second later along with two patrolmen and two paramedics. "Jesus!" was all Sanders said at the carnage inside the room.

Slowly, Nic opened one eye and smiled at the sight of Carly. Carly smiled back and kissed her again. Nic let her eye close as she felt herself being lifted onto a stretcher.

"COME ON, LET me help you," Carly demanded, opening the passenger side door.

After two hours, they were finally back at Nic's house. Her right arm was in a sling, and she had been given a shot to ward off any infection. "Okay, but I'm telling you, I can walk just fine."

"Humor me." A pair of pale green eyes indicated they weren't going to take a rebuttal.

Realizing it would be in her best interests to comply, Nic got out of the car and leaned on Carly for support. Truth was, she did feel a little woozy from the loss of blood, but she wasn't about to admit that. They made it to the deck at the back of the house. The newly installed motion lights triggered and flooded the deck with light. Nic punched in the security code and waited for the three-beep tone that indicated the alarm had been deactivated. Once inside the kitchen, Nic sat down slowly in one of the chairs while Carly turned the lights on. It was just past eleven-thirty, and both women were clearly bordering on exhaustion. Two pieces of paper were lying on the table, one from QHS and one from the carpet place.

"Would you like some tea?" Carly asked, noting her friend's pale face.

"Yeah, that sounds good."

Carly filled the sunflower-covered teakettle with water then placed it on the burner to heat. Taking a seat next to her friend, she covered Nic's hand with hers. "Nic, have you eaten anything in the last twelve hours? I'm worried, you look awfully pale."

"I'm fine now that you are safe." Nic lifted Carly's hand and kissed the knuckles one at a time. She noticed the red burn marks around Carly's wrists where they had been tied with the rope.

"Thank you." Carly paused as she looked into the light blue eyes that regarded her. "Thank you for saving Jimmy and me." She started to shake her head. "I just don't know how you did it. You are the most amazing person I've ever met."

Nic felt a blush creeping onto her face. "I'm just glad that we're all okay." She reached over and brushed the lone tear that was sliding down Carly's cheek. "Why don't we have our tea upstairs? I'd really like to get out of these clothes and get cleaned up."

"Okay. Let's get you settled up there, and I'll come back down and get the tea." Carly helped Nic get up, and they headed down the hallway that led to the front of the house. Carly turned lights on as they progressed.

With relative ease, they ascended the stairs and entered Nic's spacious bedroom. Nic was impressed to find the room in order. The new carpet looked good, all freshly laid and vacuumed. Nic sat down on the bed and flipped her boots off. "Looks like everything went according to plan here today."

"Yeah, your friend did a great job with the carpet."

Carly picked up Nic's boots and dropped them in the closet. "So what's next?"

"Well, I think I'm going to need some help washing up." Nic wiggled her eyebrows in a manner Carly found incredibly sexy.

"Let's not forget you're injured," Carly reprimanded her.

"It's just a flesh wound. I'll be fine. You do want to help me, don't you?"

"Nic, you know I do. Get undressed while I start the bath." Carly walked into the bathroom and flipped the light on. "You know, Nic, this is some bathroom you have here. I especially like the tub."

"Yeah, I like that a lot, too. Don't let this get around, but I'm a bubble bath kind of girl."

Carly started the water running then splashed a cupful of jasmine bubble bath into the water. "That sort of surprises me, Nic."

"Why is that?"

Carly gasped when she turned to see Nic standing in the doorway dressed only in her undergarments. God, she was even more beautiful than Carly imagined, even with her arm in that sling.

Struggling, she managed to regain control of her mouth. "What?"

"I said why is that?"

Carly blinked several times in quick succession. "Why is what?"

Nic started walking toward Carly. "Why does it surprise you that I like bubble baths?"

Carly had completely lost track of the conversation now that Nic was standing inches away from her. She looked up into the incredible blueness of her eyes and felt her heart skip a beat. "I...I...don't know." Her breath was coming in short bursts. "Nic?"

"Yeah?"

"If you don't kiss me soon I think I might die."

A slow, sexy smile started in one corner of Nic's face and worked its way to the other side. She bent down ever so gently and captured Carly's lips. Steam from the hot bath water encircled them. The rich fragrance of the jasmine enhanced the mood. Carly wrapped her arms around Nic and leaned in, soaking up the contact. She had finally found the one person who made her feel complete. The kiss deepened as Nic curled her free arm around Carly's waist, pulling her closer, as if that were possible. Nic felt like her life was starting over again and, for the first time in her life, she wasn't in a hurry. They had all the time in the world, and she would see to it that they enjoyed every second

The End

FORTHCOMING TITLES

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IM
by Rick R. Reed

A gay thriller with supernatural overtones, *IM* is the story of a serial killer using a gay hook-up website to prey on young gay men on Chicago's north side. The website's easy and relatively anonymous nature is perfect for a killer.

When the first murder comes to light, the first detective on the scene is Ed Comparetto, one of the police force's only openly gay detectives. He interviews the young man who discovered the body, Timothy Bright, and continues his investigation as the body count begins to rise. But, Comparetto hits a snag when he is abruptly fired from the police force. The cause? Falsifying evidence. It turns out that Timothy Bright has been dead for more than two years, murdered in much the same way as the first victim Ed investigated.

The case becomes a driving force for Comparetto, who finds more and more evidence to support that the person he first spoke to about the murders is really dead. Is he a ghost? Or, is something even more inexplicable and chilling going on? As the murder spree escalates and Comparetto realizes Bright is the culprit, he begins to fear for his own sanity...and his own life. Can Ed race against time and his own doubts to stop the killings before he and his new lover become victims?

Available May 2007

Tears Don't Become Me

by Sharon G. Clark

GW (Georgia Wilhelmina) Diamond, Private Investigator, dealt in missing children cases—only. It didn't alter her own traumatic childhood experience, but she could try to keep other children from the same horrors. She'd left her past and her name behind her. Or so she thought. This case was putting her in contact with people she had managed to keep a distant and barely civil relationship with for fifteen years. Now the buried past was returning to haunt her. When Sheriff Matthews of Elk Grove, Missouri, asked her to take a case involving a teenaged runaway girl, she believed it would be no different from any other. Until Matthews explained she had to take a cop as partner or no deal. A cop who just happened to be the missing girl's aunt.

Erin Dunbar, received the call concerning her niece from an old partner, Frank Matthews. It should have been from her sister, but their estrangement, compounded by her having moved to Detroit, kept that from happening. Now she would have to work with a PI. One had nearly killed her and Frank years ago; she expected this one would be no different. Matters were only made worse by discovering it was a "she" PI—a Looney-tune one who gave new and literal meaning to: "Hands Off." For the sake of her niece, Erin would put up with just about anything, until...GW seemed to be strangely affected by this case and Erin, to her chagrin and amazement, was strangely affected by her.

If Erin could solve GW's past, give her hope, could they have a hope of finding her niece?

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