



Pay Dirt by Moira Reid

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*By*

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### **Pay Dirt**

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**Dedication**

For Shannon; because she got up at 4 every morning for months on end (even though she's not a morning person) just to write alongside me.

## Chapter One

Elle walked through the Houston Galleria Mall on her break, glancing into the numerous shop windows as she passed. Everything was on sale today; too bad she was broke.

She seldom purchased anything here, and imagining she could afford the items in any of these stores was simply entertainment. Spending \$85 on a blouse meant eating Ramen Noodles and drinking off-brand diet soda for a month to make up for it. No, she'd go on dreaming while working every day of the week, playing her lotto numbers in stupid blind hope, and doing her real shopping at discount places on the outskirts of the city.

Checking her watch, she discovered she had five minutes of her dinner break left before her duties behind the perfume counter resumed. Her boss was a stickler for promptness, and she couldn't afford to lose this job. At only \$9 an hour she barely made the rent as it was. And although Jeremy would love to date her, he'd enjoy firing her even more, just to publicly throw his weight around.

She quickened her steps as she turned the corner toward the entrance of the newly expanded Sharmiah Clothiers. She stopped to double-check her reflection in the gold-draped window. The company's dress code was strict, and Jeremy's mantra echoed in her ears: "if you don't look like *you* shop here, why would anyone else shop here?"

Her long, auburn hair was a tad wild today, but still acceptable. She sighed and consigned herself to the fact that as soon as she left her

apartment, she had little say about the final shape her mane would take. She was a slave to Houston's humidity scale, and today's mugginess had wrought serious havoc. Even during the first weeks of December, the weather could be counted on to be two things—hot and humid—and this year was no exception. But her navy skirt and white blouse remained presentable, and the high-heeled leather Ferragamos she'd happily discovered at Goodwill last week gleamed with this morning's shoe polish.

Elle walked into Sharmiah's, and the wonderful smell she equated with wealth and privilege assailed her. She imagined living the kind of lives the people who could afford to shop here must live. When she closed her eyes, she tried to picture herself belonging to that social stratum. *Not happening.*

Moving quickly to the back of the store, she pushed open the door sporting a sign that read *employees only* and grabbed her timecard from the metal holder on the wall. Dropping it into the digital time clock, she noted the readout on the machine's screen.

"You barely made it."

Elle forced a smile. "Hello, Jeremy." She returned her timecard to its slot and turned to go.

Jeremy stepped in front of her. "You're looking great, Elle."

He was shorter than she by a few inches, but what he lacked in height he made up for in ego. Usually she found ways to avoid running into him at all. Today she wasn't so lucky. "Thanks, Jeremy. I'd better get out there. Customers are waiting."

He placed his hand on her elbow and squeezed. Elle fought the urge to rip her arm out of his claw-like touch. "No hurry. I thought we might talk for a minute. It's almost time for your review. I'm sure you believe you deserve a raise."

Elle kept the smile plastered on her face and took a slow, deep breath. "That's a nice idea. Think there's a chance of it happening? I heard rumors about a pay freeze until after the holidays."

"Well, for some people there may be." Jeremy's eyes flashed as he stepped even closer. His hand trailed from her elbow to her upper arm,

rubbing her bare flesh with his thumb. She hoped her skin wouldn't crawl off her bones. "Why don't we meet this evening after the store closes and talk about your future with the company?"

Elle slowly extracted his hand from her arm. "Jeremy, I would like to discuss my position and future with Sharmiah's. How about tomorrow at lunchtime in the corporate offices?" A cadre of secretaries was always present upstairs. She knew it and felt sure Jeremy knew it, too.

He pursed his lips and tossed his head backward, sending his long, brown ponytail sailing over his shoulder. "You're a real tightass, you know that? You should loosen up a little."

She took a step away from him. "I beg your pardon."

"It's a shame too—a real shame. I was hoping we could come to an understanding, but it is my duty to inform you the company is cutting back on staff. I hoped you wouldn't be one of those let go, but it appears your inability to be a team player is an insurmountable obstacle. There's no need to clock out. Your final paycheck will be mailed to you."

Shock and anger burned through her, and she clenched her fists at her sides. "You're firing me because I won't go out with you? I'll have you brought up on harassment charges. This will become an official EEOC matter."

Jeremy laughed so loud his voice rang across the darkened hallway leading to the break room. When he finally stopped laughing, he leaned toward her, his lips curved into an ugly grin. "Good luck with that. Who do you think they're going to believe? The owner's son or a stripper?"

A wave of dizziness washed over her. *How did he know?* A year ago, when she'd been desperate for money, she'd worked for one of Houston's gentlemen's clubs. It had been humiliating, but the money had gotten her out of a tight spot. Had he seen her there? Had someone else seen her and told him?

She squared her shoulders, held her head high and spun on her heel, forcing one foot in front of the other until she was standing near the main entrance to the mall. She could still hear the echoes of Jeremy's laughter in her ears as tears stung the backs of her eyes.

Elle concentrated on trying to slow her breathing. That bastard had just harassed her, fired her and then threatened to expose a terrible mistake she'd made a long time ago. *And there was nothing she could do about it.* She took deep breaths, clutching her purse at her side for comfort. Her knees shook as she tried to get control.

As a well-dressed couple passed by, she noted their judgmental glances. She turned and walked over to the nearest window, feigning interest in the plasma televisions being sold inside. *I guess the rich don't have emotional moments in public.*

It was just after ten, and Channel 13 was showing the Texas Two-Step Lotto drawing. Elle forced back tears as she stared at the screen.

She had to make it to her car and get back to her cat and her little apartment without falling apart. Jeremy would not get the satisfaction of seeing her cry because of his Napoleonic control over her life. Somehow, she'd find another job.

Fear coursed through her as she continued to stare at the television behind the glass. Already late with this month's rent, she'd been counting on the overtime pay during the holidays to get her past this most recent rough patch. By tomorrow she'd have to be once again gainfully employed, or she'd lose everything.

Her face burned with humiliation. He'd found out about the stripping, even though she'd never mentioned it or run into anyone who'd seen her there. The thought of returning to that job flashed into her mind. The money she'd earned during that brief stint had saved her life. She could make more in two nights' work than she made in a week at Sharmiah's.

She shook her head. Against her better judgment, she'd taken the easy way out back then, but she would never do it again. No amount of money was worth dancing almost naked in front of leering men who catcalled and felt free to touch her. Physically, there was no reason she could not return, but mentally, she'd spent her last ounce of self-respect on that stage. She couldn't and she wouldn't—ever again.

Other girls were able to separate the two lives they led. *It's a job* was the common phrase, but she'd seen a seedier side of men there she



never wanted to see again. Their expensive clothes, gold Rolexes and polished shoes were not enough to cover up the fetid, base desires and repugnant treatment.

No, no matter what happened, she would not go back to that life.

She took a deep breath and focused on the television, willing herself to get it together enough to get out of here. The woman running the game explained how the Texas Two Step worked as she did every Monday and Thursday night. Four balls chosen at random from balls numbering one to thirty-five with one bonus ball also chosen at random from a group numbering one to thirty-five.

Elle could not hear the television through the glass, but she had the speech memorized. She rubbed the back of her hand over her eyes and glanced back to see if anyone else was staring. Her knees continued to tremble as she struggled to gather herself enough to walk out amidst the holiday shoppers. She turned back toward the television and closed her eyes for a long moment. *God, give me strength.*

When she opened them, the drawing was over. The woman on the screen smiled and displayed the numbers of the balls selected. 4, 7, 11, 31 and 25.

Elle blinked, an audible gasp caught in her throat. She stared at the numbered balls filling the television screen. *This wasn't possible.*

She covered her mouth with her hand and continued to stare.

A commercial with a break-dancing cat advertising kitty litter came on the screen. There had to be some mistake. Her mother's birthday—January 4. Her father's—March 7. The day she'd adopted her cat, Frankie—October 11. Her birthday—July 31, and her favorite holiday—December 25. Elle rested her hand against the glass in front of her and leaned on it for support. She'd played those numbers every week for the past year.

How she got out of the mall and onto the sidewalk, she might never know, but the hot air did not feel so hot anymore, and the humidity carried a sweet scent that rested on her skin as she all but floated above the pavement.

She'd just won the lottery.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nick sat outside the Galleria Mall on the most uncomfortable bench he'd ever been on in his life. Noting people's movements as they came and went and covered in a coat too hot for weather hovering in the eighties, he adjusted his dark sunglasses and scratched his neck. Dusty grime and sweat, gathered from a long evening spent sitting beside this busy road, had created an itchy, gritty paste like sandpaper under his fingernails.

But tonight wasn't about comfort. The disguise he thought of as 'poor, dirty and broken down blind man' placed him where he wanted to be—under the radar, undercover from his prey, and beyond notice of the remainder of Houston's considerable police force.

When Toni, the second victim, had been found raped, beaten and barely alive not ten feet from this spot, he'd immediately been taken off the case the Houston Chronicle had dubbed 'The Houston Marauder.' Lieutenant Smith put Detective Mark Broker and Detective James Robertson on the job in his place. Both had years of experience and had come up through the ranks with Nick.

But Toni was his sister. No other cop in the city would work as hard to find the bastard who'd done this. So, he'd taken some time off, ostensibly to care for her. Instead, he'd spent every day of the last week doing his own detective work.

Thoughts of what must have happened to her while in captivity haunted him, and he adjusted his dark glasses again and stood up from the bench. He paced back and forth, tapping his cane on the ground as he moved. Somehow he was going to catch the bastard.

Nick stopped walking and turned slowly toward the Galleria, tilting his head as he'd seen Ray Charles do throughout his lifetime of childhood-onset blindness. The stance was ideal for collecting information without being an obvious threat to anyone. This disguise had worked well so far, but he had to continually remind himself not to shift quickly or follow movements around him that would give him away.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a young woman step outside the main entrance to the Galleria. She walked toward him, her long, wild, copper hair swinging behind her. Nick turned so he didn't appear to stare, but he couldn't take his eyes off her. She moved with the easy grace of the wealthy, although the shoes were last year's Ferragamo's, and judging by the clothing, cheap purse and lack of shopping bags, he saw middle class income at most.

About thirty, a hundred twenty five pounds and a little over five-foot-eight, she was beautiful, if not well-moneyed. In all the faces he'd seen this evening he couldn't remember another so completely thrilled to be alive.

In the faint light of the streetlamps, about forty yards to her right, a tall figure approached wearing dark glasses and a long black trench coat much too stifling for the current weather. Nick couldn't discern any facial detail, but the person's quick, short steps suggested a woman beneath the covering.

Trenchcoat had spotted the beautiful, happy woman as she exited the Galleria, too. Coppertop hadn't noticed, lost in her own happy thoughts.

Still a good forty yards away, if she kept up the same jaunty pace, they would meet up beside him at the same time. At this rate, Trenchcoat would be close enough to strike in the next ten seconds, and based on the body language, Trenchcoat had marked her for a target.

He had to make a decision. If Trenchcoat attacked Coppertop and Nick did anything about it, his cover would be blown. The rapist's latest victim would be dumped here like the others either tonight or tomorrow night; he just knew it. If he shitcanned his cover, his plan to apprehend the bastard was out the window. He couldn't let that happen, but he couldn't let Trenchcoat remove that glow from the girl's face either.

Dammit.

Nick's heart began to hammer in his chest, and he reached into his coat pocket, feeling the rubber grip on his Glock. He turned away from the two of them, still keeping them in his sights. As the ugly scene played

out before him, he hoped that Trenchcoat saw a blind, homeless man unable to participate in what was about to happen.

Trenchcoat began to jog toward Coppertop, moving more like a man than a woman. Nick gritted his teeth and tightened his grip on both the Glock in his pocket and the cane in his other hand.

Trenchcoat grabbed Copper's purse off her shoulder and shoved her to the ground, then took off at a dead run directly toward him.

Just as he'd expected. *Shit.*

At this trajectory, Trenchcoat would pass right in front of him. Nick turned yet again, as if completely oblivious to what was happening. He took a deep breath and waited as the thief rapidly approached.

"Help!" the woman screamed from the ground. "He took my money! Help!"

As Trenchcoat passed five feet in front of him, Nick spun hard, bringing his cane around to meet the thief's face, the hard metal point on the end of the cane catching him square in the forehead. Trenchcoat fell ass first, the purse skittering behind him.

Nick moved slowly around Trenchcoat toward the purse, not looking down as he watched the thief out of the corners of his eyes. "Is someone there? Did I hit you with my cane? I'm terribly sorry."

Nick tapped the cane on the sidewalk until he reached the purse's strap, stepped inside the loop and planted his feet. He stared at Trenchcoat from behind his dark glasses. "Is someone there?"

The thief jumped up from the ground, rubbing his neck with one hand as he sized Nick up. Trenchcoat leapt toward him, but like a bullfighter avoiding an oncoming bull, Nick slid aside letting the thief stumble past him. "Anyone there? I hear somebody."

Nick faced the thief. The tall figure looked up at him again then glanced around. Cars had begun to slow, and the occupants watched the altercation from their air-conditioned, locked interiors. He seemed to consider his options, then fled off into the dark.

His foot still firmly inside the circle of the purse's strap, Nick stared into seeming nothingness away from the woman running toward him. He

tipped his head upward and released his hold on the Glock, removing his hand from his pocket.

"Sir, thank you!" Coppertop wrapped her arms around him and squeezed him against her body. "Oh, my God. Thank you!"

Nick couldn't move. Her curves pressing into him, the sweet smell of her long, auburn hair filling his nostrils—hell, he didn't want to move. He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath of her fragrance. She held him for a moment that didn't last nearly long enough, then loosened her grip on his body and tipped her head toward his face. He hoped his eyes were still hidden behind the dark glasses so she wouldn't notice how he was examining every curve of her beautiful face. Her eyes glimmered with tears, her full lips curved into a wide smile. Nick forced himself to avert his gaze.

"I don't know what just happened," he said. "I was standing here waiting for the bus when it felt like someone ran into my cane."

"That was somebody trying to steal my new life." She took his face into her hands. "But you gave it back to me."

Then she kissed him.

## **Chapter Two**

Elle had only intended the kiss to be a 'thank you'. Her hopes of starting over had disappeared as quickly as they'd come until this sweet blind man had wrenched them back for her. He didn't know the depth of what he'd done, but she did, and she'd never been so grateful for anything in her life.

Then the man began to kiss her back. He placed his hand on her waist and pulled her closer, and somehow the thank you kiss lengthened and deepened. Conflicting emotions flooded over her all at once—gratefulness, happiness, and something else—something electric and warm. He pressed her body against his, and heat streamed through her veins and flitted along her skin.

Tilting his head, his soft lips dragged her deeper into the joining of their mouths. She let her hands fall to his shoulders as her breasts pressed against his chest and his mouth moved over hers.

Something hit the sidewalk as his other hand pressed into her back, and she realized he'd released his hold on his cane. The feeling of euphoria coursing through her exploded as he pressed his tongue to her lips, and she opened her mouth to receive the sweet taste of him.

She became lost, forgetting everything except the feeling of his body against hers, his mouth possessing hers. Her tongue met his, and both of them tightened their hold on each other, moving their mouths in a rhythm that had changed from 'thank you' to 'I want you.'

Elle loosened her hold on the man as he ended the kiss. His hands dropped slowly from her body as he stared blankly into the distance over her head. Elle searched for her voice as she took a deep breath. He found his first.

"You're welcome," he whispered, then cleared his throat. "I don't know what I did, but let me know if I can ever do it again."

Elle knew her face had turned fire-red now as blood burned in her cheeks. Still, she didn't care. That, she realized with shock, was the greatest kiss she'd ever had in her life.

The man stepped backward, and Elle looked down at the ground. Her purse lay next to his cane, her winning lottery ticket still safely tucked inside. She stooped and picked them both up, replacing the purse on her shoulder. She took the man's hand in hers and placed the cane into it. "You have no idea what you have done." She struggled to regain her composure as she pressed her lips together then licked them, tasting the sweet flavor of his mouth. "I can never thank you enough."

The man cleared his throat as he gripped the cane and nodded. "What's your name?"

"Elle." She smiled and looked carefully at the man's face, extended her hand and grasped his. His clothes were dirty, but he smelled wonderful. When she'd first seen him, she'd imagined he was one of Houston's homeless. But how would a homeless man stay so clean? "Elle Parson."

"I'm Nick Damato. Very nice to meet you."

"Mr. Damato, please let me buy you dinner." When had he last eaten? He didn't look unhealthy, and his hard body had certainly not felt underfed. Except for the clothing, he was nothing she expected a homeless person would be. But he had to be homeless. Nothing else could explain the clothing.

When he didn't reply, she stopped the rapid train of thoughts running through her head. "It's the least I can do. Are you hungry, Mr. Damato?"

"Please call me Nick."

"Nick. So, how about dinner?"

He stood erect, those wonderful lips held in a tight line. "That's not necessary." He paused a long moment. "But, I could meet you somewhere. Later."

She glanced at the bus stop bench then back to him. "No. That's too much trouble for you. I can take you anywhere you need to go." She hesitated to say, 'Then I can take you home'. This might be his home.

Besides, you don't even know this guy, her cautious mind shouted. He could be that serial rapist the Chronicle had been reporting on for weeks.

Elle smiled. A serial rapist who'd just saved her future. *To hell with it.* "I'd be happy to bring you back here or take you anywhere you'd like to go. You have no idea how much I owe you right now."

"I'd like to get cleaned up a little first."

Elle nodded. So he did have somewhere to go clean up, maybe a halfway house or small apartment. A wonderful idea began to form in her mind as she took his hand. "What about this? We'll go to dinner—then we'll cash in my lottery ticket."

"Lottery ticket?"

"Yes, Mr. Nick Damato. You're looking at the world's newest millionairess." She paused. "I mean, you're standing in front of...I'm sorry."

He smiled and squeezed her hand. "It's all right."

A sudden wave of generosity flooded through her. If he hadn't stepped in when he did, she'd be miserable, desperate and destitute right now. She'd been so busy thinking of her own problems, she hadn't even considered someone like Nick, who managed to smell wonderful in spite of his reduced circumstances.

Elle made the decision in an instant. "If it weren't for you, I'd have nothing. I want to give you half of what I've won."

"Half, huh?" Crinkles formed around his eyes, which were hidden behind the dark glasses. She wished she could see his eyes; his smile was gorgeous. "And how much are we splitting?"

Elle had not said the words out loud until now. She glanced around them, but no one was within earshot. The smile took over her face as she



leaned into his ear and let the words spill from her lips. "Ten million dollars, give or take."

Nick glanced down at her face, then shook his head to try to draw attention away from the gesture. He was not supposed to be able to see her, he reminded himself. Besides, she had to be kidding, although the smile on her face and glitter in her eyes led him to believe otherwise. He forced a laugh. "Half sounds fair."

She laughed along with him, and the sound rang through the air. She opened her purse and reached inside, then pulled out a small slip of paper. "We'll eat first, then cash in the ticket. I could use a handy bodyguard like you if I'm going to carry this thing around."

"You really bought a ticket, huh?" Nick tried to look at the paper in her hand without being too obvious. He didn't know who, if anyone, was watching them, but he'd kept his cover so far; he didn't want to blow it.

Elle placed her hand over his on the cane. "I really *won*. I saw the announcement right before I left the mall. But if you hadn't stepped in when you did, I'd have lost it all. I owe you, and after I buy you an amazing dinner, tomorrow morning I'm driving us both to the lottery office so we can collect our winnings. Now, let me take you to your house so you can change."

Nick paused again. He couldn't let her see his house. For one thing, there were books everywhere, not a single one Braille. Secondly, she thought he was poor, and as soon as she drove up to his house she'd know that was a lie, too.

But did he have to keep up the disguise when they were away from this place? The memory of her mouth on his surged through him; he wanted to do that again. But he owed her the truth about who he really was before that could happen.

Besides, it was here that he wanted to appear blind, not everywhere. Whoever had taken those women wasn't following him around to be certain he was really blind.

On the other hand, what if he left for a couple of hours to eat dinner with her and the scumbag showed up and dropped off another body? His ingenious plan would be completely shot to shit, and yet another girl

could be at risk. The guy had gotten brazen; three girls abducted already, while he walked free among the citizens of Houston. Nick could not risk another victim being dropped off tonight undetected.

"Is everything okay?" Elle asked.

"I would love to have dinner with you, Elle," Nick finally managed. "I don't usually look like this, I assure you. I'm a mess right now." He searched for a smooth way to get her out of here so he could finish what he'd come to do. He wanted to have dinner with her, without question, but the other girls had been dropped off around this spot before seven, and if the girl abducted just a few days ago would be dumped here, he couldn't leave.

The guy had just begun the spree, but already there were signs he had a way of doing things the CSI guys in the department insisted was the compulsive behavior of a serial offender. If he could just get a license plate, a description of the car, *something* tonight, then he could keep the feds out of it, find out who'd done this, and save his sister.

But he couldn't do that if he was eating dinner with this beautiful woman. "I really can't right now. Maybe another time."

Elle frowned as she looked him over from head to toe. He could just imagine what she must be thinking of him with his filthy shirt, dirty jeans and the oldest pair of shoes he could find at the Salvation Army. Yet when she spoke, her voice held no trace of contempt or condescension.

"Don't worry about how you look, Nick. I've been at work all day, and frankly, I look a fright. I know this wonderful place that would work for both of us—it's down on Richmond Avenue called the Ragin Cajun. Nobody cares how we look there, and they have the best muffalatta sandwich and red beans and rice in town. If you wouldn't be too embarrassed to be seen with me looking like this, I would love to take you right now."

Nick wanted to laugh, but he was too touched by the gesture. She thought he couldn't see her, and this was her attempt to make him feel comfortable. Hell, not only did she not look 'a fright', she looked like a frigging model. If he could, he'd tell her, too. Whatever her job was, if it made her this beautiful, every woman in town must be wrangling for it.

His sister had been into labels, so he knew the top-dollar stuff from the cheap crap. But Elle had a way of wearing this knock-off as if that famous Paris designer Toni was always talking about had created it. And her hair—how much hair did the woman have? It was a mass of auburn waves and curls. She was, in a word, knock-down-by-God-gorgeous.

He searched for the right thing to say and finally came up with another lie. When he got her away from here, he would have a lot of explaining to do. He couldn't tell her his car was parked up the street, and he'd drive over and meet her. He couldn't tell her he didn't want her money, but he'd love to take off these glasses and really get a good look at her. He couldn't tell her anything approaching the truth until he got out of here.

"I've got a couple of errands to run first, Elle, so can I meet you there later?" He thought about looking at his watch then caught himself. "What time is it now?"

She glanced down at her own watch. "It's after ten. How long have you been out here?"

Nick frowned. "It's that late already?"

"It must be difficult to tell the time when you can't see the sun going down." Elle gasped at the words she'd blurted out, then sighed. "I'm sorry. God, what an idiot I am."

The other women had been dropped here before seven. He'd been here since two. The most recent victim obviously wouldn't be here today. Nick felt his stomach tighten. So she would spend another day and night being abused by her tormenter. The realization hit him like a stone to the skull.

"Nick," Elle said, interrupting his thoughts. "I'm sorry, really, I—"

Nick shook his head and stared off into the darkness. "I'll tell you what. I'll take care of my errands tomorrow. Let's go to the Ragin Cajun. It sounds great."

Elle hesitated. "Okay, if you're sure. Really, I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry." Nick shook his head and held his hand out toward her. "My mind is on other things. Why don't you lead the way?"

Elle took his hand and led him toward her car parked across the street. He was going to have a lot to be sorry for when he finally told her the truth. But for now, he would play along until they got out of sight of the Galleria on the off chance anyone had been watching them.

As they reached her car, a late-model Honda Civic four-door, she pressed the button on the key fob and the interior lights came on. "Here we are." She placed his hand on the door handle and walked to the driver's side and got in. Nick took a deep breath and got in beside her.

"So," Elle began as she cranked the car and pulled out into the flowing traffic headed east toward downtown. "Have you ever been to the Ragin Cajun?"

Nick glanced out of the corner of his eye to see through the side window. They were leaving the Galleria behind, and only the darkened road lay ahead. If anybody was watching him, they couldn't see anything now. He removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Yes, I've been there a few times. I love the red beans and rice. The road kill hanging on the walls is a little strange, but I still love the place. I get out there as much as I can."

Elle stomped on the brake, and Nick pitched forward, then slammed back into the seat.

He started to turn, but the cold barrel of a handgun pressed to his skull stopped him.

"Oh, shit."

### Chapter Three

Elle pressed the gun against Nick's temple—if his name really was Nick. How stupid had she been? She'd let a stranger into her car—God, she'd practically *forced* him into her car. And hadn't he put up a good fight about not coming along with her? Very convincing, indeed. It must be part of his scheme. Pretend to be blind, help a woman in some way, and then she's so grateful she trusts him right before he turns on her. *Brilliant*.

"Elle, what are you doing?" He sat perfectly still.

Cars all around them began honking their horns, but Elle held the gun steady. "You aren't blind at all, are you, Nick?"

He shook his head a fraction. "I'm a cop, Elle. Put down the weapon."

She considered this for a moment among the blaring horns and the rapid pounding of her heart. "A cop?"

"I was working outside the Galleria. Put the weapon down, and get out of the traffic before you get us killed."

"Don't move." Elle pressed the gas pedal and pulled the car to the side of the road. She never moved the gun from his head. *Sure, he was a cop*. As she came to a stop, she reached across the steering wheel and killed the engine. "I want to see your badge. Tell me where it is, and I'll get it. You try anything, and I'll shoot you, so help me God."

"I'm not moving. My badge is inside my right coat pocket next to my Glock. Go ahead and pull it out." Nick glanced at her, but he was careful not to move his head. "I'm not going to hurt you, Elle."

She tightened her grip on the .38 pistol she'd carried for years and kept on the floorboard of her front seat. Houston was a dangerous city, and she'd long ago decided to have a weapon in case she ever needed to protect herself. She wasn't sure if she believed this man, but better safe than sorry.

Elle reached across his body and rifled around the bulk of his coat until she found the pocket. Plunging her hand inside, she kept the gun pressed to his head. She encountered the metal shape of the weapon he'd mentioned and then another, smaller leather pouch. She pulled it from his pocket and held it in front of her face in the darkened car, lit only by passing cars and streetlights.

"That's it, Elle," he whispered. "I am a detective with the Houston Police Department. I am not the Houston Marauder, I swear."

Faint with relief, Elle felt all of the blood rush out of her head. "You are a cop." She lowered the gun to her lap. "Thank God. I can't believe how scared I was."

"You were?" he asked. "I *really* need to change clothes now."

"Oh, Nick, I'm so sorry. God, what a day."

Nick looked into her eyes. His were piercing but kind. "Do you know how to shoot that weapon?"

"At this range? Oh, yeah." She placed the gun back down on the floorboard and took a deep breath. "But why were you pretending to be blind?"

"I was working."

"I'm telling you, this is the luckiest day of my life. What were you doing, going after purse snatchers?"

He shook his head and continued to stare at her. "No, not purse-snatchers."

Her heartbeat was beginning to return to normal, but her knees were like jello. "Man, you scared me. Well, if not purse snatchers, then what?"

"I hoped to catch a glimpse of the Houston Marauder."

"Really? You must know everything. What can you tell me about the attacks?"

"You've seen the television and newspaper coverage?"

"Yes."

"Heard the radio reports?"

"Yes, I have."

"Then you know what the police know."

Elle turned to him. "They've got to know more than I do. Three women were abducted, bound, raped and severely beaten with a whip, first a young woman named Elizabeth Manley, followed a week later by Toni McCray and two weeks later by Joyce Johnson. After each abduction, their bodies were left at the Galleria. Two of the women were already dead. That's everything I know."

Nick nodded slowly. "You have been reading the papers."

"I'm a single woman living in a big city alone. When something like this happens, I take notice. But you must know more. There have to be clues and things the police aren't telling anyone. Some kind of evidence to point them in the right direction."

"I really can't talk about an ongoing investigation, Elle." He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You know, you scared the hell out of me just now. Makes me wish my sister carried a gun."

"Your sister?"

He faced the windshield and paused for a long time before continuing. Elle noted the hard clench of his jaw. "Toni McCray, the second victim, is my sister. She's alive, but still in the hospital."

His anger and sadness filled the space around them. She stared once more at the road even though all she wanted to do was take him into her arms and somehow remove the hurt she heard in his voice. The dirty clothing and his agile attack on her purse-snatcher finally made sense. And that kiss—it wasn't the kiss of a grateful homeless man at all but one of Houston's finest.

Searching for something else to say, she could think of nothing besides *I'm so sorry*, which would be as useless as it sounded. As scared as she was a few moments ago, imagining his worry and pain caused her chest to ache.

She placed her hand over his as it rested on his thigh. "I owe you dinner at least. And if you'd like to talk about it, I'm a good listener." She cranked the Honda and pulled back into the traffic, heading once again toward the Ragin Cajun.

"So, yeah," he said, appearing to make an effort to clear his thoughts. "That's why I was there tonight. I was waiting for him when Trenchcoat decided to show up."

"Trenchcoat?"

"That's what I named him when I saw him following you," Nick said.

"You named him?"

"Yeah. It's a habit I developed over the years. When I see a situation, I need names for all the players to develop an action plan. He was Trenchcoat."

"Oh, and who was I?"

"You were Coppertop."

"Coppertop, huh?" She smiled to herself and wiped a hand across her eyes. "I didn't even think you knew what color my hair was until we got in the car. You went undercover as a blind man, so you could see everything without anyone knowing what you were up to. I'll bet all the other detectives are jealous of you. You've got it all figured out, haven't you?"

"Unfortunately, nobody's got it all figured out. No one knows much beyond what you've already read and heard, and that's not enough. The case had gone deadwood in the last week, so I came up with this plan."

"It was a good plan until Trenchcoat and Coppertop showed up." Elle forced a jolliness she did not feel. "So, you'll do it again tomorrow then?"

"Yeah, and every night from now until I catch the sick bastard."

She not only owed him dinner, but if he needed a chance to share his torment, she would listen. "Are you and your sister close?"

"Yeah." Nick took a deep breath.



"I am so sorry, Nick." The words sounded as empty as she'd known they would. She squeezed his hand again.

"Her husband is probably sitting by her bed right now, holding my niece and praying for Toni to come back to the land of the living. He spent the days Toni was missing alternating between caring for Leeza and calling me every hour to find out what we knew."

"Toni was almost comatose when they found her, and although her eyes were open, they were like black holes. She didn't speak. Gary put the baby in her arms after the worst wounds had been bandaged. She didn't even look at the baby. She just stared out the open window at nothing. If Leeza can't bring her back, I didn't know what would."

Elle listened and felt her heart knocking against her chest. "You sound like you know now."

Nick continued to stare straight ahead. "The doctors suggested telling Toni her attacker had been apprehended might help. Gary wanted me to do it, but I couldn't lie to her." He paused a long moment.

"What happened?" she asked. "Gary did it, didn't he?"

Nick nodded. "He was in love and in agony. Yeah, he did."

Elle pulled into the parking lot of the Ragin Cajun and parked the car. She killed the engine and remained silent, waiting for him to continue.

"Toni looked to me and for the first time since we'd found her, her eyes flashed with recognition. She asked me if it was true. I should have lied, should have told her we'd caught the bastard, but I couldn't make myself do it. She knows me better than anybody. She'd know the truth whether I admitted it or not."

"What did you say to her?"

"I told her we'd get him, but she had to help us. She hasn't spoken another word since."

Elle looked at him. The lines around his eyes exposed his pain and exhaustion. "You couldn't lie to her; lying wouldn't have solved anything. You did the right thing."

He was silent for a long time, then slowly put the glasses back on. "I'm not a big fan of lies either, but sometimes it's necessary to get to the truth. I should have tried it anyway."

She shook her head. "I don't think so. Using a lie to get to the truth sounds like an excuse for taking the easy way out. What do the doctors say?"

He looked away again and his shoulders slumped. "With intensive therapy there's no reason she can't make a full recovery. But they're wrong. Whether it's guilt or rage or fear that's keeping her silent, she's not coming back until she knows that guy is dead or behind bars. She's counting on me to make sure that happens."

"I'm sorry I interrupted your work. My lottery ticket seems pretty unimportant compared to that."

"No." He shook his head. "I've got a job to do, and I'm doing it. You didn't stop me from anything. I'm glad I could help." He forced a smile. "You should be celebrating. You've got a lottery ticket to cash in. You weren't kidding about that, were you?"

"No, I have the winning numbers. I *won* the Texas Two-Step lottery." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "This night is surreal, on a lot of levels. First, I win the lottery, then I get mugged, then a blind man who isn't blind saves me, and then I almost kill him."

"You've had quite a night, but most people would agree to go through even that for ten million dollars."

"Well, five million. We are splitting the winnings, remember? Who really needs ten million dollars anyway? Five million is more than I was ever going to make in a couple of lifetimes at the rate I was going. After we eat, I'll take you back to your car and tomorrow morning, we'll go to the Lotto Office and collect our money together."

"Are you insane?" Nick laughed. "Nobody gives away half a fortune!"

"I do." Elle was surer now than ever. "I believe in Karma. I'm about to begin a new life, and if I start out wrong, it might all go down the tubes. You're taking half. It's settled."

She grabbed her purse and opened her door. "Now, even rich, we've still got to eat. I'm starving. Let's go."

Elle walked to the front of the restaurant and waited to make sure Nick followed. He'd put his dark glasses back on and grabbed his cane. Elle walked back to him. "What are you doing?"

Nick smiled, placed his hand on her arm and tapped the ground with his cane as he moved forward. "Until I'm sure the guy is behind bars, I don't want to take any chances while I'm in disguise. Will this bother you?"

Elle followed him. "No, I understand."

They arrived at the front door. "Just do what you would do if you thought I was really blind," he whispered. "To be convincing, we've both got to pull this off."

Elle nodded. The realization that whoever had taken those women could be inside the restaurant unnerved her. Still, if he was going to be apprehended, it was going to take someone craftier than the marauder had shown himself to be to do it, and this policeman had already shown he was capable of bringing a man down should the occasion arise. She'd been the personal recipient of that blessing. She opened the door and led the way.

Nick followed her, his hand on her arm as she chose one of the tables covered in red patterned tablecloths.

Elle held out the chair for Nick and placed her hand on his waist. "The seat is right behind you." Nick lowered himself onto it slowly then collapsed his cane and placed it across his lap.

She sat down on the seat next to him and looked up at the menu on the wall above the counter. "Would you like me to tell you what they have on the menu?"

A man walked up to their table. "Hello, and welcome to the Ragin Cajun. What would you like to drink?"

He held two menus in his hand, handing one to her and a different one to Nick. Elle realized Nick's was in Braille and felt a surge of panic. She doubted part of his undercover training included actually learning Braille. "Want a beer?" she asked, touching his hand.

Nick nodded. "And I'm ready to order." He ran his fingertips over the menu then returned it to the waiter. "I've heard plenty about the red

beans and rice and muffalatta from my friend here. I'll take one of each. And the beer."

Elle nodded at the smoothness of the cover. He must be a very good policeman. "I'll have the same, except for the beer. Sweet tea, please. Thank you."

The waiter smiled at her then walked away. Elle took a deep breath and absorbed the spicy aroma of the New Orleans' style Cajun cooking. She'd never made any Cajun food on her own, but she loved it. Someday she wanted to visit New Orleans during Mardi Gras just to sample all the wonderful food.

"Are you okay?" Nick asked, not looking directly at her, keeping his head forward, his hands flat on the tabletop.

"I was just thinking that someday I'd like to try some of this cuisine straight from the heart of Louisiana herself. I've never been to New Orleans, but I love the food. And the music."

"And now you can." Nick tipped his head up as if to listen more carefully to the sound from the overhead speakers as a rolling Zydeco beat spread throughout the restaurant.

Elle glanced around the room with new eyes. He was right. She could afford to do anything she wanted now. Eat at little spots like this, or four-star restaurants anywhere in the world. The feeling was heady.

The darkened room hosted three other couples sitting on the other side of the restaurant. The couple to her far right held hands and kissed each other across their table. All three couples appeared to notice no one else but their companions.

She looked at Nick again and wondered what he was thinking. He obviously had a lot on his mind, yet he was here sitting here with her. Why?

The memory of the kiss returned in a blinding flash. The realization that he was an undercover cop and not blind at all had taken her mind off being in his arms for a moment, but now the memory came back in full-color. She felt her face grow hot and wondered if, under those dark glasses, Nick could tell. Was he thinking about that kiss, too?

"I think I'll go and wash my hands." Elle rose from her seat.

"I can see you twitching over there." Nick took her hand in his. "Karma or no karma, I really don't want any of your money. You were caught up in the moment. I appreciate the gesture, but I'm not really interested in being a millionaire."

Elle dropped back into the seat—she had been caught up in the moment, all right, but not the moment he was talking about. "Why wouldn't you be interested in being a millionaire?"

He ignored her question. "Is it the lie about me being blind?" he whispered, staring off into space. "I was just doing my job."

"Of course you were," she whispered. "That wasn't a lie. When I found out you weren't blind, I freaked out a little, but I do understand."

Something about him, however, didn't make sense. She couldn't put her finger on it. Yes, he was dressed in disguise; yes, he worked as an undercover detective. Neither of those things bothered her. But still, something niggled at the back of her mind.

"Or maybe it's something else." Nick leaned forward as he pulled her toward him. "Was it this?" He gently brushed his lips over hers.

Elle let her eyes close as she leaned into his mouth. Whatever was bothering her, it wasn't this. She told herself she should be uncomfortable, should be cautious since she didn't know him at all. And yet, this was the one thing that didn't concern her in the least. His kisses were the one thing that seemed perfectly right.

He ended the kiss and leaned away from her a few inches. She looked at her own reflection in his dark glasses, saw the star-struck look in her eyes, and cleared her throat.

Nick nodded, not releasing her hand. "Can I assume you're not married, no boyfriend?"

"Yes, I mean, no. I'm not married, and I don't have a boyfriend. But, Nick..."

Elle forced herself to put some distance between them. He was gorgeous under the dirty clothes, if unreadable behind those dark glasses. He'd spilled his feelings out to her, and his kisses were raw and real. She cleared her throat again. *Slow down. Think before you get yourself into*

*something that could mean real trouble. Not as much trouble as the Houston Marauder, but still very dangerous.*

"I'm glad there's no one else."

"Nick, this is a little fast for me," she finally managed. "Let's not get carried away."

"That doesn't sound like a woman who is about to embark on a whole new life." His smile lit up his features. "I thought the rich didn't worry about tomorrow—only concerned themselves with the here and now, only worried about their personal pleasure. The moment they want things, they get them."

Elle shook her head. "You don't think very highly of rich people, do you? They aren't any different than anyone else. Well, maybe a little different—I'll bet they don't cringe every time they pull a wad of bills out of their mailboxes."

Nick smiled slowly and released her hand. "So, you think the rich are just like everybody else?"

"I don't know." Elle rose from her chair again. "I've never been rich, but I don't see why money has to change anything. I know what I want to be like, rich or poor."

"Money changes people. I've met very few rich people I like. But, I do like you."

## Chapter Four

After she walked away, Nick perused the room. He shifted in his seat to soothe the erection straining against his jeans. Her mouth was hot and her gaze hotter. Damn good thing she'd left when she did. If she came back from the restroom with that same look in her eyes, he would rip down his zipper and bend her over this table.

That would go over big with the Friday night dating crowd.

Rich or not, he wanted her. He'd dated wealthy women in the past, and talk about your cataclysmic nightmares. This woman, however, was a different breed. Seductive, sexual, and smart—the triple threat.

And passionate. Her walk alone stiffened his cock. He could still taste her lips and remember the feel of her arms around him. Soon, he promised himself; very soon, he wanted those legs wrapped around him, too.

Should he tell her he had plenty of his own money and no interest in hers? That he wanted something from her, but it wasn't her damn cash?

Hell, he needed to tell her the truth, but hadn't he been here enough times before? Once women discovered his considerable bank balance, things twisted into bizarre. Just once, he'd like to find a woman *not* interested in him for his money, interested instead solely on his making them come.

He'd tried keeping his financial status a secret before, but women discovered the truth quickly. A phone call from his broker, a request for another matching million-dollar donation to the American Lung

Association; his mother dropping by in her Rolls and wearing every diamond she owned—something always gave him away.

And never, *not once*, had any of those women been annoyed to discover he'd lied to them. Quite the damn contrary, they'd barely contained their delight. He'd instantly gone from handsome poor guy to life-partner material. And their tastes in places to go and things to do changed just as drastically. A picnic lunch suddenly had to include caviar and champagne instead of fried chicken and beer. A fishing trip required a yacht. A night out dancing must begin with dinner at a four-star restaurant.

Yeah, he didn't worry about pulling bills out of the mailbox. Elle was right about that. He didn't worry about money. Not how to invest it, not how much he had and not how much anything cost. He was a simple guy with simple tastes so he had more than enough.

He'd searched now and then for a woman to spend time with, one who would respect the things he cared about. So far, no go. And he had *no* interest in long, expensive trips to Paris or expensive mansions or rare paintings. He drove an old Mustang that was beautiful and reliable but nothing special. He had an old johnboat he kept out in Galveston, and he lived in a simple two-bedroom house in Sugarland, outside Houston. He had a dog and a yard he mowed himself. He was not your typical millionaire, and he didn't give a shit how other rich people lived.

Still, he hated to miss this opportunity, hated to miss his chance with this woman. Her impulsive kiss on the sidewalk had stoked a blaze inside him he'd long considered dowsed. And she'd been as turned on as he was. She'd pressed against him like a second skin when he'd kissed her, her mouth searching and giving as much as his.

*Go and collect the money.* A long drive to Austin with time to talk. Another chance to touch her in the dark. Now *that* sounded full of possibilities.

But if she found out the truth about his financial status, the whole dynamic would change. Right now, she thought he was just another Houston detective—a typical underpaid, no savings, regular guy. It would



no longer be about the obvious heat between them if she knew the truth—everything would become about the money.

No. Not this time.

*Shit. Damn. Hell.* The timing couldn't be worse. The Marauder hadn't shown up tonight, which meant he needed to be back in the same spot tomorrow if he was going to have a shot at catching the bastard. That didn't leave much time for getting to know her, unless...

They could leave tonight and get back early tomorrow afternoon. In the space of fifteen hours or so, he could determine a lot about her, see if she was what she appeared to be or not. See if they were as hot together as he damn well knew they could be. That kind of heat could burn a long, long time. If something even longer lasting dwelt behind that heat—even better.

He could easily imagine clutching that long, wild hair in his hands while he made love to her for a long time to come. Imagine her calling his name. Imagine those eyes staring up at him every day as they had this evening.

He smiled and picked up his beer mug taking a long drink. Now, how to convince her to take him with her *tonight*?

\* \* \* \* \*

Elle smoothed back her hair as she considered her reflection in the mirror. Her heart hammered in her chest, fluttering at the base of her throat. Even after she'd splashed water on it to cool herself down, her face remained flushed. She needed to get a grip on her raging hormones. The earlier kiss had excited her, but this most recent one had been her undoing.

They needed to be on safer ground, away from the topic of sex. Neither of them had mentioned anything specifically sexual, but every time she looked at him the word flashed into her mind. *Sex. Sex with Nick. A lot of hot sex with Nick soon.*

Elle grabbed her handbag off the bathroom counter. That train of thought would get her in a lot of trouble. Oh, but what interesting trouble. She shook her head to clear away the betraying thoughts and walked out.

As she approached their table, the waiter placed dishes of steaming food in front of Nick. She slowed her pace. Now was the time to get it together before she did something crazy, even crazier than the dropping of a few numbered ping pong balls turning her in a millionaire. She sat down and picked up her glass of sweet tea.

Nick reached slowly for his bottle of Lone Star beer. He took a drink, then placed it carefully back in the same place on the table. If she didn't know better, she would believe he really was blind. That would be her opening—and exactly what they needed—a change of subject.

"You must be very good at your job."

Nick picked up his spoon and touched his bowl of red beans and rice with his other hand, then carefully placed his spoon into the bowl. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, you are very convincing." She kept her voice low. "I've watched you since we got out of the car, and if I didn't know better, I'd believe this disguise. Do you know any blind people? How are you so good at this? Oh, and where did you get the cane? Blind Cops 'R Us?"

"My father was blind. The cane was his."

Elle felt her face grow red. Would she never stop saying such thoughtless things? "I'm sorry."

"No big deal. Let's talk about your new-found fortune for a moment. You shouldn't go alone to collect your money. You'll want someone along in case anything goes wrong. You could lose your ticket, someone else could try to mug you...your car could break down." Nick tilted his head up as he looked over her head. "What about going to Austin with me tonight?"

*Tonight?* "The lotto office is closed by now."

"We could check into a hotel and go first thing in the morning. Then you can cash in the winnings, and we'd still make it back into town before I need to be at the Galleria."

Elle felt her breath catch in her throat. Check into a hotel together? The idea was more enticing than she wanted to admit. "Nick, that's a little fast if you're suggesting what I think you're suggesting."

"I'm not suggesting. I'm saying I want to spend the night with you. Preferably with you in my bed and underneath me."

Elle choked on her bite of sandwich. She covered her mouth, coughing as blood raced through her veins. She continued coughing until Nick patted her on the back. Then she laughed.

"You all right?"

Elle finally stopped coughing long enough to take a drink of her sweet tea. She knew she should stand up, grab her bag, and get out of here. That's what a lady would do. The desire his words sent surging through her, however, did not make her want to get up and leave. They made her want to get up, pack up the food they had left and take it with them straight to Austin. Her cheeks burned.

"I'm fine." She cleared her throat. "The next time you plan to proposition me, though, would you give me a little warning first?"

"Whatever you say." Nick's mouth curved into that wide grin she found so appealing. *Appealing and dangerous.*

Elle stared into the black lenses of his sunglasses. "I think you're nuts. I think you're coming onto me as a little entertainment for yourself, and I think it's insulting."

Nick shook his head. "No, you don't."

Elle wanted to argue, wanted to tell him to shove off, but she couldn't make the words come. He was right, of course. Every one of her arguments sounded so right, so proper, but every one was a lie and the farthest thing from her true desires.

"I'll tell you what I think," Nick continued. "I think we can get this food to go, and we'll have plenty of time to talk about why you don't mean a word of it as we drive to Austin."

Drive with him to a hotel? Stay in a room with him? Was she actually considering this? Elle shook her head, forcing sanity back into her thoughts. "Nick, I appreciate what you did for me, I really do. And I, well, I liked kissing you. But..."

Nick took her hands into his. "But you don't know me. You don't know anything about me other than I'm a detective, and I liked holding you in my arms."

Elle nodded and held her breath. "Yes."

He squeezed her hands, gently stroking her fingers with his thumbs. The heat from his touch traveled up her arms and along her limbs to settle low in her belly. She ignored the people sitting around them, the food in front of them, and the fact that she didn't know him at all. The heat from his touch obliterated even her ability to breathe.

Sliding his fingers up her arm to her cheek, he cupped her face. "I can tell you some more things I like. I like kissing you. I like the idea of driving with you to Austin, touching you, telling you about myself and learning about you. We can take it slowly; get separate hotel rooms, if that's what you want. But it isn't what you want, and it's not what I want. We can play games, or I can make love to you all night until you scream my name."

Recklessness overcame her as his words swirled around her, and his thumbs pressed the soft skin below her ear.

"What do you say? Are we ready to get this food to go?" Nick raised his hand and motioned to the waiter. Her skin continued to tingle where he'd touched her.

The bell above the restaurant's front door jingled, fizzling the alluring fantasies his words portrayed and dragging her back to the present.

*Oh, no. "Jeremy."*

"Who?" Nick looked slowly toward the front door, still carefully averting his chin.

"My ex-boss." Elle pulled her hands from his. She wanted to bolt for the restroom again before the little jerk saw her sitting here.

"Ex-boss. And ex-boyfriend?"

"No." Elle kept her voice just above a whisper. "*Hell*, no! That guy is a wart on the butt of humanity."

Nick laughed out loud, and Elle cringed as Jeremy glanced toward their table.

Jeremy turned and walked straight toward them. "Oh, crap. He's coming over."

"I can see that," Nick whispered. "I'm not really blind, remember? Want me to handle him?"

"No." Seeing this jerk was no way to begin the evening Nick had planned for them. Elle wished she'd already agreed to leave.

Jeremy stopped a few steps away. The table stood between them, but Elle's skin twitched the way it had when he'd touched her a few hours ago.

"Hello, Elle."

"Good evening." Nick held his hand out in the general direction of Jeremy's body.

Jeremy looked at Nick, then back to Elle. He took Nick's hand, shaking it quickly and releasing it like he'd touched a coiled snake.

Jeremy stepped around the table toward her and bent over. His face was within inches of hers. "You stormed out so quickly, I didn't have a chance to say good-bye."

Elle drew back. "What are you doing?"

Jeremy placed his hand on her shoulder. As she pulled away, Nick came across the table and grabbed Jeremy by the throat.

"Ah, good guess. I thought your neck would be about right there." Nick lowered his voice. "Now, back the fuck off."

Jeremy coughed and tried to wrench away from Nick's white-knuckled grip. Twisting like a sheet on a line, Jeremy struggled for a moment before Nick shoved him backward, then followed him around the table.

Elle jumped out of her seat, stepped in front of Nick and grabbed his arms. "Please, don't."

Nick looked over her head toward Jeremy. "Take a hike, asshole."

Jeremy backed away from the two of them, then ran outside. The bell jangled as the door opened, then slowly closed behind him.

"What was *that* all about?"

"You tell me." Nick straightened, his jaw tight. "Was he going to kiss you right in front of me? Has he tried anything like that before?"

## **Pay Dirt by Moira Reid**

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Elle felt the eyes of the other patrons on them, then glanced around the restaurant, which only served to confirm the awful feeling. She'd never had two men fight over her before; the experience was highly overrated. She nodded toward the door. "Can we please get out of here?"

## Chapter Five

To Nick's surprise, Elle waited for him by the front door. When he reached her, she grabbed his hand, opened the door, and glanced around the parking lot.

Hesitating only a second, she strode down the steps and toward her car. He followed along, still tapping the damn cane. Nick didn't know if she'd taken his hand as part of their act, if she were afraid Jeremy would reappear, or for another reason entirely. He held out hope for the possibilities of the third option.

Glancing around the edges of his dark glasses, he saw no one else meandering through the parking lot or sitting inside any of the parked vehicles. Jeremy must have burned rubber to get out of here that fast.

Good.

"Did he ever try anything like that before?"

She cocked her head to the side and kept walking. "Let's just get to the car, okay?"

He nodded, but if she thought he was going to drop it when they got to the car, she had another think coming.

When they were safely inside the darkness of the Honda, he removed his glasses and pressed the light button on his watch. It was almost midnight, and although he'd been awake since five a.m., he wasn't the least bit tired. Elle had stirred his blood, and now Jeremy had his adrenaline going. It would take him hours to fall asleep. What he did in those hours was largely up to her now.

Without a word, she cranked the car and pulled into traffic, the tension between them a palpable presence. He rubbed his eyes. *Lucky if she doesn't curb your ass back at the bus stop.*

"Elle, will you talk to me now?"

"Yes, of course I'll talk. Thank you for dinner."

"I'm not talking about dinner—I want to know about that asshole back there. Has he tried to pull that shit with you before?"

"Yes, but I don't work there anymore, and he got nowhere, so it's nothing. I'd rather not talk about him."

"I'm not interested in *him*." Nick struggled to keep his temper in check. Jeremy had his blood boiling, and now this woman was doing exactly the same thing. The only difference being he wanted to break Jeremy's scrawny neck. Hers, he'd like to lick.

"I'm interested in you, and what the hell just happened back there. He doesn't seem to care that you don't work for him anymore. He just fired you, and already he's stepped up to molesting you in a public restaurant in front of your date."

Elle kept her eyes pinned on the road. "First of all, he isn't that brave. He thought you didn't know what he was doing. Secondly, he will never run into me again. This city is huge, and I'm sure I don't hang out in the same places he does. That will probably be the last time I'll ever see him."

"You don't hang out in the same places? You were there, and he was there. Unless you think he followed you there."

She shook her head vehemently. "That's ridiculous. It's just a very unhappy coincidence. Look, can we change the subject? I want to talk about something a little less nauseating than Jeremy Schieffer."

"That was Jeremy Schieffer?" Nick spun toward her. "As in Schieffer, son of the owner of Sharmiah's Clothiers' Schieffer?"

"Yes, so?" Elle asked.

"Rumor has it he's a major jerk off. Which is obviously no rumor. The guy's got a record. You know that?"

"All of Houston knows that. He supposedly beat up his last girlfriend, but his family has plenty of money and a good lawyer. I



wouldn't put anything past him. Jeremy is the kind of guy who thinks the law doesn't apply to him. Seeing that shocked look on his face was almost worth being the center of attention."

"I wish I'd tightened my grip around his neck a little more."

Elle laughed, and the sound floated inside the car, loosening the tension in the air.

"I like your laugh. I'd like to hear more of it."

"Yeah, maybe we'll get together and do this again sometime," Elle said, her voice flat.

"Elle, don't let Jeremy ruin your evening. You should be celebrating. Let me take you to Austin. I'm a great guy, if I do say so myself."

"I'm sure you are." She resisted the urge to smile. If Jeremy hadn't shown up, things might be very different, but Nick's clutch on Jeremy's throat had jarred her back to reality. She didn't know this guy, and an impulsive jaunt to Austin with him for a wild night of sex was *not* the normal way she spent her nights. Just because she'd won a lot of money shouldn't change that. And just because he was gorgeous and hot...well, that shouldn't change it either. She parked her Honda alongside Nick's car and turned off the engine.

"This has been an interesting evening," she forced herself to say as she avoided looking at him. "But this is probably as far as it should go."

"Is that what you want?" Nick moved closer, until his face was mere inches from hers.

Elle looked at his lips and then back into his eyes. *This is not a normal night.* She could smell the woodsy scent of his cologne as she imagined him closing the distance between them. *And I don't want normal anymore. I want him.*

He pressed his hand to her breast and brushed his thumb over her nipple, sending a flash of sensation through her body. "Because I want something else. I want you naked and under me."

She blinked and held her breath for a long moment. When he continued to stare into her eyes, her resolve disappeared. "And then what would you do?"

He opened the car door and stepped out onto the street. Resting his arm on the top of the frame, he leaned back inside. "Come here a minute."

She got out and walked to his side of the car. The distant streetlights cast half of his face in shadow.

He pressed her back against the driver's side door, his erection against her thigh. "You deserve a proper bed somewhere a little more private. But if you don't want to go with me to Austin tonight, I'm more than willing to make love to you here. Just say the word."

His hands traveled down her back and then cupped her ass, holding her firmly but gently against his hard body. He captured her mouth with his as she had done earlier to him, removing all remaining question from her mind. Her lips parted, and his tongue moved against hers in a searing heat. The kiss deepened, and the warmth in her belly spread through her, settling between her thighs.

He slipped his hand under her blouse and cupped her breast. "Do I take this off now?" he asked, lifting the bra cup over her breast and twisting her nipple between his fingers. "Or in Austin?"

*Now and in Austin*, she wanted to whisper against his hot mouth but could find no breath to put voice to her desire. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his lips back to her own.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," he whispered against her mouth, then unfastened the front closure on her bra.

She shivered involuntarily before his hands moved over her flesh, and his mouth reclaimed hers.

Nick slid his hand beneath the waistband of her skirt and clutched her ass. "So nice," he murmured against her lips.

"Suck my nipples." As she heard herself say the words, the spark of desire in his eyes stoked to a flame. He captured her with his gaze then slowly unfastened the top few buttons on her blouse. Taking each in turn, he sucked and nipped her breasts with his lips and teeth. Elle held his head in her hands as she closed her eyes and leaned back against the car, letting her head fall back on the roof.

Sliding her skirt up along her thighs, his voice took on a rough edge, as if he were straining for control. "Elle..."

"Don't stop."

He unfastened his pants and let them fall low on his hips. As his erection sprang free, she wrapped her hand around his hard, thick cock, eliciting a groan from deep in his chest. Pressing his palm against her mound, he squeezed.

"Make love to me," she whispered.

He pulled a condom from his back pocket, ripped it open and slipped it on.

Her panties slid to her knees, his finger burning a trail down the delicate skin along the inside of her thighs. Releasing her grasp on his cock, she clutched his side, his body the only steady thing in the swirling need spinning in and around her.

Nick pressed against her wet opening but did not enter her. The urge to thrust her hips forward, to capture him with her body, burned through her every pore. Sultry night air caressed her skin as she forced herself to wait for him. He held her face to his. "You're so wet, Elle." Low and menacing, his voice rang with barely contained desire.

"Please. I want you," she whispered against his lips.

He shoved his cock inside her and captured her lips in a kiss, stilling her shout of pleasure. He withdrew, then plunged inside her again.

His third stroke against her clitoris sent orgasm tearing through her body. The deep kiss muffled her scream as he continued to move inside her, pressing her back against the window of the car.

"More?" he whispered.

She bucked her hips against him, driving him deeper and harder. She couldn't get enough of him. He wrapped her legs around his thighs and carried her around to the front of the car. He lay her body down on the hood, never releasing her from the joining of their two bodies.

Lying back, she stretched her hands to clutch the sides of the hood as he leaned over her, riding her toward another course of heat building inside her pussy. He pinned her elbows down on the hood with his hands as he pumped inside her, then stifled her third scream with his mouth as he came.

Resting his head next to hers, he ended the kiss, his lips on her neck. For a long moment, he didn't move. She gasped the warm air deeply into her lungs then turned and kissed his ear.

"*And in Austin,*" she whispered.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back inside her car moments later, Nick stroked her hair. He couldn't stop staring at her. She'd been beautiful before, but now her face glowed. The tension in his shoulders had disappeared, too.

"How you feeling?" he asked.

"Pretty darn good." She smiled at him as she touched his face. "I've never done anything like that in my life."

"You're about to be a very wealthy woman. You said you wanted to find out how the wealthy live." Nick rubbed his hand over her cheekbone. "Maybe this is how they live."

"Not a bad way *to* live." She hesitated for a moment, then her face reddened. "Guess we can't say the same thing about you."

"What?"

"How'd you happen to have a condom so readily available?"

He laughed. God, he thought she'd been onto him already. "I hand them out to teenagers at talks the department gives on safe sex. Happened to have an extra. We'll need to stop somewhere along the way though—that was my last one."

She smiled. "So, we're going to do that again?"

"Oh, yeah." He leaned toward her and kissed her soundly. "You ready for Austin? A much more comfortable bed awaits us."

"Well, I hate to say it, but maybe not. I'm not rich yet, you know." She shook her head. "The only credit card I have is maxed out. I'm not sure they'll let me stay on a promise of lotto winnings."

"I'll pay. When you get the money, if you want to, you can pay me back. If you don't want to, you can consider it my congratulations present."

Elle seemed to consider the options as she watched him.

"Hey," Nick said. "It's a road trip. You don't have to get up for work tomorrow, remember? You can stay up all night if you want! We get there, hit the nightlife, dance a little, have a few drinks, and check into the best hotel in town. You can think of it as the last irresponsible thing you did before you had to get serious about managing your millions."

"Manage my millions. That sounds so strange."

"I'm sure it's work." Work he didn't have to do, thank God. His paychecks were deposited directly into his brokerage account, and his money manager handled his investment portfolio.

Nick considered his options. What difference could it possibly make to tell her the truth now? He liked her, and she obviously liked him. Then, again, there'd be plenty of time to discuss their financial lives before bringing his family and fortune into this.

Right now, they were both basically broke in her mind—and together because they wanted to be. If everything continued down the path they'd taken, then he'd confess everything.

"We'll be back here in time for me to stake out the same location tomorrow. For tonight, let's do this. With the Marauder around and you holding something this valuable, wouldn't you feel safer with a police escort, anyway?"

Elle smiled. "Interesting logic. All right, if we're going, I think we should take your car. And I think I should drive it."

"Agreed. Here," Nick pulled his keys out of his pocket and handed them to her. "You crank mine up. I'll park yours in my spot, and we'll be on our way."

Moments later, Elle unlocked the vintage Mustang convertible and got in. "Ah, classic American engineering." Nick's immaculate vehicle smelled like new leather. She wondered if he used those 'new car scent' air fresheners. The vehicle certainly wasn't new.

This was her favorite Mustang body style, 1965, the only sports car ever made that she thought looked right for a woman. She couldn't wait to drive it. She turned the key in the ignition and listened to the purring engine.

"This is a beautiful car. Finding a classic car in this kind of shape is impossible. Not that I've ever been able to afford one, but I keep an eye out for them in the paper. Red is my preferred color, of course, but dark blue isn't bad. Where'd you pick it up?"

"A local guy. I'll move your car."

She pulled his car away from the curb, allowing Nick room to pull her old Honda into the spot. Parking this far from the mall was free so leaving it here all day wouldn't be a problem. On the other hand, if someone stole it, did it really matter? If it was here when she got back, she would take it to a dealer, see what she could get for it, and find a Mustang of her own.

Nick opened the passenger door and got in, handing her keys back. "Ready?"

"I guess so. How tacky is it to show up without luggage?"

"You don't have to worry about things like that anymore," he said as he fastened his seatbelt. "You can do anything you want now."

She headed toward Interstate 10. "You said that before. Do you really believe having money gives a person license to behave differently?"

"Depends on what you mean by differently. Some rich people I've met think it gives them license to do just about anything they want. If that means leaving town without a toothbrush or change of underwear, that's perfectly within their, and your, prerogative. It's one of the good things about being rich. Enjoy it."

Elle considered his statement for a moment then nodded. "It hasn't sunk in yet. I keep having this thought that I misread the numbers or I'm going to lose the ticket before I get there, or I'm going to get there and they'll tell me I'm too late to claim the prize."

"Like that dream you have when you show up at school on the last day of classes, have a bunch of tests that day, can't find your classroom, haven't been to class all semester, in fact...all the nightmares of school wrapped into one dream."

"Yes! How did you know I have that dream?"

"Everybody has that dream. Are you naked when you have it?"

Elle laughed. "Not usually. When I'm in the naked dream, I'm always at a large social gathering of some kind."

"Me, too," Nick said.

The car grew quiet, and Elle pulled onto Interstate 10 and headed toward Austin. "I've wanted one of these cars all my life."

"And now you can have one. You can probably have just about anything you want."

"I don't want much. I'm a little overwhelmed about the whole thing, if you want to know the truth. All I'm really happy about is that I won't have to balance my checkbook anymore."

Nick shook his head. "Now you can hire someone else to do that for you. And someone to find you a mansion, someone else to clean the mansion, someone to cook your food, someone to wash your clothes...if you're not careful, you'll spend yourself right out of anything to do. Except drive around in your new car, that is."

Elle shook her head as she listened to him. "Is that what you plan to do with your half?"

Nick coughed. "Well, I like doing my own laundry and cooking my own food. I would have someone else balance my checkbook though. I never liked doing that. Besides, how do you fit in all the zeros in that little space they give you in the check register?"

Elle laughed and relaxed. Inside his car, with him next to her, she felt safe for the first time in a long time. Living alone in a big city like Houston could be frightening. Today, when Jeremy had fired her, she'd felt about as alone and scared as she'd ever been. Then, when her purse had been snatched, she'd been slapped with how truly unsafe the city was.

And then, Nick changed everything.

"You all right?" Nick asked.

Elle was glad for the darkness inside the car. "I wonder how far it is to Austin. This is the right way, right?"

"Yep." Nick settled back into his seat. "I wouldn't mind stopping somewhere to get some clothes. We probably should have changed before we left. Ah, the heck with it. We'll buy new clothes."

"Absolutely." Elle forced herself back into the spirit of the moment. "Why shouldn't we? Tomorrow morning, as soon as the stores open, we can go shopping, then hit the lottery office and cash in."

Nick laughed. "First, though, there's tonight. What would you like to do?"

"It's so late," Elle said. "I'll bet nothing is even open."

"It's Friday night in a college town; there'll be something to do."

"I don't think I'm up for a kegger."

"If you prefer something more sedate, we can hang out in the hotel bar until the piano man shuts down for the night."

"Piano man? You know a place that has a piano bar? I'd love that."

Nick nodded, his face lit intermittently as the headlights from oncoming cars illuminated it. "I do, and I could go for a beer. Or maybe we should spring for some champagne."

"I'm not much of a drinker. I saw too much of it at a place I used to work. People become idiots when they drink too much."

Nick laughed. "Where did you work?"

Elle paused. What kind of judgment would he make when he found out the truth? She didn't want the rest of this trip to be uncomfortable. On the other hand, if he didn't like her for who she was, then no matter how sexy, he wasn't the guy for her.

"You're thinking too much again. I know how to keep a secret. What horrible place did you work? What were you, a bartender for some seedy dive?"

"No, I wasn't a bartender."

"Naked dancer?" Nick asked, laughing.

Her heart rose into her throat. So what if he judged her? She'd had a job, and it paid the bills. She wasn't proud of it, but she'd never done anything to be ashamed of. She danced, and she got paid. And then she'd gone home at night...alone. She took a deep breath.

"I wasn't naked, but yeah, I was a dancer."

Nick nodded. "You still a dancer?"

"No."

"Why not?"



"I didn't particularly like the clientele. I got sick of seeing people drunk and behaving like animals or idiots. It just got to be more appalling than I could stomach. So I quit and got the job at the mall."

"You did it for the money. I understand the money is pretty good."

"Yeah, I did it for the *money*. Why else would someone do it?"

Nick shrugged. "Attention, praise, low self-esteem, who knows?"

"I do not have low self-esteem!"

"I didn't say you did. I specifically said you did it for the money. How long did you do it?"

"Just over a year. When I'd made enough to get myself into a financial situation I could live with, I quit. I'm not rich, well, I wasn't rich, but I was making it okay after the dancing ended. That job saved my ass, if you want to know the truth."

Nick nodded. "Which club did you work for?"

"Gentlemen of Houston. Not far from where I work now—well, where I worked until I got fired. As bad as it was, it still wasn't as bad as working for Jeremy, now that I think of it."

"Asshole."

"Yeah, and you know, Jeremy must have seen me there at some point. I didn't tell you this earlier, but he threatened to spread around what I used to do if I breathed a word about his harassment."

"He threatened you? Now I'm sure I should have broken his scrawny neck when I had the chance."

"How do *you* know the Gentlemen's club? I don't remember ever seeing you in there."

"We busted the place for drugs a few times over the years. I guess you weren't there long enough. Either that, or your timing is great and you missed it. My sister used to go there occasionally for their Chippendale nights when her friends had bachelorette parties. It was all in fun, she said. The night she was abducted she was there for a party. She was gone for five days."

Five days. The words sent a gripping chill of dread across the nape of her neck, like cold fingernails prickling along her skin. She'd waitressed on nights the club held 'women only' parties. The female customers were

nicer, didn't grab her ass or her breasts, and tipped well. The champagne was usually flowing, and the women at the bachelorette parties were the freest with their money. It was always a good night to work, and she'd worked most of them.

"What does your sister look like?"

"Toni." His voice had dropped to almost a whisper. "Before this happened, she was beautiful. Long, blond hair—thin, tall—gorgeous blue eyes. Whatever happened to her besides the obvious bruising and rape changed her. She can move around, eat, and get dressed on her own. But she doesn't speak, and she doesn't bathe unless her husband does it for her. She won't get out of bed unless someone forces her. Then, she'll sit in a chair for hours, staring out the window."

Elle placed her hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry, Nick."

Nick reached into his back pocket and removed his wallet. He slid out a photograph and handed it to her. Elle flipped on the interior lights and glanced away from the road to the photograph.

The cold fingers of dread tightened around her neck. "Oh, my God. I know her."

## Chapter Six

"You know her?" Nick asked.

"She was a great tipper, always happy, always smiling and laughing."

"How long ago did you quit there?"

Elle shifted in her seat. She knew she'd made it sound like her stint there had been a long time ago, but she owed him the truth. "A year."

"You're telling me you remember her out of all the people you saw while you were there?"

"No waitress or dancer ever forgets a good tipper. And we especially don't forget a nice customer. Your sister, Toni, was always polite. She drank dirty martinis with six olives and always paid in cash."

Nick coughed. "That's her drink, but that's impossible. She couldn't have gone there more than two or three times."

Elle wasn't sure what to say, but his sister had spent a lot more nights there than that. Elle wondered if she should tell him. With her current condition depending on him finding her abductor, the complete truth was probably best. Still, telling him when he was already upset didn't seem a very kind thing to do.

"Maybe you're remembering wrong."

"It's possible," Elle said.

Nick paused then turned to face her in his seat. "No, it isn't. It was her, wasn't it? How many times was she there? Four, five?"

Elle was careful not to let him see her eyes for fear of giving away too much. "Does it really matter? I mean, it's none of my business anyway, right?"

"That was the last place she was seen before the abduction. I've been basing everything on the assumption that she wasn't there very often. If she was a regular, I need to know. The guys working the case think this was a random grabbing. If she was targeted, it could change the whole face of the investigation."

Elle turned to look at him. The anger in his features was eclipsed only by the hurt. It was in Toni's best interest to tell the truth, no matter how much it might hurt Nick to hear it.

"She was there a lot."

"How often is *a lot*?"

"Every night we had the Chippendales. While I worked there, the Chippendales were on stage at least two or three times a month. Every night I worked it, she was there."

Nick stared out the passenger window, as if something in the darkness would shed light on the reasons why. "Well, I'll be damned."

Elle left him alone with his thoughts as she drove. He didn't speak as she pulled off Interstate 10 and checked the road signs. Finally, she could stand the silence no longer.

"It's adult entertainment. She's a grown woman, Nick."

"If she hadn't been out doing God knows what, this would never have happened!" Nick shouted. "Toni has a husband and a child, for crying out loud! What in the hell did she think she was doing, trying to recapture her youth?"

"I don't know." His anger wasn't directed at her, but she hesitated to add to it. *A husband*. Should she tell him the rest?

Nick fumed in silence for a while longer. As she entered the city, she cleared her throat. "I'm not sure where I'm going, Nick."

He continued to stare out the passenger window.

"We don't have to do this tonight. I'll just find a Holiday Inn or something. It's no big deal."

Nick shook his head. "I told you that I'd come with you. I want to be here. This is your big moment. I'm just a little distracted."

"It's okay."

"The place is in the middle of town. Go another five blocks and turn right."

Elle didn't say anything else as she followed his instructions and pulled up in front of a massive hotel. A man jumped out from the curb, ran around to her door and opened it for her.

"Hello, and welcome to Hale's Ford Inn. My name is Enrique, and I'm happy to get you checked in tonight." Enrique was about five feet tall, handsome, young and well dressed. He held his hand out to Elle. She took it, then stepped out of the vehicle.

As Nick climbed out of the car, she noted the look of recognition on Enrique's face. "Any bags I can get for you, Mr. Damato?" he asked as he walked around to the trunk of the Mustang.

"No bags, Enrique, thank you. Elle?"

Elle folded her hand into his then followed him through the large panel doors of frosted glass encased in dark stained oak. "You know him?"

"I've been here a few times," he said, offering no further explanation.

The interior of the hotel was like something out of a Hollywood movie. The floor was marble, the drapes a rich, deep burgundy. Various sitting areas surrounded a large fireplace in the middle of the room and separated the front desk from the entry foyer by a considerable distance. The place looked like a cross between money and more money and represented how she could begin to live now that she had access to some herself. And she liked that idea more than she wanted to admit.

"This way." Nick placed his hand at the small of her back as he led them both to the front desk. A smartly dressed young woman stood behind the expansive cherry counter, her brown hair in a razor cut pageboy, her smile larger than those on toothpaste commercials.

"Oh, Mr. Damato. Welcome back." Her impossibly white teeth sparkled in the soft lighting of the room. "We're so glad you could join us tonight. Would you like your regular suite?"

Elle frowned. "Regular suite? What's going on here, Nick?"

"We'll have one of the suites with adjoining rooms." Nick ran his hand through his hair. *Shit*. He bent over and whispered into Elle's ear. "Trust me. I'll explain everything when we get to the room."

"Maybe you'd better explain now."

Nick signed the papers the woman put in front of him and forced a smile. "Thanks, Lisa." He picked up the card key and led Elle away from the front desk before Lisa said something else that would expose him.

"Elle, I said I'd bring you to the nicest hotel in town, and I'm not going to crap out now. This is the best place in Austin; I come here whenever I need to get away."

"Even so," she said as he guided her toward the elevator. "How does everyone know your name?"

"You knew Toni's name. I'm a good tipper myself, and I make it a point to know the people I meet. I've never brought another woman here, if that's what you're thinking."

She stared at him skeptically for another long moment.

"And I'm not going to sneak into your room in the middle of the night and take advantage of you if that's what you're afraid of. I'll be there if invited, though," he added, smiling.

Elle smirked. He grabbed her hand and followed Enrique into the elevator. The glass elevator revealed the city sinking below them as the elevator moved up toward the penthouses.

His hotel had the nicest rooms in the state. In spite of disliking most things to do with wealth, he did enjoy owning this hotel and visiting here often, and he could see that she was enjoying it too. Soon to be a very rich woman, her days of cheap motels were over. By the look on her face, she'd already begun to enjoy her newly found fortune.

He needed to change his attitude. It wasn't Elle's fault his sister watched Chippendale dancers every week, putting herself in a dangerous situation that could have gotten her killed.

He let the light of excitement in her eyes flood over him. He tried to imagine what it would be like to enjoy his money—really enjoy it. His family had always had money. His great-grandfather hit oil in Houston when prices were good, and his legacy had set the family for life. He'd gone to the finest private schools and the best colleges. He'd had the best of everything since birth. Which was why he'd joined the police force in the first place; he wanted to give something back. His mother had told him he was crazy, but he'd wanted to do something better, something more important than just become a playboy and spend his millions.

So, he'd become a cop, then a decorated detective, but none of it had mattered. In spite of his best efforts, his sister...

The elevator stopped, and Nick pulled Elle along with him down the hall as they followed the bellman. That was it. This line of thinking got him nowhere. Tomorrow he would be at the stakeout site, and he would apprehend the bastard. Tonight, he would enjoy a beautiful woman's company and his money, two things he seldom ever took the time to enjoy.

He handed the electronic card to Enrique, who slipped it into the door slot. After a click, the door fell open. The bellman entered first, flipping on lights as he moved.

"Thanks, Enrique. That's all we need." Nick reached into his pocket and handed the man a twenty-dollar bill, hoping to head off any further commentary that would have to be explained later.

"I hope this room meets with your approval, sir. Your beds will be turned down as soon as you like."

"That won't be necessary," Elle said. "I can still turn down my own bed, thank you."

"Enjoy it, Elle. This is part of that 'being rich' life you're beginning tonight. Good night, Enrique."

"Yes, sir." The bellman placed the card key on the dresser then exited quietly. The door clicked closed behind him.

"So." Nick gestured to the expansive suite. "Does this meet with your approval?"

She walked slowly around the room, glancing at each crystal vase filled with fresh flowers, the bookshelves on the far wall stocked with hardbound classics, and the fireplace already stoked and crackling in the living room. She lovingly touched the fine oak furniture, opened the armoire and saw the large, flat screen television inside, then lowered herself onto the bed's fluffy burgundy and green comforter.

"I should say so." Elle rubbed her hands across the soft fabric. "I've never seen anything this nice in my life."

Nick opened the adjoining room door. "Your room is through here, unless you want this one." He flipped on the wall switch, and two small bedside table lamps blazed to life. This part of the suite had a similar layout, and another fireplace blazed in the corner of the room. One of the rules he'd instituted when he bought the place: make sure the fireplaces are burning when guests enter the room.

"They've got the air conditioner going full force in here," Elle said, following him.

"So the fireplaces can burn and not heat us out of here—the answer to creating instant ambiance. Do you like it?"

Elle got up and followed him into the room. "Like it? Who wouldn't? We should check out the mini bar. I could go for a soda or something. Where is it?"

"Not a mini bar." Nick opened the refrigerator. "It has a *bar*...full sized, fully stocked. How about some wine? No, we should have champagne."

"A drink now might knock me out cold." She came around the bar and checked out the inside of the refrigerator herself. "Holy cow! They've got everything in here."

"Let's open a bottle. One small drink?" Nick pulled one of the bottles out and checked the label. "Dom Perignon sound good?"

"I've died and gone to heaven," she said, pulling two glasses off the shelf and placing them down on the bar. "I've served drinks before, but never had any of the champagne."



Nick pulled the wrapper off the bottle then deftly removed the cork. "Those are wine glasses. The champagne glasses are in the other cabinet."

"Oh."

"We'll have to send you to Miss Porter's now that you've got money. You can learn all the carefully defined rules of behavior and etiquette for the wealthy."

She placed two champagne flutes down on the bar then moved toward the fireplace, her back ramrod straight. He poured champagne into both flutes then carried them over. "Elle?"

She turned around; her cheeks were red. "Yes, thank you."

*Oh, damn.* His own money obviously hadn't bought him any *la finesse privilégiée*. "I'm sorry, Elle. That was rude. Maybe I should go to Miss Porter's."

As she took the flute from his hand, her fingers brushed over his, stirring an erotic tingle along his arm. He held his glass to hers. "To your good fortune."

"Cheers." She clinked her glass against his and took a long drink. He watched the muscles in her neck move as she swallowed the expensive elixir and imagined placing his lips on the tender flesh. "It is still considered good form to touch glasses, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is." Nick took a drink, not tasting it. He wasn't a big fan of the bubbly, even if this was supposed to be the best. Swallowing the champagne, he set his glass on the coffee table. What a waste to imbibe when the woman in front of him intoxicated him more than all the liquor in the wine cabinet.

Her cheeks were still red, and she wouldn't meet his gaze. Nick shook his head; this crap had to stop. "Elle, let me tell you something: I'd like to dispense with the glasses altogether, pour champagne over your breasts and drink it off your nipples."

She choked on her drink. "*That's not in Emily Post.*"

"To hell with Emily Post. I meant..."

She turned back to the fireplace and put her glass on the mantle. "You *meant* that I'm what the rich call 'new money.' Not born into family

wealth that spans centuries. No polo ponies or boarding schools or wine cellars. Just a stripper who bought a lucky lotto ticket."

"No, that's *not* what I meant. I don't think that."

"Okay. What do you think then?"

Nick grabbed her wrist and turned her toward him, claiming her mouth. She did not respond for a long moment, her body stiff, until she finally relaxed in his arms, her lips softening against his.

"I think," he whispered, "that you are beautiful, funny, and intelligent. I think you're sexy as hell, and I want to make love to you again. I don't give a shit if you lived in a garbage can and never saw the inside of *any* school before tonight. I want you, and money has absolutely nothing to do with it."

She gazed into his eyes for a long moment then smiled. "Well, that's more like it, then."

## Chapter Seven

Nick's words had injured Elle's pride, but just as quickly restored it. She rubbed her hands over his shoulders, stepped up on her tiptoes and kissed him for real this time, trailing her tongue over his lips, chin and down to his neck. She nibbled his firm flesh and let her hands trail down his torso.

"Expensive champagne or not, it tastes a lot better on your tongue."

He groaned and pulled his fingers through her hair, sending small, tender shivers along the nape of her neck. "If you keep doing that, we'll never make the piano bar, dancing, or any parties."

His voice had deepened, rumbling against her chest. She stepped back, pulled her blouse and bra over her head in one swift motion, then picked up the champagne bottle.

"I liked that other idea better."

As he watched, she poured the champagne over her breasts, letting it spill over her belly to the waistband of her skirt. His eyes blazed and widened.

"Champagne without glasses?" she asked.

He yanked his shirt over his head and knelt down in front of her. Placing his hands low on her hips and beginning at her navel, he licked her flesh with long strokes, lapping up the champagne as he moved upward toward her breasts.

His mouth sent ripples of hot pleasure along her skin, the sound of his lapping tongue filling her senses. They *could* finish their drinks and

talk a little while, maybe go down to the piano bar. But as her blood raced and she watched his mouth with fascination and anticipation she knew that no piano man could compare to this.

His tongue delighted her flesh as he drank in the sweet fluid from the bottom of her breast slowly upward until he reached the tip of her nipple, took it into his mouth and suckled her until she felt dizzy.

"This stuff is better than I remember," he mumbled against her flesh.

"Champagne flute, my ass." Elle turned the bottle up and, taking a long swallow, let the cold liquid flow down her chin, over her breasts and onto his lips. She watched him lap at her flesh, moving from one breast to the other and back again.

He slid his hands down low on her hips, hooked his thumbs into the waistband of her skirt and slid the fabric down her thighs. Trailing his hand with his mouth, he sucked the champagne down the inside of one thigh and up the inside of the other.

She took another drink of the champagne, this time to cool the fever burning inside her belly. Moving lower, his mouth traveled closer and closer to the apex of her thighs. Her knees began to buckle.

He caught her as she slipped to the floor in front of the fireplace. Kneeling face to face, she closed her eyes as he captured her mouth again, his hands moving over her back and cupping her ass in his hands. He pressed her body against the erection straining against his jeans.

His mouth moved over hers, then to her cheek and down to her neck. "I promised you a comfortable bed this time," he mumbled against her throat, then nuzzled her ear.

*We didn't buy the condoms.* The thought moved into her mind for an instant, then just as quickly floated away in the fire and his embrace.

"I don't care," she whispered.

He helped her up from the floor, then lifted her body into his arms. "I care. You deserve better than this wood floor."

His mouth descended on hers once more, taking away her will to care about anything including beds or condoms...anything other than this. His body against hers, his mouth on hers, his kisses set fire to

everything inside her. He plundered her mouth as they moved through the room, the motion of his steps rocking her against him. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she reveled in the taste of him, the heat of his tongue inside her mouth, the warmth and strength of his arms holding her.

When the motion stopped, she felt herself being lowered, and the soft plush of a down comforter touched her naked skin.

He lifted his lips from hers, and she forced her eyes to open through the semi-drugged state of bliss. His eyes locked on hers.

"Don't move from that spot."

Nick grabbed the telephone, quickly punching in a series of numbers. "Yeah, it's Nick. Would you send up a box of condoms right now, please? I need them in the next five. Can you do that?"

He said something else Elle couldn't hear, hung up the phone and joined her on the bed.

"And here I thought room service only delivered dinner."

His eyes intent on her body, his only nod to her attempt at humor was a slight crook of his lips as he slid to the foot of the bed. Taking her ankles in his hands, he slowly spread her legs, then lay down between them.

Resting on his elbows, he looked up at her, his face a breath away from the wet folds of her panties.

"Some hotels are nicer than others."

He lowered his lips to the dampened silk fabric, and she fell backward on the bed, burying her face under the pillows to stifle the groan in her throat.

"Oh, God."

He blew warm air through the fabric, then slipped a finger beneath the edge of her panties and slid them aside, exposing her moist center to cool air. She shivered until his tongue skimmed over her pussy in one long upward stroke to her clit, when her body convulsed with a shock of new heat.

The sound and feel of the panties ripping off her thighs caused her to send the pillows flying off the bed. His chuckle tickled her pussy more

as he buried his face deeper, sinking his tongue inside her. She grabbed his hair, winding the long strands into her fists as aching, burning need from his touch swelled inside her, taking her quickly to the edge.

The knock on the door stopped him cold.

"Nick, no!" she whispered as he pulled away from her.

He smiled, his eyes blazing. "One second. Get on your hands and knees. I'll be right back."

He left the room without another word. She could hear him open the front door and speak to someone, the deep timbre of his voice urgent. Her pussy ached for the orgasm she'd been quickly approaching, and as she turned over on the bed, rising to her hands and knees, it was his mouth she wanted. His tongue, a potpourri of sensation and pleasure, stroking her pussy again. She wanted him inside her, yes, but oh, his mouth was magical.

She glanced up as he reentered the room and walked over to her. He tossed the box of condoms on the bedside table.

"The way you look right now, I want to go through that entire box."

He unbuttoned his pants and slid them down his thighs, then stepped out of them. The sight of his erection stole her breath. He'd been inside her tonight, but she hadn't seen him up close like this. His chiseled muscles, the taut skin—she could imagine staring at his body for hours.

But his plan obviously did not allow her to spend any time staring. He walked to the foot of the bed, sat down on the floor and laid his head back against the mattress.

Elle glanced back to the side table. "You know, those don't really work unless you take them out of the package."

He took her calves in his hands and pulled her gently toward him. "Slide back here."

She squatted down until her pussy was positioned a few inches over his mouth. She yearned to close the distance and connect her need once more with his ability to satisfy it. He slid his hands up to her buttocks, then began to stroke his fingers down her thighs until her legs trembled with the desire to lower her hips.

"Nick, please."

One quick movement of his head between her legs, and his tongue instantly reignited the fire inside her. She pressed closer to that wonderful long, hot stroke as he buried his face in her pussy.

She clutched the comforter in her fists as the fire burned hotter and hotter once more inside her. He slid both hands up to her breasts, finding both nipples and pinching them hard between his thumb and forefingers as his tongue completed what he'd begun. Orgasm shattered through her, startling her with its sudden intensity, and she screamed his name.

He tightened his grip on her nipples, sinking his tongue even deeper inside her as waves and waves of exquisite pleasure washed over her.

When the tide finally subsided, she felt him move away as her limbs gave out, and she collapsed onto the bed, her long legs hanging over the end of the mattress. Her eyes were closed, but she could still hear him moving around the room.

She forced her eyes open and saw him standing next to the bed, his enormous erection already sheathed and jutting out deliciously from his body. The piercing ache inside her began again, but her muscles would not cooperate.

"Roll over, if you can."

She slowly turned on the bed, until she lay on her back with her eyes half-open, every muscle in her body relaxed as she watched the mixture of desire and amusement in his eyes.

He climbed onto the bed beside her, lay down and began stroking her hair. "Need to rest a while first?"

She shook her head and kissed him, sliding her hands down his stomach then touching his cock, encircling it with her hand.

"I want to be inside you," he said as he slid over her, bracing himself on his elbows. His cock rested against her soaking wet opening. "But you look exhausted."

With every ounce of willpower she possessed, she planted her feet on the mattress and levered herself up against him, the head of his cock entering her. "Oh, yes," she managed as she closed her eyes.

He needed no other encouragement as he moved his cock slowly inside her wet opening. He lay still a long moment and kissed her tenderly. She returned his kiss, encouraging him to increase the heat. She hadn't done this in a long time; hell, she'd never done anything like this.

"If you fall asleep on me, I'll never get over it," he whispered against her lips as he pulled away from her slowly then thrust forward.

Her eyes opened wide, and she smiled against his mouth. "That will keep me awake."

He laughed, then repeated the motion. The low groan from her throat vibrated against his lips as she began to move beneath him, her hips grinding upward as he pulled away then thrust again.

With each subsequent thrust, their kisses grew deeper and hotter, her hips moving fervently against him. Releasing her from the kiss, he looked down her gorgeous body, seeing the perspiration on her skin glisten in the firelight. He clutched her damp hair in his fingers as she slid her hands down his thighs. When she clutched his balls in her hands and squeezed them gently, his orgasm shuddered through him.

He continued to pump his hips against her until he'd spent himself, and when he stopped the movement, she opened her eyes. A slow smile moved over her full lips. "You can keep me awake like that anytime," she whispered, then closed her eyes once again.

By the time he'd removed the condom and returned to the bed, she was sound asleep. He curled up next to her and pulled the edge of the comforter over them both, ready to give into his own exhaustion.

But sleep evaded him. His body replete, his mind refused to follow as it ran through the details of the investigation. These past hours with Elle had camouflaged the nagging thoughts for a while, but they returned with a vengeance.

He buried his face in Elle's hair and breathed in the sweet scent of her body, trying once more to push them away. He didn't want to think about the investigation while this beautiful woman lay beside him. All he wanted to think about was *her*—her body, her smile, her face.

Still, his mind refused to cooperate.



Most likely, James and Mark had already gone home for the night. If there were a chance in hell they hadn't, he would give them a call and check on any new developments in the case. Then, perhaps his mind would stop spinning like a whirling dervish, and he'd be able to fall asleep next to Elle's lovely body.

He glanced at the clock on the bedside table. Three a.m. *Hell, yeah, they've gone home by now.* In a few hours, their day would begin again.

He willed himself to close his eyes. James and Mark were good guys dedicated to the work. They were perfectly capable of handling this case on their own.

His eyes opened once more, and as he lay awake in the darkness staring at the fireplace, he knew the naked truth. No one else would have the same compulsion to find this guy and bring him to justice that he did. No one could.

Which was, of course, why the Lieutenant had taken him off the case. Nick had seen it happen too many times before—cops personally involved with the feelings of the victims and their families, too caught up in their cases. Feelings clouded judgment, and police work demanded a cop keep his emotions at a distance. He was too close to head up this investigation, hell, too close to be involved in any way.

If he could only get his hands on the bastard before any criminal defense attorney could...but Nick knew that any guy smart enough to abduct and dump women without getting caught was smart enough to say nothing without a lawyer present.

And that was the best reason to go it alone on this. He had every right to be pissed and demand revenge. When he thought about the marks on Toni's body and her current catatonic state, he wanted to grab the guy and pistol whip him. But he was a smart cop; he knew better. He'd be in some deep shit if something went wrong, and he screwed up the investigation. Hell, he'd already broken about ten codes of conduct just by going on an unauthorized stakeout alone.

To hell with their rules. This was his sister, and he could go anywhere he pleased on his time off. If he just happened to be somewhere the Houston Marauder showed up, well, lucky break for Houston's finest.

He wouldn't let his personal feelings interfere with the case. He would put this time off to good use and apprehend the suspect, and when he did, he would get some answers. He wouldn't let the guy go until he did, and then his lawyer could have whatever was left of him.

Nick adjusted his head on the pillow and felt the tight clench of his jaw. He forced himself to relax as he stroked his fingers over Elle's shoulder.

"Nick, go to sleep," she mumbled.

He leaned toward her and kissed her warm skin. "Sorry. I'm keeping you awake. I'm going to get the rest of that bottle of champagne. You thirsty?"

She turned over, squinting against the light from the fireplace. "You know, you can talk to me—whatever it is. Is it me?"

He pulled her closer then kissed the top of her head. "No, it's not you. You're perfect."

He rose from the bed and walked out of the room, returning a moment later with the remainder of the champagne. He took a long drink, then handed the bottle to her.

She shook her head then took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm not perfect. But if there is one thing I learned from working in a bar, it's that you leave with the same troubles you came in with, no matter how much money you spend or how much liquor you drink. In this case, you'll leave this bed tomorrow with the same troubles you came into it with tonight unless you decide to share the load a little."

Nick took another drink of the champagne. He sat down on the edge of the bed and placed the bottle on the nightstand. "I told you my sister was the second victim. What I didn't tell you is that I'm not officially on the case."

"You're not?"

"No."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

She stared at him for a long time, then sat up in the bed. "What time is it?"

Nick watched the long line of her neck as she moved to see the clock on the nightstand. Just looking at her turned him on.

He lay back on the bed and pulled the sheets up to his waist, resting his hands in his lap. Since when had he become a horny teenager? When he looked at her, when he held her in his arms, he almost forgot about the case entirely. He'd found peace in her body, in her sweetness that he'd never found in another woman. And even if it only lasted for as long as he held her, it was enough.

She turned back toward him, not bothering to cover herself. The light from the fireplace glimmered over her pearlescent skin and lit her facial features in golden tones. Her eyes glittered.

"It's almost four o'clock in the morning." She lay back on her pillow beside him. "If you're sure you don't want to talk, then maybe you should get some sleep."

"I'm sure." He traced a line down her neck to her breasts. "We've already been up most of the night."

He pulled the sheet down as his index finger trailed along her abdomen.

She slid her hand across the sheet to his thigh then to his erection. "And you're thinking you'll be up all night, I take it."

"Looks that way." He captured her sweet mouth with his.

## Chapter Eight

Elle stretched, then opened her eyes. Nick was watching her, a shit-eating grin on his face.

"I hope you didn't spend the rest of the night staring at me."

"Nah, only the past fifteen minutes." He brushed her hair away from her face. "I woke up about nine. How'd you sleep?"

She stretched again and smiled. Her body was sore and well-used, but she felt wonderful. "Not long, but well." She sat up, pulling the sheets with her. Looking around the room, she suddenly remembered where she was and why.

"I know that look. That's the look of a woman about to shop."

"I'm a woman in need of a shower and some clean clothes, so yeah, guess I have to shop. Shame really."

He laughed. "Well, if I'd known you were looking forward to shopping that much, I wouldn't have had these sent up. You don't have to wear them; we can still go shopping, but I had to get something. I couldn't go anywhere in the clothes I had on last night."

She looked where he was pointing. A filmy, periwinkle dress, long sheer stockings and garter belt hung on the back of the bathroom door. A pair of gorgeous strappy sandals lay on the floor below them.

"Oh, Nick!" She leaped from the bed, dragging the sheet with her. She pulled the hanger down and held the diaphanous fabric in front of her. "It's perfect. How'd you know what size to get?"

"I measured you while you slept."

"What?"

He laughed. "I checked the tags in the clothes you were wearing, Elle. The color is perfect. I'll have to remember to give Enrique a big tip."

She removed the dress from the hanger and examined the stockings and shoes then paused. "I don't see any underwear here."

He continued to smile at her. "Don't suppose you'd believe it was an oversight?"

"Nick!"

"Ah, hell, woman." Rising from the bed, he walked to the bathroom stark naked. She couldn't take her eyes off him. The long, lean muscles in his legs and tight butt captured her eye, but his considerable erection held her stare.

"You don't need underwear," he said, then closed the bathroom door.

She laid the clothes out carefully on the rumpled bed. How thoughtful he was, and she would have to remember to thank Enrique herself. She couldn't wait to shower and put that dress on. Underwear or no underwear.

She heard the toilet flush, then the shower come on. Hmm, she thought. *Time to bathe.* With one last look at the lovely dress, she walked into the bathroom.

Nick stood inside the stall, the outline of his body fuzzy through the smoked glass and rising steam. She admired the lean lines of his body for a long moment, the memory of writhing beneath him last night returning unbidden. When had she ever felt such utter wantonness? Placing her hand on the shower door, she imagined rubbing soap all over his skin, trailing kisses along his neck, down his chest...

Had winning the lottery done this to her, or had Nick brought out the latent heat now burning inside her? *It doesn't matter, Elle. Doesn't make a damn bit of difference either way.*

She pulled the door open and climbed in beside him.

The kiss began slowly, his hand on her cheek, his mouth gently brushing over hers. She sighed as a calm, floating sensation overcame her senses. The electricity pulsing through her blood earlier had taken a

backseat as his large hands slid down her back to her hips. Comfort and safety—the words washed over her like the hot, pulsing shower spray. She placed her hand over his.

“Thank you for the clothes.” She looked into his eyes and saw something there, the same something she’d seen last night when he’d talked about his sister.

“Nick, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said, dropping his lips to her neck.

Although she wanted to kiss him again and give into her body’s surprising insatiability; although he’d saved her in ways he could not possibly begin to understand and gratefulness surged through her like a fountain—in spite of these things, she couldn’t let whatever that look on his face meant go unquestioned. She leaned closer and placed her lips at his ear.

“Talk to me.”

“You’re beautiful.” His tongue traced small circles on her neck.

“That’s not what I meant.” She forced herself to concentrate. Something was on his mind, something dark and a little sad, and in spite of her body’s desire, she couldn’t let this be all about sex. “Something’s going on.”

“Something’s about to go on, if that’s what you mean.”

She took a step away from him and stared into his eyes. There it was—fear. “Please, be serious. What’s going on? What are you afraid of?”

Nick blinked, but continued to stroke her cheek with his hand. “What makes you think I’m afraid?”

“I pay attention. Is it your sister? Or are you afraid that the same thing is going to happen to someone else?” She placed his hand over hers and clasped it. “Is that what’s on your mind?”

“No, that’s not what’s on my mind.” He adjusted the showerhead to spray over her ample breasts. *It’s what should be on my fucking mind, but it’s not.*

Elle ran her fingernails over his chest then stroked them along his sides. “Is it because I was a stripper? Or because I’m rich now? I know how you feel about people with money. If you don’t tell me, I’ll assume

you think I'm not good enough to share your feelings, and you just want my body."

"It has nothing to do with money." He tried not to grit his teeth at the lie. "And I don't give a damn what you used to do for a living." Nick took her face into his hands and kissed her, long and hard, the water from the dual showerheads pouring over them both.

He ended the kiss and leaned back against the shower stall. He should care about something besides wanting to stay here with her. Whatever crazy whim had taken him over last night had intensified this morning. If he didn't get back some semblance of control, he would keep her here in this room with him and forget about his job altogether.

"Elle, look. I saw what was about to happen to you last night. I did what I was trained to do. But I don't do things like this. I don't take victims to hotel rooms and make love to them all night, shower with them, buy them clothes and pour out my soul." Nick struggled with the words. He didn't get what the hell was happening to him, and he sure as hell wasn't sure how to tell her about it. Whatever she'd done to him had thrown him off his game, but good.

"Are you sorry?"

"Hell, no." He picked up the bar of soap and rubbed it over her breasts. "I should be thinking about work, but when you're this close, I don't. If anything's wrong, that's what's wrong."

This, whatever it was, had gotten out of control. He wanted her, and he didn't want to talk about all the reasons why or think about what he should be doing right now. He didn't want to think about anything but his body inside hers, and yes, that was the problem.

She was beautiful, smart, and just a little too easy to get to know. How much of this was real and how much was yet another example of hitting pay dirt and having it change your whole persona? This time, she'd come into her own fortune instead of his, but the results were turning out exactly the same.

Enthralled with the beauty of her face and her naked body in front of him, the odds of him not making love to her until she screamed weren't good. He'd lost focus on his real goal—to catch the Marauder.

Nick forced himself to move her out of his reach. "Let's get this show on the road, Elle. I've got to get you to the lottery office, then get back. If you stay in here with me, we'll never leave this hotel room."

"But we're about to be millionaires," she said, disappointment apparent in the sound of her voice. "Remember? We don't have to be anywhere we don't want to be."

"Being a millionaire doesn't relinquish me from doing what needs to be done." It took a supreme effort of will not to pull her back into his arms, press her body against the wall, and make love to her again under the hard spray of the shower's jets.

She nodded slowly, then took the soap out of his hands. Turning him around, she soaped up his back. "I'm not here to take you away from your life, Nick. If you want to talk, just know that I'm here."

She handed the soap back to him, climbed out of the shower and left him standing alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elle finished showering in the adjoining room and quickly dried her hair with the hotel's hairdryer. Nick had not come in, and she assumed he was in the other room, getting ready to go to the lottery office.

She shook her hair out behind her, then pulled it up into a French twist at her neck. Nick had been great to bring her here. First, he saved her purse, then he treated her to a magnificent night at this four-star hotel. He'd made love to her and touched her in ways she'd never imagined possible. She had no right to be upset. He had responsibilities; she had to respect that.

Why had she said that to him? His work was obviously important to him, and finding out who'd hurt his sister was tantamount to his sister regaining her life. Maybe he was right; maybe money did change people. That flippant comment alone suggested it had changed her already.

He had a job to do, and he was intent on doing it. Who was she to judge him for wanting to keep his job? Just because he was also now a millionaire didn't mean he wouldn't want to continue his life as it was.



She'd wanted a different life; it was presumptuous to assume he would as well.

She stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her cheeks bloomed rosy, and her eyes had a new sparkle they hadn't had in years. Nothing could rival Nick's prowess in the bedroom, and now she was about to go out with that gorgeous man to claim her fortune. She would be a very wealthy woman. Nothing could go wrong today if she would stop trying to tell him what he should do with his money and his life.

Nick liked her, really liked her, and she was going to be filthy rich. What could be wrong with that? This was the beginning of the rest of her life...her much improved life.

Maybe he didn't want his share of the money; maybe that's what this was about. He obviously didn't think too highly of rich people; maybe he didn't want to be one of them. He'd never expressed any excitement in sharing her winnings. Hadn't he believed she meant it when she'd offered to split the money? No, it wasn't that. He didn't even appear concerned about sharing it.

Well, she certainly wasn't going to force it on him. If he so much as suggested she keep the money again, then she would. She wasn't out to change anyone's life if they didn't want it changed. She was just trying to show her appreciation. If he didn't appreciate it, then she'd take it back.

Ten million dollars was better than five million anyway. The IRS would get half of whatever she won, and if she split it with him, she'd already be down to two and a half million. Wow, her fortune from yesterday was already starting to sound like not so much money at all. Two and a half million wasn't exactly heiress status.

Well, if he didn't want his half, she'd have twice that. She'd leave that decision up to him.

Elle walked out of the bathroom, feeling like a new human being, reborn to a sated body and rejuvenated picture of her future in her mind. Nick stood in the center of the room, his face scrubbed, his hair slicked back. He wore a brand new pair of black slacks and a white dress shirt open at the neck.

"Wow, that's quite an improvement over last night's attire."

"And I see you're ready, too. I thought I'd have to come in there after you." He gave her a long, appraising look. "Obviously, everything fits perfectly."

"Except for the missing undergarments, of course."

"No, they fit perfectly too...still on their shelves at the store. I'm seriously going to have to see that Enrique gets a raise."

"You might be hungry, but I'm too excited to eat. Can we go to the lottery office now? What do you think I should do first when I get the money?" She didn't know what excited her more, the way he was looking at her or the reality of what was about to happen to her life.

"You really want my opinion?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"Okay, then. First, pull that ticket out and print your name, address and phone number on it. Sign it. Take it downstairs and let the desk clerk make a copy of it for you. Do you have two signature I.D.'s with you?"

"Yes." She leaned back on the edge of the bar and stared at him.

"Good. If you can collect the money in a lump sum, do that. They are going to take your picture and put your name in the paper. Be ready for a complete loss of privacy. You've already gotten out of town, but as soon as you collect the money, don't go back to your apartment. Check into a hotel, and while you're there, contact a tax attorney to find out how much you get to keep, and an investment advisor to get that money into some short-term, low risk government bonds until you figure out what you're doing with it. Find yourself a new place to live, and get an unlisted number."

She walked around the bar and began making a pot of coffee. He looked as if he were settling in for a long answer to her question. His knowledge of this particular subject struck her as more than a little odd.

"Remember that you're about to be in the highest federal tax bracket. Luckily, Texas is not a personal income tax state, so you'll only be paying federal tax on the winnings. Get your investment advisor to let you know the best way to keep your money. Think long term. You don't want it all gone in five years. Then, you'll be right back looking for a job with years missing from your employment history."

As the coffee began to brew, she tried to keep her features schooled. How did he know all this? Had he spent the past ten years planning to win the lottery or what?

"Another thing, and your investment guy will tell you this, get that money out of your checkbook and into savings vehicles as quickly as possible. Otherwise, friends, family, charities...they are all going to come out of the woodwork looking for a handout. You will want to splurge some, maybe on your Mustang, and you'll want to give some, but be selective and remember that it goes fast. If you really don't want your money to change you, you'll have to play this smart. Oh, and you might want to think about hiring a bodyguard."

She couldn't think of a single thing to say.

"Elle?"

"Yes?"

He walked over and picked up the carafe sitting on the bar. "You'll also need to continue to put the pot under the coffee maker."

She glanced down at the coffee spilling all over the bar and onto the floor. He placed the pot onto the burner and took her into his arms. "I'll be there with you. It's going to be okay. Money will change you; I promise it will. But it doesn't have to be a bad change, right?"

She stared into his eyes, speechless.

"Elle?"

She shook her head. "No, I mean, yes, it doesn't have to be bad. It's *not* bad. This is a good thing. It's the best thing that's ever happened to me."

He pushed a stray hair away from her face and tucked it behind her ear. "The best thing that ever happened to me so far has been meeting you. But money, well, that's good, too, I guess."

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her gently. Her body felt like rubber bands uncoiling as she let him hold her against him. All the words he'd just spilled out swirled around her like a tornado—investment advisors and bodyguards and tax attorneys and unlisted numbers. A strange fear mingled with her previous excitement.

She stepped back from him and felt her body shaking. "My God, this *is* going to change my life, isn't it?"

"Yeah." He dropped a towel on the floor and used his foot to wipe up the spilled coffee. "It really is. Everything that happened before made you who you are...those are the things you want to keep. Your values are your values; you are *you*. You don't want that to change. I don't want you to change."

She shook her head slowly as she watched him finish cleaning up her mess, grasping onto the side of the bar for support.

"Should we get this coffee to go? It'll take a little while to get to the lottery office from here."

Elle nodded. Yes, she needed to get to the lottery office, but she suddenly felt a little overwhelmed. "I have to sign the ticket first, right?"

"Yes, you do." He pulled open a drawer in the bar and handed her a pen. "You'll need this."

"I don't think I can walk."

He laughed and squeezed her to his side. "I'll be there to help you every step of the way."

After she signed the ticket and they walked down to the lobby, Nick made good on his promise. Whether from the meager amount of sleep she'd had or her impending good fortune, she was still a little unsteady on her feet, but Nick took care of everything.

After giving instructions regarding the items they'd left in their room, he had the copy made and asked that his car be brought around so they could leave immediately.

She was perfectly capable of taking care of all these details, she told herself, but as she watched him efficiently handle everything, she had to admit that it was nice. She'd been taking care of all the details of her life for so long, it felt nice to let someone else handle things for a change. Her knees were a little on the wobbly side and though she grasped the front desk for stability, she knew where her real stability was coming from.

When she collected her winnings, she could afford to buy all the help she needed. But she could never have purchased the kind of help this

man had given her in just a few hours—the kind of help that had fundamentally changed her.

The woman behind the desk handed the ticket and copy to Nick. When he offered it to her, Elle took the copy.

“You hold the original, okay?”

The smile on his face spoke volumes. “You sure about that?”

“Yes. You said I needed a bodyguard. Until I can hire another one, I’d like to hire you. How much do bodyguards cost?”

“Guard this body?” he whispered as they walked to the front entrance, and he shoved the ticket into his back pocket. “No charge.”

The sun blazed into their eyes as they stepped out of the hotel. A tall man wearing the same style uniform had replaced Enrique. He moved toward them with a jaunty step.

“Good morning, Mr. Damato, Miss Parson. One more moment and your car will be here.” As he spoke, Nick’s Mustang pulled up in front of them, and the driver jumped out and jogged around to them.

“Did they wash it?” Elle asked.

“Looks like it,” Nick said, slipping a folded bill into the man’s hand and opening the passenger door for her.

Elle sat down and took a sip of her coffee to steady her nerves. Nick got inside and set his cup in the drink holder. “All set? Would you like me to put the top down?”

“Whichever you prefer.” Butterflies fluttered inside her stomach. “Thanks for driving. I can’t believe how nervous I am.”

“You’re not feeling ill, are you?”

“No, I don’t think so. Do I look okay?”

He leaned across the console and kissed her on the mouth. “Miss Elle Parson, you look beautiful. No heiress ever looked better.”

As Nick pulled out of the parking lot and into the traffic, she clasped her hands over his knees to steady them. God, she had to calm down. *It’s only money*, she kept repeating to herself.

About twenty minutes later, Nick pulled into a gas station. “I’m going to double-check the location of the Lottery Office, okay? You want to come inside or wait here?”

"I can wait." She took another sip of her coffee and noticed her hands still trembled slightly. "I might have to sit in the car while you cash in the lottery ticket if I don't calm down."

"Well, that's another great thing about being rich. You can hire as many people as you want to be your legs for you."

He got out of the car and walked around to her side. She rolled down the window. "Forget something?"

He kissed her through the open window, touching her cheek with his fingertip. "I can't get enough of you. As scared as you look sitting there, you are still amazingly beautiful."

A loud crack, like close thunder, tore through the air, and Nick dropped to the ground.

"Get down!" Nick shouted.

Elle shrunk into the seat. Another loud crack rang through the air accompanied by the sound of exploding glass. Elle peeked over to the gas station's shattered front window.

The car door opened, and Nick grabbed her arm. "Get out, and stay low."

Her knees trembled in spasms as she climbed out of the car, Nick's hand pressed down on her head. He grabbed her shoulders. "Are you all right?"

She suddenly realized she was still holding the coffee cup in her left hand. "Yes."

"Okay, give me that." He took the cup from her shaking hand, then pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. "When I say go, run to the back of the building. Ready?"

She nodded. He tossed the cup over the car to the sound of another angry crack and more shattering glass. "Go!"

He shoved her toward the left side of the building. She ran, his hand on her back as he followed right behind her. When they cleared the corner, Nick grabbed her arm and pressed her hard against the concrete wall of the building. He held the phone to his ear with one hand while continuing to hold her immobile with the other.

"This is Detective Nick Damato of the Houston Police Department. Shots fired at the Convenience Mart at the corner of West 6th and Hillside. High-powered rifle, at least one person injured."

Grabbing her arm again, he turned to her. "We're going behind that dumpster and across the back alley to that housing division. Ready?"

She nodded, although she didn't know if she was ready at all. A low stone fence stood about twenty feet from the dumpster. She glanced at the parking lot, checking for pieces of broken glass or anything else that might slow her down, then kicked off her shoes.

"Yes, right now. We're moving for cover. Hold the line!" he shouted into the phone. His hand gripped her arm like a vice, yet she suspected it was the only thing holding her upright as blood pounded into her head.

"Go!"

She took off at a dead run toward the dumpster, her long legs pumping as red dots filled her vision. She would not faint, she told herself as she jumped the stone fence and raced around to the front of the house, Nick close on her heels.

When she reached the front door, she pressed her back against it, Nick beside her. He punched the doorbell.

"Who is it?" answered a female voice from the other side of the large wooden door.

Nick shoved his badge up to the peephole. "Police! Open the door now!"

A moment later the door opened, and Nick shoved Elle inside, followed and slammed it shut.

Elle glanced around, taking in the details of the foyer, a woman and a child in an instant.

"Sorry to disturb you, Ma'am. Thank you for opening the door." Nick smiled down at the little girl, held his badge out toward the woman and tucked his gun into the back of his pants. "May we come in for a moment?"

"Yes," she said, her voice shaky and low.

Elle took deep breaths and smiled down at the little girl. She heard the sounds of a television coming from another room. *Dora the Explorer*. "Sorry we interrupted your morning. Were you watching Dora?"

The little girl nodded and smiled shyly, then glanced at her mother. Elle tried to portray a semblance of calm. "Might I sit down a moment?"

"Where are your shoes?" the little girl asked.

"This way." The woman pointed toward the interior of the house.

Nick took her elbow and they followed the woman into the living room. Elle dropped onto the sofa, a wave of nausea flashing over her. The little girl stood in front of her. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, honey," Elle said, fighting off the nausea and feeling suddenly very cold. "Do you have a blanket I could borrow?"

The little girl nodded and pointed to the quilt folded over the back of the sofa. Before she could reach for it, Nick grabbed it and spread it over her. "Are you all right?"

She nodded and kept smiling at the little girl. "I'm just a little chilly."

The woman walked to her child. "Emily, why don't you go get your Dora and play in your room for a few minutes? Mommy's going to talk to our guests, okay?"

The little girl looked disappointed, but she obeyed and left the room, walking backward and waving to Elle.

"What's going on here?" the woman whispered as the child disappeared from the living room.

Nick put the phone back to his ear. "Damato here. Yes, had to secure a witness. I'm going back. Are they en route?"

Another wave of nausea flooded over Elle and she bent over, putting her head between her legs. "I'm sorry, but I may need a trash can if you have one."

\* \* \* \* \*

Three hours later, two Austin detectives stood in the kitchen. The one named Sanchez wrote in a notebook, while the other, Jackson,



continued to ask Nick questions about what he'd seen. Sanchez hadn't spoken since they'd arrived, leaving Jackson to do all the talking. Nick patiently answered the questions, telling the same story over and over again until the men appeared satisfied.

"So, you think it may have just been a random shooting?" Elle asked as it appeared the questioning was winding down. She kept the blanket wrapped around her as she clutched a cup of coffee in her hands, more for warmth than for refreshment.

"We're not sure, Miss Parson," Jackson said. "There is no gang activity in this area of town, and I doubt college kids would get up this early to go on a shooting spree. But we just don't know yet."

"How's the clerk?" Nick asked.

"They've taken him to St. David's Medical Center. He was hit in the shoulder, and although he's lost a lot of blood, he should live." Jackson looked at Sanchez. "Any other witnesses?"

Sanchez flipped through his notebook, then shook his head. "Just an older couple inside the store who hit the floor as soon as the front window shattered. They saw nothing. Shell casings were found across the street beside the old warehouse, probably the shooter's. Rodriguez and Joe are canvassing the area now, sir."

"Good." Jackson removed a card from his pocket and handed it to Nick. "Well, if you think of anything else, give me a call at this number."

Nick nodded and rested his hand on Elle's shoulder. "We're going to finish our business here, then go back to Houston today. I'm on a case."

"Business with the hotel, Detective Damato?" Sanchez asked.

Elle glanced up at Nick as he quickly shook his head. He'd told them both earlier that they'd come into town last night and stayed at the hotel. What business Nick would have other than that, she couldn't imagine.

"No, just recreational." Nick turned to the woman who'd opened her door to them and now held her child in her arms. "Thank you, ma'am, for your help. Here's my card. Please call me sometime next week so I may thank you properly."

Elle rose from her seat and removed the quilt from her shoulders. She folded it and laid it on the sofa. "Thank you so much." Elle smiled at the little girl. "It was very nice to meet you."

"Now you can get your shoes back," the girl said, then squirmed out of her mother's grasp and ran back to her room, giggling.

Nick led Elle back to his car. He checked his watch, then opened her door. "I'm afraid we don't have enough time to get to the lottery office. We'll have to come back another day. I'm sorry, Elle. I know you were looking forward to this."

"You're going back to Houston right now?"

"Not just me," Nick said. "You're coming, too."

"I'll just go back to the hotel and try the lottery office tomorrow. I've had enough excitement for this day anyway." Elle thought about it for a moment, then shook her head. "I wonder if I should try to find a safety deposit box for the ticket. Oh, I almost forgot. I'll need my ticket back."

"Elle, I've got to get back, but you can't stay here alone."

"What are you talking about?"

"We don't know who was shooting. We don't know what they were shooting at. For all we do know, they were trying to kill *you*, and I'm not ready to take that chance," he said, his voice full of finality. "Until we get some answers, I'm not letting you out of my sight."

\* \* \* \* \*

Nick rested his arm on the sill of the open driver's side window and stared at the highway as it rolled under them. The afternoon air had warmed up, but the humidity was taking a holiday, making it easier for him to breathe, which was a very good thing. An hour ago, he'd been unsure if he would ever breathe correctly again.

The only sound in the car was the air whistling around them. Elle had not spoken since they'd left Austin. He didn't know if she was angry about not collecting her fortune or because he'd insisted she return with him.

Either way, the situation couldn't be helped. Whoever shot at them, and Nick believed the shooter intended one or the other of them as his victim, could still be following them. He glanced into the rear-view mirror, as he had dozens of times in the past hour. A station wagon still remained behind them as it had for the past forty miles, but unless the sniper was a soccer mom, he hadn't seen another possible suspect on their tail.

Detectives Jackson and Sanchez knew nothing more than he did about the sniper, and in a moment of privacy and out of Elle's earshot, Jackson told him to keep an eye on her if he could. He'd thanked the detective but hadn't needed that advice; he had no intention of letting her go off on her own. She was much too trusting anyway and much too easy a target.

He didn't want to frighten her, but this morning's narrow escape from the barrage of bullets had shaken him. He'd been lulled into a false sense of euphoria with her in his arms and in his bed, and this morning he'd barely managed to keep both of them from being killed. Just being around her took away his edge.

Yeah, he'd been scared shitless, and the less he said about that to her, the better.

He looked at the clock on the dashboard. Two o'clock. He still had plenty of time to get dressed in his ratty clothes and be back at the bus stop before four. What he was going to do with Elle during that time, he hadn't determined. One thing was certain: she couldn't be without protection, and she was not going back to her apartment.

On the other hand, taking her to his house would require explanations that he did not have time to make. He would check her into a hotel, call Broker or Robertson and have one of them watch her until he got back. Now, how to convince her to go along with his plan? She'd been accommodating so far, if not enthusiastic, but even from what little he knew of her, he suspected her compliance would not last when he started issuing more orders.

Nick looked over at Elle. Her hands were clasped in her lap, her head pressed hard against the headrest. Her whole body screamed *tension*. "You're quiet over there. You all right?"

Elle dragged in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It's been a very unusual 24 hours. I feel like I've been beaten up."

"Maybe some music will relax you." He turned on the radio. "We won't be home for a while. Why don't you take a nap?"

"Excellent suggestion," she said as she closed her eyes. "Now if my heartbeat would slow down a little, that might be possible."

As one of the latest top 40 hits wound down, the DJ began reading the news. Nick half-listened, until the word "Marauder" caught his ear. He grabbed the volume control and cranked it to the right.

"As we reported earlier, investigators are still assessing how the fourth victim's body was dumped outside the Houston Galleria sometime overnight without a single witness. The identity of the woman has not been confirmed, but unnamed sources report that she might be Jennifer Cromwell, a woman reported missing three days ago, and the fourth woman to go missing in the Houston area in the past three months. A press conference is scheduled for six o'clock tonight and will be carried live on this station."

The second news story began, but Nick heard none of it through the thrumming of blood in his ears.

## **Chapter Nine**

Nick held tight to Elle's hand as he walked into the police station and looked around for Mark and James. They were his friends, but more importantly, they were heading up the investigation into the Houston Marauder attacks. Since the report they'd heard on the radio, no further information about the victim's identity had been given. If the police did have information, they wouldn't release it to the news media until notifying her relatives.

Notification was always a nightmare. Family members and friends of missing persons immediately began to call or show up at the police station. They needed closure. Nick understood that. But it made for a hell of a day.

As he moved through the throng of people, Elle kept up with him step for step, her new shoes clicking softly on the tile floor. They finally reached Broker and Robertson's office, and Nick knocked on the door.

Mark looked up from his desk and motioned Nick inside. Still holding Elle's hand, Nick walked in, then closed the door, sealing out the crying and shouting mass of humanity.

"Have you ever seen so many unhappy people in your life? I've been getting calls all morning." Mark stared at Elle as he spoke, although Nick knew the question was aimed at him.

"Elle, meet Detective Mark Broker and Detective James Robertson. They are in charge of the Houston Marauder case."

"Nick, what are you doing here?" James asked.

"So, was she our missing girl or not?"

Mark finally tore his eyes away from Elle, as if just realizing Nick had also entered the room. "You expect us to talk about the case in front of her?"

"Elle is in protective custody, so she stays with me. Besides, the radio news is already speculating."

James gave him a long look and said nothing. He knew that look. Nick sighed. "Elle, would you mind waiting in my office? It's right next door."

Elle left without a word, and Nick noted how the two men didn't miss a step of her exit.

Mark licked his bottom lip. "Nice."

Nick gave his best "bite me" glare. "Now, tell me what you got. Was she the missing girl?"

James took a sip of his coffee and shook his head. "There's no official ID yet."

Mark dropped into his seat and stretched out his loafered feet, crossing one over the other. He was as good a detective as Nick had ever met, and his relaxed stance and prurient interest in Elle's figure belied his concentration. Mark and James had been partners since they'd made detective together, and Nick knew this case was in good hands. That didn't stop him from demanding some answers.

Nick looked from one of them to the other. "What do we know?"

Both men were silent for a long time before Mark finally spoke. "Hell, next to fucking nothing is what we know. But you're not on the case; vacation, remember? Lieutenant's orders."

Nick plopped down into the chair next to Mark's. "If you know something, I want to hear it. I've been shot at once today, so I'm annoyed already. Don't push me. Was she dead when you found her?"

"Shot at?" Mark gave him a slow smile. "You've certainly been busy."

"Yeah, Nick." James put his coffee cup down on the desk. "She was dead. Beaten to hell and back. I've seen hamburger that didn't look that unrecognizable and raw. The M.E. gagged when he did the preliminary

examination, and Buddy's been doing this for thirty years. You'd think a guy like that would've seen it all by now."

"What was the weapon?"

"Blunt instrument," James said. "Bat, maybe a crowbar. M.E.'s not sure yet. He's doing more tests. That's not what killed her."

Nick waited, then when neither of them said anything, he finally asked. "Well, what killed her?"

Mark glanced at the door and crossed his arms over his chest. "Let's talk about something more interesting. Who's the babe, Nick?"

"Man, did I mention that 'babe' got shot at today, too?" Nick said. "Neither of us has the patience for this."

"She died from ingesting some kind of poison the guy put in her rectum," James said. "Semen in the vagina, M.E. says, but definitely something acidic in the rectum. Maybe rat poison. He's still checking."

His stomach turned over. What in the hell kind of psycho were they dealing with? He'd never heard of anything so disgusting. "When's the final M.E. report coming out?"

"Supposed to be late this afternoon, near dinner time. You hanging around?" Mark got out of his chair and walked over to his private coffee pot. He'd brought his own, since no one would drink his brand of sludge. The carafe looked like it hadn't been washed since he brought it into the precinct. He poured a cup of the thick tar-like substance into his mug. "So, are you still on vacation or leave or what?"

"I'll stay until the report comes out. What else do you guys know that you haven't told me?"

James folded his hands over his ample belly and closed his eyes. "Nothing, Nick. Not one damn thing. How'd your stakeout go?"

Nick looked from James to Mark and tried not to let his surprise show. Of course he wouldn't be the only one to think of watching the spot. "What were you guys driving?"

"We weren't driving," Mark said. "I watched from the corporate offices upstairs at the mall; James sat at the coffee house across the street. You were closest to the site, so we figured you'd be there first if the shit hit the fan."

Nick nodded. So they'd let him in on the case after all; would have been nice to know that.

Oh, shit.

"Nice work on that purse snatcher, by the way," Mark said, then took another sip of his coffee. "Quite a smacker she planted on you, too."

Nick continued to stare at him, but said nothing.

"I guess we all left too early."

"How is your sister doing?" James asked, obviously attempting to change the subject.

"I haven't talked to her husband today. She'll be fine when we nail this guy." Nick rose from his chair and walked to the window facing the street. He watched cars bumper to bumper in the late afternoon traffic, the heat from the vehicles rising off the asphalt. So many people in this city. Somewhere out there their prey stalked his next victim. They had to get it together and find this bastard, for his sister as well as all the other women in Houston.

"Well, my wife's praying for her every night," James said, sitting forward in his chair. "She told me to tell you that."

"Tell Isabelle I appreciate it." Nick cleared his throat. "Are you going to stake out the mall again?"

"Yeah," Mark said. "You should know that you were a person of interest until James finally recognized you and told the other two guys on the radios who you were."

"That's just great. I take a few days off, and I'm the fucking Marauder."

"Yeah, well. We didn't want to watch *you*. James told them you were cruising for chicks and got lucky."

Nick turned to James, who shook his head. "He's yanking your chain, but he's right, you know. You're lucky you didn't cross the line. We were watching for the same thing you were, except we are *on the case*, and you *aren't*. Are you trying to get yourself fired? How long you been doing that shit anyway?"

Nick sat back in his chair, a little surprised at the man's tone. James could usually be counted on to keep a cool head. "A few days."



"It stops right now, or the shit is really going to hit the fan. As soon as they positively identify that woman's remains as Jennifer Cromwell, the feds are going to get in on this. There's no way to stop it. And if they see your hobo ass out there, they'll take your badge, and you know it."

"See anything while you were out there?" Mark asked.

"Just the purse snatcher."

Nick realized Elle and the purse-snatcher may have saved his job. He'd been stupid to think he could go it alone. Then again, if he hadn't been there, what would have happened to her? Maybe there was some bigger force in control here.

Or maybe he was just full of shitty excuses for his own bad decisions.

"And now a purse snatching victim needs police protection?" Mark asked. "I didn't remember seeing anything about that in any reports. Still doing the paperwork?"

"Elle is in my personal, vacation-time, off-duty protection. You get me?" This was as much as he was willing to tell these two. He didn't know what his relationship with her was exactly, but it wasn't for public consumption.

"Well, isn't *Elle* lucky to have her own personal, professional bodyguard?" Mark stressed Nick's use of her first name.

Nick clenched his fists. Mark was married and convinced that multiple willing women laid every single guy he knew every night. Mark was just being Mark, but he didn't like the implication. Telling him off was better than the alternative—to punch his bony face.

"I've got to take care of some stuff. I'll be back by six to see where you are."

"Tell Toni we said hello," James said. "I miss seeing her smiling face around here."

"Will do." Nick tried to keep his voice even. He could tell her the sky had turned green, and it wouldn't faze her. He doubted a lame 'Hey, get well, will ya? The guys at the precinct want to see their favorite gorgeous babe' would help. Nothing short of arresting this guy would make a bit of difference.

Nick left them and knocked on the door to his office. Elle rose from the chair, and he placed his hand at her lower back and silently guided her into the hallway, closing the door behind them.

When they'd walked down the long corridor toward the back entrance, now well out of earshot of Mark and James, Nick finally broke the silence. "I'll bet you're starving."

"I could definitely eat something. My knees are still wobbly. Is everything all right?"

Two policemen walked toward them, and Nick moved in front of her to make way for them. While she'd sat in his office, she'd heard their voices through the wall, and though she couldn't make out the words, she got the general idea—things were not going well on the case.

Nick continued on down the hallway, but something had caught her eye through the open door next to her. The large gathering room was utilitarian, full of chairs and tables, piles of papers, files, and Styrofoam cups. All of that barely registered because her eyes were glued to the far wall where a large whiteboard with photographs, post-it notes and lines drawn all over it stood.

Elle walked into the room, a horrible, chilling shake like a cold wind sweeping over her. "Oh, my God."

"Elle! You're not supposed to go in there. Let's go, before we both get our asses kicked."

Dizziness swept over her as she gaped at the photographs. "That's JJ." Elle touched the picture with a number "3" above it. "She used to come in with her boyfriend when I first started working at the club."

Nick walked up behind her. "Her name is Joyce Johnson—"

"And that's Beth." Elle ran her hand over the first photo on the timeline. She tried to swallow, but her mouth felt as if it had been washed out with sand. "Beth, and there's Toni."

"You know them all?" Nick placed his hand on her arm and tried to pull her away, but she couldn't make her feet move from the horror in front of her. She tried to speak again, opened her mouth, but no words came out. She finally turned to him and nodded.

Nick released her arm and walked to the podium at the front of the room. He shuffled through a stack of papers, pulled out a large sheet and brought it back to her. "What about her? Who is she?"

"Jenny," Elle said, her voice just above a whisper. "That's Jenny."

"Jennifer Cromwell. How do you know her?" Nick's voice had taken on a sharp edge.

Elle looked up slowly from the photograph of the smiling young woman into the hard lines of his face. "Jenny used to come in. She wore a brown pageboy wig and dark glasses. They never showed photos in the paper—"

"So how can you be sure it's her?"

"The ladies' room. She removed them both one time in the ladies' room. Said the wig itched, but she didn't want to be recognized. I feel sick."

Nick grabbed a chair and placed it behind her, gently pressing her back into it. Elle dropped down and continued to stare up at the board.

"Your sister," Elle said, her voice just above a whisper.

Nick nodded, and looked again at the photographs of the three women, then stuck the photograph of Jenny next to JJ's. "She's the only one so far to survive the ordeal, the only one who could have helped us." Nick squatted down in front of her chair and put his hands over hers. "Until now."

"You think I'm connected to this?" Elle asked.

Nick stared at her for a long moment. Was she in danger? Had the guy who'd grabbed her purse that night been involved in this, or was that just a coincidence? Had he interrupted the method the perp had developed for acquiring his victims? The gears inside his head shifted to high. What if none of what had happened so far was a coincidence? What if every bit of this was part of this guy's M.O. and he'd perchance stopped something much worse than losing a purse?

"Because my sister was uncommunicative when we found her, we have no idea how she was lured into the abduction. What if it all started with a purse snatching?"

"Nick." Her voice cracked as tears streamed down her face. "Do you think I'm going to be next?"

Nick pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to her. She dabbed her eyes with it then twisted it in her hands. "No, you are not going to be next," he said with force as he stood up, still holding her hands. "You are officially in police custody. Nothing is going to happen to you."

Elle's vision shimmered around her tears. "Maybe I *was* going to be next." She rose from the chair and threw her arms around his neck, burying her head in his chest. "And you stopped them."

She began to sob with gusto, and Nick wrapped both of his arms around her and held her close, all of the earlier desire that had overwhelmed him now replaced with another burning need—to protect her at all costs.

"It's okay, Elle." He gently rocked her in his arms. "It's going to be okay."

Mark and James walked into the room but stopped when they saw Nick's face. Surprisingly, neither of them had the usual lecherous looks Nick would have expected. Here he was holding a beautiful woman in his arms, and nothing but surprise registered in their features.

Nick nodded to them and gently disengaged Elle from his body. He wiped the tears from her eyes with his thumbs and looked deeply into her eyes willing her to be strong. "Elle, I need you to talk to these guys." He turned her around gently. "Elle knows all of the victims. Even Jennifer Cromwell."

Mark and James' faces lit up. While they weren't smiling, they looked even more interested than they had when they walked in.

\* \* \* \* \*

Minutes later, the four of them stepped back into Mark and James' office and closed the door once more. A television in the corner of the room was on, its sound muted. Nick hadn't realized how late it had become until he saw the opening credits for the six o'clock news.

"So, Miss Parson," James began, walking back to his seat and picking up his notepad. "May I call you Elle?"

"Yes." She sat down in the same chair Nick had used earlier. "That's fine."

"Elle." James sat on the edge of his desk. "How do you know these women?"

Nick listened as she explained that all four had been customers of the Gentlemen's Club where she'd worked. Nick knew she must be uncomfortable telling them about her job there, and he hated that she had to disclose his sister's indiscretion—but the truth had to come out. He understood interviewees avoided some portions of their stories in these situations. Some wanted to keep back certain facts to protect their privacy for less than upstanding behavior. Still, he knew that unless they all understood exactly what they were dealing with, they would be unable to apprehend the perp.

"Why were you outside the mall that night?" James asked.

Elle looked up at the muted television screen. She read the words on the screen as they appeared. "You see that? That announcement about the Texas Two Step Lotto winner?"

All three men looked at the television. James turned back to her. "Yes?"

"Well, I'm that winner. I had just found out that I won the lottery, and I was going home to change clothes and head to Austin to collect my money."

James exhaled a sharp breath. "You won the lotto?" His voice was flat. "I see."

"I had gotten fired a few minutes before I left, then on my way out of the mall saw the winning lotto numbers on a television screen at the electronics store. When I realized I'd won, I guess I was in a daze because when I got outside someone ran up from behind me and grabbed my purse."

James tossed his pen down on the desk. "You won the Texas Two Step Lottery." He glanced at the television screen as the words moved across the screen. A live feed required a person to type the words as they

were spoken, so various typos appeared and were corrected as the person typed in the closed captioning for the benefit of the non-hearing audience. But the total of the lottery jackpot appeared correct the first time as the total was mirrored in big red letters blazing across the screen.

"You won ten million dollars? What happened to the ticket?"

"I had it in my purse. Nick was sitting at the bus stop that night. The snatcher went right past him. Nick tripped him and got my purse back. I thought he was blind until I took him to dinner and found out he was an undercover cop. That's why he left the scene that night. I forced him into accepting my appreciation."

Nick shook his head as he listened. The whole story sounded crazy, but how crazy was winning the lottery?

"So Nick got your purse back." James slowly picked up his pen again. "Do you still have the lottery ticket?"

Elle turned to Nick. "You still have it, don't you?"

Nick pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, removed the ticket and showed it to James.

James stared at the ticket for a long moment, then back to the screen. "And these are the winning numbers? The news is broadcasting that no one has come forward yet, even though the ticket was sold here in town. There's only one winner." James' voice sounded incredulous and flat, as if he were staring at a golden calf, ready to be worshipped.

Nick took the ticket from his hand and handed it back to Elle. "I think we'll let her hold that, buddy."

"Actually, there are two winners," she said, looking at Nick. "I'm splitting it with the man who saved me."

Mark laughed out loud. "What the hell does he need half of ten million dollars for?"

"Mark." Nick knew where this was going. Everybody in the precinct knew his financial status, and very few understood his desire to continue working in law enforcement. Mark was one of those who'd made it abundantly clear he'd quit and move to Aruba. He had to act fast. "You're right, Mark. I don't need it, and I'm not taking it. But Elle is a generous person, so shut the hell up, and quit making fun of her."

"You're giving him half?" James' voice verged on reverent as he ignored both Mark and Nick and spoke only to Elle.

"The short version? I wanted to thank Nick for saving my money and my life, I took him to dinner, found out he was not blind and indeed a cop, and we drove to Austin to cash in my ticket. I offered to split the winnings with him, but he never seemed interested in having the money. He has remained dedicated to solving this case."

Nick listened to her and realized she was attempting to protect him; she believed he was in trouble for what had happened last night. He wanted to take her into his arms and kiss her for days and weeks. Hell, for a lot longer than that.

Realizing the direction of his thoughts, he stopped breathing. *I'm in love with her. Holy effing shit.*

"But you didn't cash in your ticket," James said.

*I'm in love with her.* He'd known her for less than a day, but there was no denying the truth. He didn't know what to do with the fact, but he recognized it for what it was—a fact. Nick pulled himself out of the morass of thoughts racing through his mind and cleared his throat. "We didn't have time. We were caught in an incident when we were on our way to the lottery office."

"Right." James nodded. "You told us she was in protective custody." He rose from his seat and walked over to stand in front of Elle. "So let's go through this once more. Where were you last night before your purse was snatched and Detective Damato helped you?"

"She told you already," Nick said. "Come on, James. She's got nothing to do with this."

James turned to him and lowered his voice. "All respect, but this is not your investigation. I appreciate your help in bringing this woman to us. Now, it might be best if you stepped outside and let us interrogate this witness."

"I don't fucking think so." Nick faced James square on and moved a step closer. "She's with me, and I have as much at stake in this investigation as anyone. I want my sister's abductor found, and this

woman knows what's going on. I'm now officially acting as her police escort, so that makes me part of the case."

"The Lieutenant said that you're not to be involved in the case at all. We've been letting you in on our information for your own peace of mind, but we're talking about the actual police work now, Nick, and that part you are not to be involved in. Now, please."

Mark rose from his chair and stepped between the two men. "Let's go outside for a few minutes and have a coffee. James can talk to Miss Parson for a few minutes, then you can go back to protecting her. Okay?"

Nick's anger burned through his body, but he knew James was right. If the Lieu found out he'd been involved this much in the case already, he would hit the roof. He would still be involved, as long as he was protecting Elle, which he intended to do anyway, with or without the lieutenant's permission.

Her face was turned up to his, her eyes wide. "Elle, I'll be right outside this door. If you need me for any reason, you call and I'll come. Got it?"

"Miss Parson," James said, deciding that Nick was on his way out. "I'm going to have to read you your rights—just for your own protection. Anything you say here can be used against you in a court of law. You are not under arrest. You are free to leave at any time. But perhaps you would like to have a lawyer present while we talk."

Nick's temper flared hotter, and he grabbed James's upper arm and wrenched him backward a step. "James, dammit! This woman is not a suspect for crying out loud!"

"That's not the point." James didn't try to pull away. "I don't think she had anything to do with this shit. But the woman should know her rights. She is free to leave at any time. If she feels, for whatever reason, that she is not free to leave, then she has the right to remain silent. I don't want her getting herself involved in this and getting herself into trouble. I'm trying to protect her, Nick, for your sake and hers. We're friends. Don't accuse me of this bullshit!"

"I want to help in any way I can." Elle's crystal blue eyes glistened, reminding him of the hours she'd spent in his arms last night. If he



wanted to pick up where they'd left off, go wherever they would go from here, then she had to talk to them without his interference.

Nick slowly released his hold on James' arm. "All right." He turned back to Elle and leaned over to whisper in her ear. "I'll be outside. Elle, do you want a lawyer here with you?"

"I don't need one," she said, her voice surprisingly calm. "I didn't do anything wrong. The truth is not going to get me into trouble here. Is it?"

"No," James said. "It won't. Nick?"

"No, it won't." Nick squeezed her hand and walked out of the room. Mark followed him and closed the door behind them.

"This sucks." Nick turned back toward the door and looked in through the window.

"If she's got information, we can use it," Mark said. "We're stuck, Nick, and we need this break. Hey, dude. Come on. Let's get a cup of coffee."

"I'm not going anywhere." Nick planted his feet outside the door. "I'm going to stay here in case she needs me."

Nick couldn't see Mark's face, but could feel him staring.

"Don't say a thing," Nick said. "Not one damn word."

Mark sighed and leaned against the door. He crossed his arms over his chest and took Nick's advice.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Nick's sister," James said. "Tell me about her."

"She was a customer," Elle replied. "A much more regular customer than Nick knew."

James nodded slowly, his face impassive.

"And she was not alone." Elle decided nothing but the complete truth was going to save Nick's sister and other women. "She was there with a man. They were obviously intimate."

"Go on."

"She visited the club a few times for bachelorette parties. Always very pleasant. She didn't get drunk or behave badly. She was just there having fun. Other nights, she was there with a man, always at the same table, always in the back. They kissed, held hands, talked, and drank a lot."

"What did the guy look like? Maybe it was her husband."

Elle shrugged. "He was taller than me but not as tall as you, had dark hair. I couldn't see the color of his eyes. If it was her husband, then they are very happily married and like public displays of affection. Their table was in the darkest part of the bar. They tipped me extra if I would make certain no one disturbed them."

"The build and hair coloring is right. That could have been her husband. Miss Parson, do you believe you could identify this man if you saw him again?"

"Yes. They were good tippers. I made it a point to remember those customers so I could get them assigned to one of my tables."

"Did she ever call him by name?"

"I heard her say his name once or twice. I don't remember it, but I would recognize it if I heard it."

"His name is Gary," James said.

Elle thought about that for a moment then shook her head. "No, that doesn't sound right."

"Did he have a tattoo on his right forearm?"

"I never saw his arms. They keep that place pretty cool so the dancers don't get overheated. He always wore long sleeves or a jacket. Wait a minute. Hector. She called him Hector."

James' eyebrows rose. "Are you sure? A moment ago you couldn't remember."

"Yes, that was it. And he had plenty of money with him, too. She never spent her own money. He handed her money, she gave it to me, then she would lean over with her hand in his lap and kiss him—my cue to leave them alone. Once I suggested they get a room, just kind of joking around, and he gave me a wicked scowl, so I left them alone. I couldn't risk losing them as customers, so I kept my mouth shut from then on out."

James didn't speak for a while as he stared at her and nodded.

"What's wrong? Do you know who Hector is?"

James shrugged. "Toni's next door neighbor is named Hector."

Elle cringed. If his sister was having an affair, Nick would be crushed. "Maybe it's just a coincidence that all the women went to the club. A lot of women visited that club."

"I don't believe in coincidences," James said. "You knowing the victims and the fact that they were all customers of the Gentlemen's Club may be the one connection we haven't been able to make until now."

"Is there some way we can avoid telling Nick about Hector?" She clutched her hands in her lap. "I want Nick to find whoever did this to his sister. He's distraught about it, and he thinks I can help. He's already helped me, changed my life in fact, more than I could ever tell you. And I want to help him in any way I can, but I don't want him to find out anything that might upset him and have no bearing on the case."

"He's changed your life? I thought you two met yesterday."

They *had* met only yesterday. How could he have changed her life in what amounted to a drop in the ocean of time? And still, the truth of it permeated her soul. Nick *had* changed her, and a sense of peace flooded her with that realization, like so many waves of time's ocean.

The door opened and Mark walked into the room, pulling her from her reverie. "Hey, almost done in here?"

James continued to watch her like a scientist inspecting a confusing specimen under the microscope. She looked away from his penetrating gaze. "Where's Nick?"

"The head—I mean, the restroom. He won't be long—he didn't want to leave your side for a second, Miss Parson," Mark said. "What happened between the two of you in the last twenty-four hours anyway? I've never seen him act like this before."

Elle suppressed a smile. She didn't want to talk about her personal life with these two policemen, but did they need to know everything that had happened or not? Her life with Nick, whatever it was now or might be in the future, was private and had nothing to do with this investigation. They needed to know what Toni had witnessed.

"I met his sister. If she's not talking to anyone else, maybe she would talk to me."

Mark and James looked at each other. "You think she'd remember you?"

"I spoke with her on numerous occasions. I'm sure she would remember my face, if not my name."

Mark shrugged as he conferred with James with a look. "Toni must have seen the guy during all that time. The specialists Nick's hired think all she needs is a trigger of some kind to get her talking again. I don't see how it could hurt anything."

James crossed his arms over his chest and nodded. "I agree. If Nick's money couldn't buy a miracle, maybe the Lottery winner here can produce her own miracle."

Elle looked from one of the men to the other. "Nick's money?"

"You thought his sister's husband was paying? All their money is tied up in her husband's start-up business," Mark said. "And of course his mother has been tight as a banjo since she gave them both their inheritances."

"Mark." James' voice took on a warning sound.

"What? Everybody knows she lives in that huge house on River Oaks Drive all alone. Toni told me that the only time she leaves the place is to stop by Nick's and complain about his living like a 'commoner'." Mark laughed. "I don't get the guy. If I had his money—"

"Mark!"

Elle struggled to understand. "So, Nick's spending his own money on her treatment? Part of his inheritance?" She almost choked on the word.

"Yeah." Mark ignored James and continued. "Nick's probably the best money manager of all of them, but he never talks about it. Wish he'd give me some advice now and then."

James watched Elle carefully, and her shock must have been apparent. "You didn't know, did you?"

## Chapter Ten

Nick was rich. He was *rich*. No wonder he had shown no interest in her Lotto winnings. No wonder he had so much insight on managing money and rich people and protocol! No wonder he knew financial consultants and didn't like to balance his checkbook! Everyone at the hotel knew him, and the Austin police had known him. Every completely obvious clue had been there—how had she not seen it?

"He owns a hotel in Austin, doesn't he?"

"Oh, yeah," Mark said. "Great place. He's turned it into an amazing spot."

She thought back to things she'd said to him last night and this morning, and her face burned in embarrassment. He'd let her spout off like a fool, probably thinking the whole time exactly what she'd accused him of—she was just a stripper and cocktail waitress who got lucky. He, on the other hand, was heir to a fortune.

He'd patronized her all this time. Humiliation broiled her flesh.

Well, no more.

Elle stood and picked up her purse. "I guess we're done here." She walked toward the door, trying hard to calm her breathing. He'd lied to her, not overtly, but in every other sense of the word.

"I have a few more questions." James stood and moved to follow her, but nothing was going to stop her from getting out of here.

"I'm tired." Elle looked from one man to the other. "I'd like to go home and take a shower. It has been a long day."

"You'll need to wait for your police escort, Miss Parson."

"Oh, I will," Elle lied. Yeah, she'd wait for her escort—a taxicab, and the quicker the better. "I'll just go to the restroom first, then find Nick. Thank you gentlemen."

Without another word, she walked through the door toward the front of the station. *Nick was rich*. Why hadn't he just told her? Why had he pretended he didn't know what it was like to be rich? He'd made a fool out of her. At least he hadn't seen her apartment...oh, God. He probably lived in a mansion with the best of the best of everything. And she'd believed he was homeless.

How much humiliation could one man heap on in twenty-four hours?

She wanted to scream. Was he just slumming with her? Had he taken advantage of her ignorance, her naiveté, and she was just now realizing it?

Her temperature rose with each step she took. She wanted to choke the life out of something. Clenching her fists as she walked, Elle reached the front door to the station.

She grabbed her cell phone out of her purse and called for a taxi. Tears stung her eyes as she waited in the shadows in case Nick walked outside looking for her. She wanted to feel dirty remembering his kisses, recalling how he'd touched her; she didn't, which made how stupid she'd been that much worse. She'd been betrayed and why? For his amusement?

He'd led her to believe he was a simple guy, while she'd gone on and on about her new life and her new money—and he'd even made her feel guilty about it. From the first moment she'd seen him, poor and blind—all of it had been a lie.

Someone had been blind that night, but it hadn't been Nick Damato. Everything about *him* had been one deception after another. He could have told her that he wasn't blind. Instead, he'd waited until she'd forced the truth out of him at gunpoint. Then, they'd gone to Austin, and he'd had every opportunity to tell her his true financial status...and yet, he hadn't. She'd laid herself bare before him in every way, told him of the stripping, the insolvency, being fired. And he'd told her nothing.

She'd have the taxi take her to her car at the Galleria, then she'd go home, contact a lawyer, find a way to get her money safely, and move the hell out of here.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nick stepped out of the restroom after splashing water on his face for at least five minutes. Those two were not going to let him into the room while they talked to her, and he'd stared at her so long through that glass, he'd begun to feel the familiar longing of his body for hers.

In love with her.

The thought terrified him on so many levels. He hardly knew her, and she didn't really know him. That was entirely his fault, but it didn't even matter. Falling in love was completely illogical and yet, for the first time in his life he knew that was exactly what had happened.

Standing outside James and Mark's office, he'd watched her. Her long legs crossed at the knee, her lips moving seductively as she spoke in silent pantomime through the barrier of the door—he'd lasted as long as he could until he'd had to take his eyes off of her to collect himself. He was going to ask her to marry him. The truth would have to come out now—all of it—but he was ready. She might just spend every last dime he had, but he no longer cared. If that was what she wanted, she was welcome to it, as long as she remained with him.

*I love her.* It was a cold, hard fact, and nothing he could stop or change, nor did he want to. It didn't matter what else he found out about her; he wanted her for himself. Nobody deserved her, probably not even him, but by God, no one else was going to have her. She was the woman he'd always dreamed of, and no one else who'd ever been in his life could compare.

Nick walked back down the hallway with new purpose. He had a lot of explaining to do, and the sooner the better. James' office door was open again, so he jogged to it, ready to tell her in front of everyone if he had to, but she wasn't there.

"Where's Elle?"

James glanced up. "Restroom."

"Which floor? The women's restroom on this floor is out of order."

"Then I would assume the one upstairs," Mark said. "She didn't ask for a hall pass nor report to us which bathroom she'd be visiting, Nick."

"Kiss my ass, Mark!"

Mark ignored his outburst as he usually did. "But you know, she suggested something that we did find useful. Why don't we let her try to talk to Toni?"

"I'll be right back."

Nick jogged to the staircase and took the risers two at a time. Now that he knew what he wanted, he couldn't wait even one more minute to tell her. As he reached the top of the stairs, he saw the *closed for cleaning* sign next to Josie and her cart piled high with toilet paper and supplies.

"Is there a tall, auburn-haired woman in there, Josie?"

"Nobody's in there, Detective."

Nick took the long way back downstairs, glancing into each office as he went. Where the hell was she? When he walked back into Mark and James' office, he saw the empty seat where she'd been sitting. She'd taken her purse.

"Where the hell is she?"

"Still not here," James said.

Nick strode up to James' desk and slammed his hands down on the tabletop. Papers flew off the sides of the desk and files fell to the floor. "Dammit, where is she?"

James jumped up from his seat. "Calm down, Nick!" He picked up his tipped-over coffee cup, grabbed a stack of papers and tried to mop up the mess. "What is wrong with you?"

"She's not in the damn building! Where'd she go?" Nick demanded, pounding his hands on the desk again. "What the hell did you say to her?"

James and Mark glanced at each other for a moment, then James sighed. "Mark told her about your financial situation. I guess she didn't know. She seemed a little taken aback by it."



Mark laughed. "What guy doesn't tell a babe like that he is loaded? You might want to share a little more of yourself with women, there, Nick. They like that."

Nick shoved Mark backward. He fell into the file cabinet, knocking a stack of files off the top as he hit the floor.

"Dammit, Nick!" James shouted. "What the hell are you doing?"

Nick stormed out of the room. He ran toward the front of the building, shoved open the glass doors and stood outside. He looked up and down the street but didn't see her anywhere. "Dammit to hell!" he shouted. "Elle!"

He raced up the sidewalk, shouting her name over and over, glancing back and forth as he ran. She was nowhere in sight. How had she gotten out of here? A cab pulled up beside him, and the driver rolled down his window. Nick looked at him. "What the hell do you want?"

The driver scowled. "I'm here to pick up a fare. What the hell do you want?"

"A fare?" Nick glanced to the other end of the street. His Mustang still was still parked where they'd left it. He pulled his badge out of his pocket and shoved it through the open window into the driver's face. "Who's the fare?"

"Elle Parson."

Liquid terror poured over Nick's body. "When did she call?"

"A few minutes ago. I was only a few blocks away."

"Wait here!" Nick shouted and headed back toward the station glancing into the shadows around the building as he moved. James and Mark burst through the front door.

"Nick! What the hell are you doing?"

"Elle called a cab! The cab's here." Nick pointed to the car still idling at the curb. "But she's gone. She didn't take my car; she didn't wait for the cab. Where the hell is she?"

James and Mark stood helpless in the shadows of the station. Nick continued to search the street, then saw something lying in the bushes.

"What the hell?"

Mark jogged to the row of boxwoods lining the outside of the station and pulled on a strap attached to something hung in the bushes. "It's a purse. Isn't this...?"

Nick felt his heart stop as he sucked in a cold, hard breath. "Look inside!"

He ran over to Mark and grabbed the purse out of his hands. Fishing around inside, he pulled out the small lotto ticket.

"Oh, shit," James muttered.

"Yeah," Mark said. "Why would she have thrown a winning lotto ticket into the bushes?"

Nick wanted to punch these idiots. No wonder no one had found the Houston Marauder yet. "She didn't throw it away, you idiot! Someone took her!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Elle felt movement beneath her as bile rose in her throat. Slowly opening her eyes, her heart pounding in her ears, she squinted into the darkness. A swatch of tan carpet caked with mud came into focus inches from her face. *Carpet?* She suppressed a rising panic and tried to make her limbs work.

Resistance at her wrists held her fast. *Oh, God. Where am I?* Something rough restricted her arms behind her back. She ran her trembling fingertips along the rough edges of it. *Rope.* A tremor of terror shivered through her limbs.

She squinted again, more to calm herself down than to see what fresh hell she'd gotten herself into.

A car horn honked nearby, and the floor beneath her shifted. The hum of an engine and the sound of a tinny radio coming through cheap speakers over her head echoed in her ears. *I'm on the floor of a moving vehicle.* Choking down the bile in her throat, a memory like a broken newsreel flashed through her mind.

The cell phone call. Standing waiting for the cab. A large yellow taxi pulling up moments later. Walking to the back door. Happy to get

away from Nick. *Nick*. Nick, who would argue and make excuses for keeping secrets. Had to leave. Get to Austin.

The pieces of newsreel began to move faster, become cohesive. She'd opened the car door, sat inside the cab, and had almost pulled it closed until she'd seen them. Five photographs across the windshield. Five women. The same four women from the police files on the whiteboard at the police station. And a fifth photo—of herself.

She'd jumped out of the car. The driver ran after her, grabbed her and they'd struggled, but the driver had been stronger. She'd flung her purse away, hoping in a moment of complete clarity that Nick would find it and realize something was desperately wrong.

If he thought she'd just left angry, he might give her some time to think. But if he found the purse, he would know. And after seeing those photographs, she knew that if he didn't come after her as soon as he walked out of the police station, he might be too late.

God help her, she would end up like the other women in the photographs. She closed her eyes and prayed. *Find it, Nick. Find it, and then find me.*

She tried to move her legs, which flopped around with each bump of the tires on the pavement. Elle wanted desperately to sit up, to jump out of this car no matter how fast it was going, but every muscle in her body hung heavy and lifeless.

Something had stung her thigh when the driver grabbed her, something sharp and thin. A needle? Her mind raced to piece the moments of terror together. A syringe. She'd immediately felt her world swirl, her last coherent thought before her eyes closed was Nick.

The driver had been wearing earrings. Earrings? Elle forced her eyes open again. She blinked repeatedly, trying to clear her thoughts. Was the driver a woman? How was that possible?

Where was she being taken? How long had she been unconscious? Based on the way the vehicle began to bounce along, they'd left the paved road and traveled along loose gravel.

Elle pulled a slow, deep breath into her lungs through her nose, trying to discern something identifiable from the air. The windows of the cab were open, and she could smell dirt, grass and cool air.

Careful not to struggle and draw attention to herself, she tried to turn her head slightly to glance outside. Let the driver think she remained unconscious. Seeing nothing but a sea of stars overhead, she closed her eyes and forced herself to think. She needed to come up with a plan to get free, and quickly. If the driver drugged her again, she didn't want to think about where she'd end up.

No glare from streetlights shone into the car; no sounds other than tires on gravel and the chirping of crickets could be heard. This had to be the Marauder, who'd obviously already chosen her before she ever entered the cab.

How long had Nick said the Marauder held the women captive? How much time did she have? The thoughts racing through her mind now terrified her—ropes, rape, beatings, death. She fought off the urge to succumb to helplessness. If she didn't keep her wits, she would not get out of this alive.

She clenched her teeth. I'm going to stay alive. Whatever it takes, this beast will not kill me.

*Oh, God, Nick. Find that purse; find me.* She was still furious that he'd lied to her, but her anger could wait. Elle pressed down the whimpering dread building inside her and focused on two things as the miles bumped along under her, her face in the carpet, the car moving on into the dark night.

*Please, Nick, find me.*

Think. Be ready.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nick raced toward the protection room of the police station, Elle's purse clutched in his fist.

"Where are you going?" James shouted as Nick passed him in the hallway.

"To get the tapes!"

Cameras surrounded the police station, viewing every portion of the outside of the building. His only hope was that video. If it captured what had happened outside the front door minutes ago, he might discover where she'd gone.

Nick shoved the door to the viewing room open. Banks of television screens blinked images into the darkened room. The resonant snore from the guard leaning back in his chair as his feet were propped on the desk sent Nick's blood pressure off the charts.

"Wake up, dammit!" Nick pushed the man's feet off the desk, spilling him onto the floor. "Which one of these is the front entrance?"

The man picked himself up off the floor and cursed. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Nick grabbed him by the collar and then drew his fist backward. "If you want to live, you'll do your fucking job and get me the tape of the front entrance to the building from ten minutes ago! You got me?"

The man's eyes widened, and he nodded mutely. Nick released him and thrust him toward the bank of knobs and buttons.

Nick read the slacker's nametag below his security badge. "Nelson, what the hell were you doing? A woman might have just been abducted right outside this fucking police station while you snored away, you asshole!"

The man's eyes widened even further.

"Forget it! Find that tape! Now!"

Nelson's shaking hand clicked the mouse a few times, and images swirled on the main computer screen, then the tape of the front of the building began to run on every screen. Nick watched the images, his pulse beating in his throat. A minute went by as he stared at the recording of people coming and going along the street, cars passing by, then the front door opened and Elle stepped out onto the street.

"That's her! Right there!"

Elle moved toward the darkest area of the picture, next to the building, but Nick could still see her pull a cell phone out of her purse and

punch in a series of numbers. She spoke into the phone, then snapped it closed and dropped it back into her purse.

Clutching her purse to her side and glancing back and forth down the street and over to the front door, she was obviously trying to remain unseen by anyone going in or out of the station.

She'd been hiding from him, trying to get away from the station before he could catch up to her. Anger and fear burned hot in his stomach. He should have told her the truth himself. None of this would have happened if she—

A cab pulled into view of the surveillance cameras, snapping Nick back to the present. As the taxi parked next to the curb, Elle walked over to it, spoke to the driver, who Nick could not see, then climbed into the back seat. There were two beats before anything happened, then Elle leaped out of the cab, tripped, caught herself then broke into a run toward the front door of the station.

The driver was too quick, though, as he jumped out of the cab, rounded the back and grabbed her, shoving something into her thigh. Nick stared hard at the screen, willing it all to be a bad dream.

"Holy shit," Nelson said under his breath as the tape rolled on.

Elle's handbag flew off into the bushes, then the driver dragged her back to the cab and pushed her inside. Nick's stomach lurched as he quickly got inside and sped away.

Nick sucked in a quick breath of air as a wave of terror and nausea broke his skin into a clammy sweat.

"That was a woman!" Nelson clicked the mouse again, rewinding the tape. The screen played the nightmare again, just as the driver loaded Elle inside the cab.

Nelson froze the image, brought it closer and sharpened the focus.

Nick leaned closer to the television monitor. As Nelson let the tape move forward one frame at a time, Nick saw it too. Even in black and white, Nick could tell the driver was wearing earrings. Large, hoop earrings. A long strand of light-colored hair escaped from the driver's hat and fell down her back.

"Look at the fingernails." Nelson closed in on the hands of the driver and Nick saw it, too. Perfectly manicured fingernails at the end of tapered, feminine fingers.

"It *is* a woman," Nick said, his voice just above a whisper.

Thoughts raced through his mind: the rapes, the poison, the semen. Was this woman working with a man on these abductions? If so, where was the man?

A sticky, crawly horror moved across his back and neck, and he wanted to vomit. He'd thought they were dealing with one sick bastard. How could two people be involved in something so horrific? He forced himself to focus to save Elle from this apparent pair of psychos.

"Get me a close up of the name on the side of that cab."

Nelson clicked away on his mouse, freezing on the cab's door as it pulled up to the curb. Before Elle stepped forward to the cab, the door was visible, but not readable until Johnson grabbed the frame, brought it closer and cleaned up the pixels. "It's Schieffer Cab Company. Isn't that owned by the same people who own Sharmiah's?"

Nick nodded and blinked hard. "Jeremy. It's that weasel? But who is that woman?"

Nick grabbed Nelson's shoulder, his fingers pinching into the man's fleshy neck. "So help me God, if anything happens to that woman because you were asleep while she was being abducted right outside the building, I'll see you dead. Get me a close up of that driver immediately. Have it sent out to every precinct in the city, and I want that cab found right now. If there are any distinguishing marks on the cab, I want to know about it. I want a photo of the whole cab, too. I didn't see the license plate, but if you get a clear shot of it, that had better be in there, too. You got me?"

Nelson nodded, his eyes wide. "Right away, Detective."

Nick had to find James and Mark. They had to get APB out on that cab and find Elle before that woman took her so far away they'd never find her.

Nick ran down the stairs and straight to James' office. "Grab a couple of uniforms. Have them meet me out front. I'm bringing Jeremy Schieffer in here right now for questioning."

He'd need to bring the uniformed officers with him for protection. Not his—Jeremy's. Schieffer would need at least two cops to keep him alive while Nick questioned him, or he would kill the lizard with his bare hands.

Less than thirty minutes later, Nick dragged Jeremy by his collar to the interrogation room and pushed him toward one of the metal chairs. He glanced at his watch, feeling every second tick by like one more hammer blow on the nails of his coffin—loud, steady and relentless.

"Nick, come on man." Mark placed his hand on Nick's shoulder.

Nick pushed him off, then turned on Jeremy, who looked like a scared, wet rat. His cuffed hands resting on the table shook. Nick didn't know who'd brought the man a paper cup of coffee, but he was glad. He hoped Jeremy drank about five cups by the time he was done with him and peed all over himself from fear. If he or that woman did anything to Elle, this would be the last time he'd piss from his johnson anyway. If Elle was hurt in any way, Nick would make sure Jeremy pissed into a bag for the rest of his sorry life.

"One of your cabs picked Elle Parson up outside the precinct." Nick slammed his hand on the table. "What are the names of your women drivers?"

"We don't have any women cab drivers that I know of," Jeremy said, his voice small and shaky. "Just guys. Foreign guys mostly."

"You've got one driving tonight! She attacked Elle and dragged her inside the cab. She stabbed her in the leg with a hypodermic needle."

Jeremy's eyes widened, and his mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water, gasping for breath.

"She has long blonde hair and long fingernails. Who the hell is she?"

"We don't have any women drivers, I'm telling you!" Jeremy's voice cracked as tears rolled down his face. "I told you; I like Elle. I want



to help you guys, but if you don't calm down, I'm going to call my lawyer!"

Nick lunged for his throat, but Mark was too quick. He grabbed Nick's arms and pulled him away from Jeremy. Nick fought against his grip, but Mark held him fast.

The door opened and Nelson carried in several pieces of photo paper. "Detective, I've got it."

Mark released him, and Nick grabbed the photographs, sifting through them until he found the one he was looking for. He slammed it down on the table in front of Jeremy.

"Who is that woman?" he asked, pounding his fist on the photograph.

Jeremy wiped his eyes and stared down at the picture. He gasped and leaned away from the photograph, his eyes glued to the image.

"Who is she?" Mark asked, stepping forward.

Jeremy didn't move as his mouth hung wide open. He appeared to have stopped breathing as his face paled to the color of his shirt.

"Dammit!" Nick lunged across the table and grabbed Jeremy by the throat just as he had last night. Had that only been yesterday? It seemed like years ago that he and Elle had been sitting together laughing and talking at the Ragin Cajun, he in his dark sunglasses pretending to be blind so he could apprehend the culprit he'd believed was a man.

Again the thought of what had been done to these women flashed through his mind, and his grip tightened on Jeremy's neck. Nick could plainly see by the look on Jeremy's face that he didn't have the stomach for this kind of attack.

No, this weasel wasn't involved, but he knew the woman in the photograph. If he had to choke it out from Jeremy's dying breath, he would get his answer. He could still get to Elle; he could still save her before anything happened. He had to.

"Who the hell is that woman?" Nick shouted into Jeremy's face.

Tears poured down Jeremy's face now, and he began to sob aloud. Nick shook him, and Jeremy coughed then sagged against Nick's hands.

“Oh, no.” The choked sound in Jeremy’s throat reverberated inside Nick’s head. “Mommy, no.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The car stopped and the driver turned off the engine. Elle squeezed her hands into fists to test their movement. She clenched her toes. Yes, she could move a little more now. Elle closed her eyes. There was no way she could risk being knocked out again. Whenever the chance came to get away, she had to be in control of all of her limbs. She would remain still and do everything she could to appear unconscious.

The first chance she got to break free might be her only chance. If she could, she’d run as soon as her feet hit the ground, but that wasn’t possible yet. She would be ready.

Elle slowed her breathing as her heart hammered in her chest. If this guy—or was it a woman—thought even for a moment that she was conscious, she was a goner. Elle thought about anything else she could, food, movies she’d seen, songs she’d heard. Anything to take her mind off the fact that when he dragged her out, she could not make a move until she found one small chance to break free.

The door opened, and the driver grabbed her ankles. She kept her body lax, her face smashing into the center bump on the floorboard as he dragged her out of the car, her nose raking over the door frame as her body dropped unceremoniously onto the ground.

Face down on the muddy, wet earth; she lay still, refusing to lift her head even slightly to get it out of the mud. She held her breath to avoid drowning in the small puddle, but thankfully, the driver seemed convinced she remained unconscious.

Elle’s chin drew a long line in the mud as he dragged her. She peeked out of one eye at the retreating cab and the dim outline of the white gravel road. Crickets chirped, the sound echoing in her ears. Wherever they were, it was far from the city’s lights. The only illumination came from behind her and cast eerie shadows on the cab.

They finally got on a grassy slope, and now blades of grass feathered across her cheeks as he continued to drag her. Her hands remained tied behind her. At some point, the driver had stopped the cab and bound her hands and feet after knocking her out.

Why hadn't he gagged her, too? The horrifying truth dripped into her mind like rain spotting a sheet of window glass—because they were so far away from everyone her cries could not have been heard anyway. She pushed the thought from her mind; only ideas for escape now. *Think. Be ready.*

The driver dropped her feet, and Elle suppressed a grunt. The sound of an opening door broke the chatter of the crickets, then the driver picked her up and dropped her into a barrel of some sort. Elle let her body crumple inside the barrel, which had something wet and sticky in the bottom.

"Stay there for a minute, will you?"

Elle almost gave herself away as a horrible, cold fear gripped her. *The voice was a woman's—a strong and wretched woman.* The realization sliced through her like a thousand juggled knives.

Elle focused on keeping her body limp, while she worked her hands slowly and carefully behind her back to try to loosen the ropes that bound her. If she could just get her hands loose, she could possibly untie her feet and then...

She forced herself to stop moving when the woman stepped back to the barrel. The woman pressed down on Elle's head and though she let her body settle into the barrel, she was still too tall to fit completely inside.

"Well, dammit!"

Sounds of the woman's retreating footsteps spurred her. Elle worked her hands quickly, loosening the knot around her wrists. She managed to get one hand free but kept herself as far into the barrel as she could. She opened her eyes a tiny bit and saw nothing, which meant the woman couldn't see her either.

She listened for the sound of her return but heard nothing. If she just had thirty seconds, she could reach down and untie her feet. She

would have to look up. Taking a deep breath to calm her racing heart, she raised her head just above the edge of the barrel.

A small shed, with a single light bulb mounted outside the entrance door, cast a faint yellow glow. Various garden tools—a rake, a shovel—hung on the side of the building. A shadowy figure moved around the side of the building toward something shimmering behind it. *She was down there.*

Elle shifted her arms in front of her, not expecting the agony of the movement. She ignored the pain and grabbed the rope around her ankles, feeling for the ends of the knot. She closed her eyes, saw it in her mind, then quickly untied it. The rope dropped to the bottom of the barrel, sinking into the sludge covering her shoes.

She glanced once more toward the shed. Where had the woman gone?

She was free now, but did she dare move? This might be her chance. Her eyes keen in the darkness now, she scanned the dimly lit shed for the woman who'd drugged her and dragged her into this pit of hell.

## Chapter Eleven

Nick jerked the phone up from its receiver and punched in the number for the Schieffer's mansion. He listened as the phone rang and rang, quickly losing his patience. Finally, a man's voice came on the line.

"Good evening. This is John Schieffer."

"Mr. Schieffer, this is Detective Nick Damato of the Houston Police Department. Is Mrs. Schieffer at home?"

"No, she isn't," Mr. Schieffer replied. "May I take a message?"

"She is a person of interest in an ongoing case, and I need to speak with her immediately. When do you expect her back, sir?"

"She doesn't keep me abreast of her comings and goings, Detective, so I honestly couldn't say," the man replied amiably. "Have you spoken with my son? She may be at one of our stores."

"I've spoken with him," Nick said. "Thank you for your time. When she returns, please call me at the downtown precinct."

"Most certainly."

Nick replaced the receiver on the cradle. Generally spouses and family members were concerned and asked a lot of questions when he phoned. The fact that the man asked none did not sit well in his gut.

He turned to James and Mark. "I'm going out to their place. What's the address?"

Mark handed a slip of paper to Nick.

"Where in the hell is this?" Nick asked.

"It's a ways out of town, past Sugarland. An old farm that's been in the family for years, is my understanding," James said. "Mark will get a search warrant for the Schieffer's house. I'm going with you."

Nick stared at the two of them. "Does this mean I'm on the case now?"

James shook his head. "Nope. You're getting a ride with me since you're going that way. Mark, keep in touch on the radio, all right?"

"I should be going with you, man," Mark said.

"Three in a car is too damn many," James said. "All three of us show up at the house, we'll never get past the front door. I need that search warrant, so walk it through the process, and make it happen. This might be a wild goose chase, and if Miss Parson's abduction is a random attack, I need to know that the Marauder isn't finding his next victim while we're off visiting the rich folks. Now, go."

James walked out of the office, Nick fast on his heels.

Moments later, James pulled into the traffic headed west toward Sugarland. "What's your deal with this woman, Nick?"

Nick didn't look at him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the fact that she's in love with you. Written all over her, in fact, just like it's all over you. You say you met this woman yesterday?"

The words came out in that matter-of-fact tone James used when talking about another chick movie his wife had dragged him to see. Nick saw no point in denying his own feelings, although he doubted James had Elle's pegged correctly.

In any case, he sure as hell didn't want to talk about it. He wanted this car to sprout twin turbo engines and fly over Sugarland. "Will this thing move any faster?"

James flipped on the sirens and lights and began to weave in and out of the traffic, making a beeline through the congestion toward the open road outside Houston's city limits.

Nick stared out the window as they drove on in silence for a while. Another fifteen stakes in his coffin later, James finally ventured another comment.

"Do you think she was the target the night she came out of the mall? The night you stopped the purse snatcher?" James asked.

"I don't know."

"How does somebody fall in love in twenty-four hours?" James muttered.

Nick continued to stare out the window. "I have no fucking clue. Just shut up and drive."

\* \* \* \* \*

Elle continued to watch for movement around the shed. She wanted to stretch her legs and run, but her head felt as if it weighed about forty pounds on her neck. How long would it take for the drugs to wear off so she could run like hell out of here?

She turned her head slowly, trying to stretch her neck muscles and get a wider view of her surroundings. Lights burned in the bottom half of a two-story house about a half-mile up a hill. *Oh, God.* Her heart began to pound in her chest as she tried to focus harder on the distant light. If she could just get out there. The house sat so far away, though, too far to get anyone's attention if she screamed.

Dammit, she had to that house or back to the car...anywhere but here.

A movement out of the corner of her eye caught Elle's attention. The woman emerged from behind the shed, casting an eerie flickering shadow as she moved. She walked up the hill toward Elle, carrying something long that extended from her hand and rested over her shoulder.

Elle watched the woman's approach. She squeezed her eyes closed and opened them again, willing her vision to make out more details.

A sound off to her right, like a car being cranked, stopped the woman in her tracks. She turned, her profile now facing Elle. The car's engine ran for a second before the headlights cast a long, dim light across the grass, illuminating the woman and revealing the rest of the long stick on the woman's shoulder.

Elle blinked and stopped breathing as the long shaft of wood, ending in a shiny hunk of silver triangular metal, caught the light with a ghostlike flash.

An axe.

The woman shifted the axe off her shoulder, turned and began to jog toward Elle.

*Time to move.* Elle tried to stand, but her stiff legs barely responded, aching with the effort. If she couldn't climb out, how would she run up that hill? And if that bitch dragged her out of the barrel, she would see the missing ropes...

Elle closed her eyes and tightened and released her leg muscles, willing her blood to circulate. She had less than a minute before the woman reached her. She couldn't run, but if she could get one good thrust, it might be enough.

Planting her feet firmly in the bottom of the barrel, she straightened her body over them, her knees bent, her head dipped and tucked forward.

This was it. Keeping the vision of the steep hill in her mind, she clenched her teeth. She had to try something, no matter what her legs would or wouldn't do.

As the woman neared her, Elle heard something drop onto the soft grass. *Please God, let that be the axe.* The woman's labored breaths blew the hair on the top of Elle's head as she reached under Elle's armpits and pulled.

Elle took a deep breath and pushed with all her strength. She stood up, aiming her forehead at the sound of the ragged breathing.

Elle's forehead caught the woman square in the chin, and she fell backward, stumbled, then hit the ground. *This is it.*

Throwing all of her weight against the side of the barrel, Elle tipped the barrel over, tucked herself inside and began to roll, quickly picking up speed on the embankment as it spun toward the shed.

She choked down a wave of nausea, knowing the crash at the bottom when she hit the shed wouldn't be pretty. That one lunge upward must have been the last vestige of her strength. Her legs flopped like wet



wash inside a hot dryer as the barrel bounded down the grassy embankment.

Outside the barrel's opening, the countryside spun. Elle closed her eyes and tried to brace herself for the impact. Everything depended on the landing—if the stop didn't throttle her too long and if the woman couldn't reach her before she could scramble out, she was going to grab one of those metal hoes or steel rakes hanging on the side of the shed and take her chances.

An interminable number of cycles later, the barrel bounced then hit the shed. The echoing crash reverberated inside her skull and across the hillside, while fragments of the container flew in every direction.

Elle forced her eyes open, and in the spinning vista saw bits and pieces of something bloody lying on the ground amidst the splinters of wood. Her feet were soaked with the fleshy, brown substance. Elle gagged and averted her eyes as her vision swam, searching back up the hill and struggling to rise, shaking her head to clear her eyesight.

The woman had gathered her bearings and was making her way down the hill. She held the axe in both hands. Elle forced herself to get up and drag her numb limbs away from the pile of blood, flesh and broken pieces of wood.

She clambered up the side of the shed, using the wall for support as she half-stood, half-leaned until she could grab the closest tool, a long-handled shovel, off its hanging place on the front of the building. She spread her legs and pressed her back against the building for support, willing her legs to hold her. Elle couldn't outrun her; she'd have to make her stand here. Every pulse of rejuvenated blood through her veins screamed for one thing. *I have to stay on my feet long enough to beat the crap out of this bitch.*

The woman slowed her approach as she moved down the hill, her eyes blazing, her teeth clenched and exposed. She tightened her grip on the handle as she shifted the blade in front of her, aiming it at Elle.

Elle squared her shoulders and clenched the shovel, quickly determining that the handle on the shovel was at least eighteen inches longer than the axe handle. The woman couldn't reach her if she could

maneuver the face of the shovel around that blade. Her arms were limp strings of spaghetti. She supported the shovel entirely with the strength in her hands.

She needed the element of surprise, but that ship had sailed. She stood propped in the light from the shed, waiting and weak.

Elle looked up at the light bulb, then gritted her teeth. She turned and swung the shovel through the air, catching the light bulb with a loud crash, plunging everything into darkness.

Elle turned, keeping her body pressed against the shed for support and lurched around the side of the building as quietly as she could. Wedging her back against the shed, she listened, holding the shovel like a baseball bat. She would swing like Babe Ruth on crack as soon as that woman came around the corner, knocking her head off her shoulders if she could. The woman who'd drugged her, dragged her here, and wanted to kill her.

Elle held her breath although her heart pumped and thudded against her chest like a drum machine. Sweat dripped from her forehead as she clenched and unclenched her fingers around the handle. She listened and waited, preparing for her attacker to come around the corner.

The loud croak of frogs brought a picture of a pond to her mind, then the sound suddenly stopped. Something shimmered behind the shed. She turned in time to see the shadows beside her move.

Elle backed away, but the sound of heavy breathing and pain continued to move toward her. Swinging the shovel again, she missed, hitting the side of the shed.

She willed her feet to move around the edge of the building, but her legs only grudgingly cooperated as if her shoes were full of water, sloshing and heavy. She tripped again and again as she moved, continuing to swing the shovel back and forth, trying desperately to connect with the advancing woman.

"All right, you slut!" the woman shouted. "You are not going to get out of this alive, so give it up. I'll kill you without much suffering at all."

Her laugh echoed through the air, and Elle shot a glance up the hill at the house that now seemed so far away. Couldn't anyone else hear this

crazy woman's screams? Where was the driver of that car she'd heard earlier?

Elle fought to think clearly. She could not let the trembling fear cascading over her overcome her will to live. If she succumbed to it, the disembodied voice in the darkness would chop her into pieces.

And it wouldn't be painless, and it wouldn't go quickly either. Elle gritted her teeth and took another swing with the shovel, smacking the side of the building again. She would *not* be victim number five.

"Back off, you psycho bitch!" Elle shouted back. "You're not getting near me."

"I've got all night to play this game with you," the woman said, her voice suddenly calmer and almost friendly. The sound of it chilled Elle to her bones. "I haven't been drugged with Rohypnol. I won't be falling asleep soon, losing control of my limbs and muscles. I'll just hang out for a while in the meantime. How does that sound?"

The woman's voice sounded farther and farther away. Elle peered into the darkness and could just make out the shape of the woman, who sounded at least twenty feet away.

"Oh, no, honey. Don't tire yourself out following me. Save your strength. You're going to need it."

Elle searched her mind. She had to do something, come up with some plan that would get her out of here. She'd hoped the effect was diminishing, but now realized it had actually worsened. The adrenaline surging through her must have warded off the effects until now. Her vision, already poor in the dark, began to swim.

She could not, *would not*, pass out. Her only hope lay in keeping her talking, hopefully loud enough for someone to hear them, someone who would come and stop what the woman hoped was inevitable.

"Why me?" Elle asked, relieved to hear her voice come out clear and strong. It was the question she'd been asking herself since she'd first seen the photographs in the cab. What did she have to do with those women? She knew them, but what did she have in common with them, other than they'd all been inside the same club?

"Jeremy."

Elle startled. "What?"

"My Jeremy loved you. He loved you, and you spurned him. For that, you will suffer."

"Jeremy who?" she asked, even though she knew.

"Don't play coy with me!" the woman shouted, and moved closer to Elle. Elle kept the shovel high in her hands. If the woman got near her, she would take another swing. Only this time, she would sever her spinal column.

"Jeremy doesn't love me, Mrs. Schieffer," Elle said, forcing her voice to sound calm. *Keep her talking. Track her distance.* She listened for sounds of her approach, but the damp grass muffled their movements. Elle shifted to the side. She didn't need Mrs. Schieffer knowing where she stood either.

"He wanted you!" she shouted. "And you spurned him, you sorry excuse for a woman! He's never found a real woman, besides me, in his life. He's chased vacuous bimbos like you. No matter how many times I tried to tell him that he needed a woman of substance! He wouldn't listen to me! He never listened to me."

Elle wanted to keep her talking, but couldn't risk giving away her position. She put her hand up to the side of her mouth and shouted to the left. "He should have someone like you?"

"Yes!" the woman screamed, not altering her course. "I loved him. I showed him love. When I held him in my arms, I taught him. And he wanted to share that with someone his own age. I told him! Women his age are a waste of his time when he can have me anytime he wants! He won't even talk to me anymore."

Elle had pinpointed her position now, and she tightened her grip around the shovel's handle. She tried to take a step toward the voice, but stumbled, swinging the shovel with every ounce of strength inside her as she fell. The crack of the shovel's connection reverberated in the darkness. Elle smacked onto the soft earth, and the shovel slipped from her hands.

Mrs. Schieffer's body hit the ground with a loud thump. Elle heard the axe bounce off to the right.

She tried to stand, but her legs wouldn't move. She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling a heavy drowsiness close in around her. Biting down hard on her lip, she fought for pain to stem the desire to lie down and sleep.

Stretching her arm out as far as she could, she felt the edge of the metal against her fingertip, then grabbed a handful of grass, pulling her torso toward it. Mrs. Schieffer groaned a few feet away.

"Amelia?"

The voice came from behind the shed. It wasn't Jeremy but was still faintly familiar.

"Amelia, are you out here?" The sound of a whirring engine moved toward them, and Elle pushed her torso up from the ground with shaking arms. She could not let herself fall asleep. She couldn't give into the exhaustion closing in around her like large, dark drapes being drawn around her head.

Mrs. Schieffer continued to groan, and Elle realized the sound was above her, higher than ground level now, and moving farther away.

She reached again for the axe. The sharp edge brushed against the palm of her hand, and her fingers closed around it. She turned over, and with what little strength she had left, managed to move her useless lower limbs over on the grass without a sound.

"Amelia?" A light came on inside the building and blazed through the darkness, lighting up the ground all around her. She had to squint to make out the two people in front of her. Not twenty yards away, Mrs. Schieffer stood holding the shovel over her head.

The voice belonged to an older man, sitting in a gas-powered wheelchair. Not a single photo had ever shown him in a wheelchair. Mr. Schieffer, his face easily recognizable from all the photos of him at Sharmiah's corporate offices, stared up at the woman he'd called Amelia.

"Amelia, what are you doing?"

Mrs. Schieffer spun away from him and toward Elle. The fury in her eyes burned in Elle's chest like a hot poker. She looked wild, insanely angry, and unconcerned that someone had found out what she'd been doing in the back yard.

Or had Mr. Schieffer known this about his wife all along? The thought brought with it a stark, cold terror. Hadn't the police reports said that semen was found on the women? Semen they had tried to identify but couldn't? What if they were in this together?

\* \* \* \* \*

James drove through the traffic past Sugarland and headed farther west. The Schieffer's house was famous among Houstonians, one of the last plantation style homes left in a city of millions of people.

Nick perused the notes James had accumulated on Mr. Schieffer. Retired from daily management of Sharmiah's in Houston, after he'd been confined to a wheelchair from Multiple Sclerosis. A powerhouse in his day, rumors had it that his wife ran the show until Jeremy took over. Jeremy, appointed Vice President of Operations last year. Mr. Schieffer was still the face of Sharmiah's, but Nick cringed to think of Jeremy given any kind of power over people, especially Elle.

Now, though, he was more interested in the mother. Amelia Schieffer had been involved in every fundraising group and garden club in the city, and her face had graced more than fifteen magazine covers over the past thirty years. Nick tried to imagine her age now. Jeremy was in his mid to late thirties, so his mother had to be at least fifty-five, although based on the last magazine cover he'd seen, she was a good repeat customer for some plastic surgeon.

Had Jeremy been yanking his chain? Could the woman who'd dragged Elle into the car and stabbed her in the thigh with a syringe really have been his mother? The crying jag had ended the interrogation and given Nick no choice but to follow the lead. He had no other, and the clock was ticking.

The view of the woman's face on the video had been fleeting and blurred, and she wore pants and a long-sleeved shirt. It was impossible to tell the details of the hands on video other than the long thinness of the fingers and the manicured nails. Were they the hands of an older woman or perhaps someone younger?

"Does Jeremy have a sister?" Nick asked.

"No. Only child." James floored the gas pedal and the car moved over the open road at over ninety miles an hour.

Nick turned to James. "You think the mother is really involved? An old woman raping women and beating them up? It doesn't make any sense."

"That was a woman," James said. "You saw the video."

"Yeah, it was a woman." A woman strong enough to grab Elle and drag her into a cab. The memory of the videotape flashed into his mind. Elle tossing the purse as she fought to overcome that woman.

"What I don't get is how," James said, taking a drag from his cigarette and blowing the smoke out the window. "How would she rape them? The M.E. found semen. Unless Mrs. Schieffer had a pretty impressive sex change operation, she's getting help from somebody."

"If Jeremy is in this with his mother, I'll kill the bastard."

"We're getting a DNA sample right now. He agreed to it without any argument."

Nick considered that. "He knows it's not his. *Shit*. We'd better not be wasting time going to the middle of nowhere to find a woman Jeremy falsely identified while Elle is God only knows where." Her sweet smiling face flashed into his mind. Where was she? What was happening to her? A sick knot of pain twisted in his gut. He clenched his fists and took a deep breath as he stared down at the photographs in his lap.

"How much longer?"

"Five minutes."

James took another long draw on his cigarette and blew it out. "Did you see the look on Jeremy's face when you showed him the picture? That was no snow job. He looked like he'd seen a ghost. It's the mother."

"The mother doesn't make any sense." Nick shook his head, his pulse racing. "Where's she been all this time, other than garden parties and social clubs? If she's really doing this, then she's been nuts for a long time. And if it's not her, we're wasting time we haven't fucking got. What's Jeremy's story anyway? The abuse allegations brought by his old girlfriend?"

"The family bought off the girlfriend. She dropped all charges."

"Let me guess; she was an employee, and he was sexually harassing her, right before he fired her?"

"Oh, yeah." James took another drag of his cigarette. "You saw that asshole. You think he could get a woman without resorting to harassment?"

James exited the main road and headed down a long driveway which led up to the plantation. The house lights were on.

James followed him to the front door, and they waited as Nick rang the doorbell once, twice, three times. Where the hell was he? Nick peered inside the window. "I don't see anybody."

Nick looked around the front yard. There were no cars in the driveway.

"Didn't you just call this guy like fifteen minutes ago?" James asked.

"Shit." Nick pulled his weapon out of the holster and walked around to the back of the house. A light burning next to a shed about two hundred yards down the hill illuminated an old man sitting in a wheelchair next to a woman with a shovel resting on her shoulder.

Nick took off down the hill like death itself chased him. Why was she holding that shovel? Had she buried Elle? Was he too late?

He heard James' feet pounding the ground behind him as they raced toward the shed. She couldn't be dead. He couldn't be too late.

The woman took a step away from the shed.

Nick forced himself to run faster, pulling the cool night air in and out of his lungs as he sprinted down the long hill toward them. The woman remained half-illuminated by the shed's interior lighting, but she took another step toward something now only about sixty yards away, a long, still shape lying in the grass.

"Oh, God," he said, his breath bursting from his chest.

"What the hell?" James' voice carried through the night air from somewhere far behind Nick. Whatever it was, the woman stood over it now. She began to lift the shovel above her head.

"Stop! Police!"



The woman looked up for an instant, then planted her feet and released a piercing scream of agony and insanity. She lifted the shovel high over her head, aiming at the lifeless shape in front of her.

A shout rang out behind him, but Nick did not process the sound. He dropped to the ground, aimed for the woman's chest and fired.

The shovel fell in an angry arc toward the ground.

"No!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Mrs. Schieffer ignored the man in the wheelchair and took a step toward Elle.

"What will killing me solve, Mrs. Schieffer?" Elle asked. Her voice sounded drowsy as the woman approached. She forced herself to focus. If she could keep her talking, she might have a chance to live. "How will that change anything?"

"You're useless. You and every one of the others. I'm going to exterminate all of you bitches once and for all. Jeremy doesn't need you confusing him and making him feel less than a man. I know him. I'm not giving him up without a fight."

"Where did you get the semen?" Elle asked, fearful the answer would cause her to vomit. *Keep her talking.*

The woman stared down at her, still holding the shovel.

"I know about it, Mrs. Schieffer. The whole city knows. Whose is it?"

She raised the shovel above her head again. "It was Jeremy's. I saved it. He wanted it inside them, and I helped him. You're just a slut like the rest of them; they took it from any scumbag off the street, yet my baby wasn't good enough for them. I taught him well; he was good enough for you, but you turned him away."

Elle tasted more bile and swallowed hard.

"Now you'll get what he offered you, whether you want it or not. I'm helping him, like I always helped him get what he wanted—I'm his mother. And because he wouldn't do it himself, I got revenge for him. He

couldn't, wouldn't get it for himself. So I helped him. That's what a mother does."

Her stomach lurched. If she threw up now, she was dead. She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "You love him so much, don't you? Those women didn't know how wonderful he is."

"Neither did you! But now, you're going to pay for that!"

The shovel rose higher in the air, and Elle tried to turn her body to roll away from the oncoming attack, but she couldn't move. Her muscles felt like they were no longer hers, her body no longer under her control at all. Fear and hopelessness rushed through her. She was going to die here in the wet grass in the middle of nowhere.

Elle heard a shout in the distance. Was that Nick's voice? No, it couldn't be. Her mind raced as Mrs. Schieffer held the shovel over her head.

She forced her eyes to stay open. If she could just roll away before that shovel plunged into her skull...she tried again to move her legs. Nothing.

She was going to die. She clenched her teeth, searching her mind for any idea to save her life, to prolong the moment before the shovel would plunge to the earth.

Another sound broke through the silence. Mrs. Schieffer screamed. As if in slow motion, her arms descended with the shovel.

An explosion ripped through the air. Elle heard it somewhere in the back of her mind as she closed her eyes and waited for the impact. She tried to move with every ounce of strength in her body, but she couldn't.

She thought fleetingly of her lottery winnings but, strangely, found that she didn't really care. What people said happens when you die was true. Her life flashed before her in slow, random visions. She wondered at that, and found it even stranger that she had time to peruse these thoughts.

Her mind filled with visions of Nick. Nick holding her in his arms, Nick swinging his cane at the purse-snatcher, Nick dressed as a blind man, Nick holding Jeremy's collar in his fist at the Ragin Cajun, and Nick making love to her in his hotel. Her anger with him about the money

disappeared as if it had never existed. Some things were just not important, and considering the fact that her own fortune didn't matter, she was not surprised to discover that neither did his.

She wished she'd have lived long enough to explore that further, and yet, the twenty four hours they'd spent together had meant more to her than the years she'd spent with anyone else. In that moment, she knew that she loved him, that she would have wanted to spend the rest of her life with him if she could have.

She opened her eyes and saw Mrs. Schieffer falling toward her, the shovel coming down. She closed her eyes again. If she'd only had another chance, she would have told him she loved him. She wouldn't have left this world without letting him know. She'd given her body to him, but he'd never know that she had given her heart, too.

## Chapter Twelve

The woman's body shifted sideways as the bullet tore through her shoulder. Still, she did not drop the shovel. Nick leaped up and ran toward them.

He was close enough to recognize Elle's lifeless form on the ground now as the other woman's body fell. Nick died a hundred times in the seconds it took him to stop again, take aim, and fire once more, his hands shaking from his heavy breathing and the strain in his muscles to hold the firearm steady.

He squeezed the trigger, his hand a rock of fear and purpose.

The bullet exploded in a flash and crack that broke the stillness of the cool, dark night. The recoil shook Nick's arm, his heaving chest bursting with cries he held down.

The woman's hand caught the second bullet. The shovel handle splintered in her grip, then fell.

The woman hit the ground, landing squarely on Elle. Neither woman moved. Nick ran again, adrenaline pumping hot through his veins. As he closed the distance between himself and the woman he loved, thoughts raced through his mind. Was Elle already dead? Had the woman killed her before he got a chance to stop her? His lungs heaved, and his heart beat wildly in his throat as he skidded to a stop on the grass next to them.

He grabbed the woman's body and threw her off Elle's prone form. Elle's eyes were closed. His heart pounded in his chest as he held his breath and pressed his fingers to her carotid artery. Her heart was beating.

He nearly fainted from relief, then gently shook her. "Elle? Elle?"

James came up behind him, grabbed what remained of the shovel from the woman and then ripped her hands behind her back and cuffed her.

Elle's eyes slowly opened, her pupils large and unfocused.

"I'm here," she whispered, her voice almost a croak.

"Are you hurt?" He searched her body, checking everywhere for the origin of the fresh blood stains all over her torso. He found no wounds and decided the blood had belonged to the woman James was hauling up from the ground.

He held her eyes open and peered into them carefully. "You were drugged, weren't you? Can you move at all?"

"No," she managed, her eyes pleading with him. "She said Rohypnol."

Nick nodded, then picked her up into his arms. In the back of his mind, he registered James calling in backup, talking to the man in the wheelchair and securing him with another pair of handcuffs, but he could not be bothered to care about any of that. "I'm taking her to the hospital right now!"

James stood and grabbed Nick's shoulder. "Is she all right?"

"We'll be at the hospital within twenty minutes. Call ahead and tell them I'm bringing her. I want immediate response and Dr. Kendall on the case. Tell them that it's me, and tell them I want it now."

"Yep, got it," James said. "You'll never be able to carry her back up that hill, Nick."

Nick looked toward the house. He could carry her a hundred miles if he had to, but James was right. He needed a vehicle now, not the twenty minutes from now it would take him to carry her. He glanced around the shed. "How the hell did they get down here? Where's the cab?"

James touched Nick's shoulder. "Buddy, the ambulance will be here before you can find it. Stay here a minute, and we'll get her out immediately."

"She's not riding in the same ambulance with that bitch!"

The woman struggled in the wet grass, her hands cuffed behind her back. She was shouting something, but Nick didn't bother to listen. He couldn't care less what she had to say, and if he got close to her, he might kill her. The least he would do would be stomp on her head and shut her up.

Instead, he held Elle close to him, listening to her slow, steady breathing.

"Of course, she isn't riding with that nut job," James said. "Set her down a minute and wait. I can hear the sirens already, Nick. She's not bleeding, is she?"

Nick shook his head, then listened to the distant sirens as they approached. "She said Rhohypnol, but it could be something else, too." He knelt back to the ground, holding Elle in his arms, resting her on his thighs. "Elle, wake up."

Elle's eyes opened, and she smiled the faintest smile, the happiness in her eyes plain even in the semi-darkness. "I'm here."

"I'm sorry I took so long to find you." Waves of relief rolled over him. If they hadn't found her when they had, God knows what would have happened. And if all she'd been given was Rhohypnol, it would wear off in a few hours.

Nick looked down the length of her body again, and although she was dirty and unable to move, Nick said a silent prayer of thanks as he lowered his lips to hers for a short, sweet kiss. They hadn't hurt her. She was alive. She was okay. Thank God, she was in his arms.

"Don't cry, tough guy. You made it," she said, then closed her eyes. "You saved me again."

\* \* \* \* \*

Elle held Nick's hand as she signed the paperwork at the Austin Lottery Office.

The last two days had been a blur. The police had found all the evidence they needed to link Mrs. Schieffer to the five abductions and three murders. Even though Nick had threatened to tear the perpetrator apart before any lawyers had time to show up, he had followed police procedure to the letter of the law.

Nick had told her, thankfully in a sanitized form, exactly what had happened.

Mrs. Schieffer and her husband would both stand trial for the crimes. During the interrogation of both suspects, who'd each hired their own lawyers, the detectives were convinced by the evidence and the testimony of Mr. Schieffer that Jeremy had nothing to do with the attacks, and had been oblivious his mother's crimes.

The semen had indeed belonged to Jeremy, but when the police discovered more of it stored in frozen bags in Mrs. Schieffer's freezer inside the shed, they'd concluded she'd systematically abused Jeremy throughout his childhood and had stored his semen, procured from condoms she'd forced him to use during the abuse. Jeremy had gotten away from his mother years prior, and although his father had known what was going on the whole time, he'd done nothing. Elle could almost feel sorry for him, even though she couldn't quite forgive him for treating her so badly.

Mrs. Schieffer would probably end up in a mental facility before it was all over, and Mr. Schieffer in jail for harboring a felon. She'd been following women home from the Gentlemen's Club for a long time, convinced somehow in her psychosis all the women there had jilted her son.

Mrs. Schieffer had really gone off the deep end as far as Elle could tell. Although nothing could be done for the women she'd abused and killed, at least Toni had made it back to the land of the living.

She and Nick had left Toni, her husband, and their daughter this morning. Toni had come around when Nick showed up at her bedside and told her that the woman who'd hurt her was in custody and nobody

else was ever going to be hurt by Mrs. Schieffer again. The light behind her eyes had returned, and the first words she'd uttered had been, "Where is my daughter? I want to hold her."

The doctors recommended continued therapy to rid her mind of the demons of those three days, but all seemed hopeful for Toni's full recovery.

When Toni had told them that the man she'd called "Hector" all those nights at the Gentlemen's Club was in fact, her husband, Gary. Nick had been relieved, if a little embarrassed. Toni told him boldly how they'd decided to try a few role-playing games to spice up their marriage after the baby was born, and they'd been having a wonderful time until that night. "You should see the look on your face, Nick!" She'd laughed and punched him in the arm. "What do you think my sweet neighbor, Hector, would think if he knew?"

"It had all been just fun and games until that night. We got into a play argument, and I stormed out to catch a cab, planning to 'accidentally' meet up with him again outside this coffee shop on San Felipe." Unfortunately, that night the cab ride had taken her into a different world, a world of fear and danger and horror.

Elle realized this was the same fate Mrs. Schieffer had planned for her, and she would have done it if Nick hadn't come to her rescue when he did.

Toni was confident that she could testify to exactly what happened on the witness stand when the time came however, and although Nick had wanted to spare her that, for the benefit of the women who had not made it out of the horror house alive, she intended to do it.

Toni had spent hours holding her daughter in her arms, talking to her constantly, and kissing her every time she got close enough. Nick was glad to see his sister had returned to herself, but he still feared her complete recovery would take a while. Based on how she was doing so far, though, and knowing the kind of strong woman she'd always been, deep down he knew she would come out of it all right.

The lines around Nick's eyes had softened, and Elle had seen him laugh quite a few times over the past few days, a sure sign the turmoil



inside him had disappeared. Even though she'd almost been killed herself in the process, she'd played a small part in helping bring that smile to his face.

And now, he was here with her as he'd promised he would be the first night they'd met. He'd driven her to Austin and as they stood together in the Austin Lotto office to claim the prize winnings, Elle felt her heart race with the possibilities for their future.

He'd been truly happy for her, and he'd finally been able to concentrate on something other than his missing sister for long enough to have a heart-to-heart talk with her about himself. He'd avoided it while they'd been in the throes of the nightmare, but the night she'd awakened in the hospital, worn out, bruised and tired but alive, he sat down at her bedside and told her everything.

Elle had gotten over the shock of discovering Nick was a millionaire fairly quickly. A near-death experience could do that to a person. And after all, she'd been intent on making him a millionaire anyway, so did it really matter? Sometime in the middle of almost losing her life, she'd realized she didn't care anymore whether or not they even had two nickels to rub together.

He'd held her hand and talked to her softly, telling her stories of his life, his childhood, everything he could think of leading right up to the night they met. He spoke with a sense of urgency, and she'd told him to slow down, that she wasn't going to die just yet. He'd kissed her, a whispering touch in deference to her weakened condition.

Until she'd met Nick, she had to admit that she had believed rich people were different, even though she'd argued tooth and nail with him about it. But rich or poor—he was the man she loved.

Handing her the pen to sign the official lottery paperwork, he leaned over and whispered into her ear. "Today you start learning the lessons I spent a lifetime learning."

"Think I can learn enough to live on this the rest of my life?"

"You'll have me close by to help you."

She marveled again at the man standing beside her. All this time, he'd been trying to let her find out on her own that money wasn't everything, that money had not shaped him into the man he was.

Strangely, Mrs. Schieffer had taught her that lesson more effectively. Realizing she was going to die, the only thing Elle had been able to think about was Nick, and no amount of money could buy her what she really wanted. Him.

Nick put his arm around her. "You're sure you want to do this?" He'd asked her the same question numerous times since she'd told him what she intended to do with her lottery winnings.

She'd never been surer of anything in her life. She placed a kiss on his cheek. "Absolutely."

When the lottery office personnel had discovered that the winners of the Texas Two Step had been one of the victims of the Houston Marauder and the policeman who'd apprehended the criminal, the media attention had been fierce.

Elle faced the flashing cameras and the videotaping reporters and smiled. "I have an announcement to make."

The room fell silent and all eyes in the room were on her. Nick squeezed her hand.

"A few days ago, every person's dream came true for me. I bought a lottery ticket, and I won ten million dollars. My life was about to change. I would finally be happy and safe." Tears filled her eyes but she forced herself to continue.

"Then, I learned a few things about money. It didn't bring me happiness. It doesn't bring safety. My life went into turmoil. I hadn't even gotten the money yet, but winning it changed my life. Money can do things; it can help when used in the right way."

She paused and took a deep breath. "My dream had come true, but winning the lottery didn't make that happen. Meeting the person who saved my life did, and I'd like to introduce that person to you. Ladies and Gentlemen, Detective Nick Damato of the Houston Police Department."

Applause flooded the room. She waited until it stopped to continue.

"Money can help people realize their dreams, bring them to life. So, I am donating all but one million dollars of my lottery winnings to the Houston Police Department's Victims of Abuse Support Fund."

The room erupted in shouted questions.

"A one million dollar donation?" one reporter shouted.

"No," another yelled back. "She said all *but* one million dollars!"

Elle smiled. "Yes, that's correct. All but one million. I'll use my million to prepare for the next challenges in my life. That is more than enough."

The lotto office staff stared in silence, then one of them began to clap. Other people who'd come to see the event joined in, until the room echoed with the sound. The reporters' voices were drowned out by the applause, and Nick turned Elle into his arms.

"Well, that's done, then. Can I make my announcement now?" Nick asked.

Elle stared at him. "What announcement?"

Nick pulled a small box from his pocket and placed it in her hand. He flipped it open to reveal a beautiful diamond solitaire; oval cut and set in platinum. "That I married a millionaire." He touched her lips with his fingertip. "If you'll say yes."

The room fell silent as cameramen closed in on the two of them. Every person in the room faded away. All she could hear was Nick's voice; all she saw was his sweet face.

"I can't tell you how proud I am of what you've done with your fortune. I hope you'll be able to teach me how to give back to others the way you have."

She wrapped her arms around him and pressed her lips into his neck. He squeezed her back, then pushed her away from his body and forced her to look at him again. "That's no answer, woman. Will you marry me or not?"

Elle nodded. "Yes."

The room erupted again into wild applause and questions. "Where will you live now, Miss Parson? Where will you honeymoon, Mr. Damato? What are your plans for the future?"

Nick pulled her back into his arms and pressed his lips to hers. The kiss was warm, firm and possessive, and Elle let herself melt into him. Wherever they ended up living, wherever they honeymooned or didn't honeymoon, no matter what their plans for the future—as long as they were together, she had what she truly wanted.

Some dreamed of winning the lottery. She'd done that. But winning the lottery hadn't made her dreams come true. Only love could do that, and with Nick beside her, love was the only prize she wanted.

**The End**

**Author Bio**

Moira Reid is a graduate of the University of Nebraska, majoring in Actuarial Science with a minor in English. She traveled the world with her military family and has lived in Houston and San Antonio, Texas; South and North Carolina; Virginia; Omaha and Lincoln, Nebraska; Seattle, Washington; Panama City, Florida; and Tokyo, Japan. Moira's favorite pastimes are writing, reading and drinking coffee.