



Billboard Cop

WANTED: OLD FASHIONED WIFE
NO OTHER NEED APPLY
P.O. BOX 48613
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS, 0210

Lynde Lakes

Billboard Cop

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Amira Press, LLC

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DEDICATION

: To My Wonderful Amira Editor, Yvette,
And My First Editor Extraordinaire, Teacher And Friend, Sara Rice.

CHAPTER ONE

Out of the corner of her eye, Jen Lyman, reporter for the *Boston Globe*, caught sight of a billboard printed in huge, black letters. The bold words on the stark white background seemed to leap at her. Her heart raced, immediately sensing a story.

WANTED: OLD FASHIONED WIFE
NO OTHERS NEED APPLY
P.O. BOX 48613
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS, 02104

She hit the brakes, shifted into reverse and sped backwards.

Dory Kincaid, *Globe* photographer and Jen's best friend, clung to the dashboard and shrieked, "Have you lost your mind?"

When Jen had a clear view of the billboard through her front windshield, she jerked to a stop. "Maybe, but I smell a story." She grabbed her digital recorder from her bag and read the ad into it.

Dory chuckled. "Oh, wow. I see what you mean." She pulled her always-loaded camera from her bag and snapped a few shots. "What kind of weirdo would put up such a hokey ad?"

Jen flashed her most devious smile. "And what kind of woman would answer it? Especially with the ridiculous requirement that she has to be old fashioned."

"Obviously, your kind. I see the wheels already turning in your head."

Jen laughed. "Guilty as charged."

Dory shook her head. "The guy's gotta be a loser. No name on the ad spells no guts."

"Or something to hide," Jen said. "But I can't blame him for being cautious. Imagine all the fruitcakes waiting to pounce on something like this. Besides, what normal, self-respecting man would want the world to know he's so hard up for a wife that he has to take out a billboard ad?"

"Normal? Ha!" Dory said. "He might even be our copycat Boston Strangler."

Jen tightened her grip on the steering wheel. "Wouldn't that be something? What if the ad is a predator's trick to get women to volunteer their addresses?" She fought excitement mingled with apprehension. "Tying the billboard ad to my strangler story would be the kind of complication that Pulitzer prizes are made of."

"Dream on. But be sure you can wake up when it's over."

In spite of the August heat, Jen shivered; her own uneasiness was amplified by Dory's half-kidding, half-serious warning. Jen shook off her misgivings and headed back into the Monday morning traffic. She glanced at her watch and pressed harder on the accelerator, zigzagging in and out of the lanes, speeding past rows of brownstones. In seconds, she came under the shadow of the sixty-two story Hancock Tower with its walls of glistening glass.

"Ease up," Dory squealed. "Wanna pick up a cop?"

"We're still blocks from the Government Center. I can't be late." Jen bit her lip. The mayor had only given her this personal interview because she'd convinced him she had questions he might not want other reporters to hear.

Dory stashed her camera in her bag. "We'll make it." She grinned. "So how will you approach Mr. Billboard, sassy and straightforward, or down, dirty and devious?"

"Have to find him first. The billboard company or post office won't help. Thanks to the Right to Privacy Act, it'd take a court order to pry info from them."

Dory wrinkled her brow. "So what'll you do?"

"What else? Write a letter. Stake out his post office box. His zip code gave away the location."

"Ah, down, dirty and devious." Dory squirmed with delight. "Let me help. The letter has to

sound domestic and a bit docile. A tone you may have trouble faking.”

“Hey. I can sling the Martha Stewart and apple pie phrases with the best of ‘em.”

They neared the iron-fenced commons with its network of long, tree-lined promenades and gently rolling lawns. The glint of the gold-domed State House just ahead brought Jen’s thoughts back to more pressing things—her skirmish with the mayor.”

* * * *

Inside the mayor’s wood-paneled office, Jen shook hands with Mayor O’Brien and his hovering public relations officer, Diego Zombolas, who almost everyone in the news business knew was really the mayor’s bodyguard. Diego had been brought on board a year ago when a wildcat union strike leader pulled a gun on the mayor on the courthouse steps.

After getting permission to take some pictures, Dory dug her camera out of her bag and checked the light meter. The mayor gestured to a leather chair. Jen sat down and waited for him to seat himself behind his desk which was on an elevated platform and left no doubt who held the power in this room.

Diego stroked his Greek nose in a deliberate way. Was it a signal between the men? He remained standing and situated himself where he could keep an eye on her and Dory who now circled the room taking shots from different angles.

Jen leaned forward. “Mayor, are you still being hassled by disgruntled union wildcatters? Or is there someone else threatening your life?”

The mayor gave a smile that failed to reach his gray, guarded eyes. “No. All’s calm here at city hall.”

Yeah, right, Jen thought. She decided to try a sidestep-topic to break through his shield. “You call Mr. Zombolas your public relations man?”

The mayor’s smile remained in place. His eyes glinted with amusement. “That’s his job title. But Diego is a man of many talents.”

“You don’t deny that bodyguard is one of them?” She kept her tone easy, non-combative.

“I take care of the mayor,” Diego piped up. He slicked back his black hair with the smoothness of a man who believed he was good looking. “The capacity depends on the situation. But surely you didn’t come here to talk about my job description?” A warning undercurrent darkened his tone.

Jen swallowed. “True, Mr. Zombolas. But if the mayor’s life is in danger because of the unions, or for any other reason, the public wants to know.”

Diego bowed slightly. “Naturally,” he said, oozing charm. “We wouldn’t dream of keeping important information from the press.”

“Good,” Jen said, forcing a smile. She wouldn’t be surprised to learn that the threats against the mayor were tied into her toxic-waste story. She placed a recorder on the desk in front of her, and leveled her gaze at the mayor. “Mayor O’Brien, everyone living here knows that a lot of Boston is built on landfill. Can you comment on the soil report that came out of the State Environmental Division last Tuesday, indicating a high toxin count in the fill used in the Old Town area?”

The mayor cleared his throat. “That test is being run again. We suspect faulty instruments.”

Diego walked behind the mayor and gripped the back of the official’s high-back chair. “Rest assured,” he said, “whether the problem is faulty instruments or spot soil contamination, it is being handled with public safety in mind.”

Jen’s palms began to sweat. But she couldn’t let it go at that. “What about a certain trucker’s claim that he was paid off by someone at city hall to forget where he got the soil?”

Diego touched the mayor’s shoulder, as if to silence him and said, “If you’re referring to Lorenzo Geoffrey Monroe, he was fired from Atlantic Trucking for being a drunk and a

troublemaker.”

The sun coming through the plate glass window, slipped behind a cloud, casting fierce shadows across Diego’s face, but it didn’t dim the flash of fury that fired in his eyes.

Jen swallowed and met his menacing gaze head on. “Mr. Monroe has provided names, dates, and locations. He swears he got the contaminated soil from a service station site with a leaking tank.” She glanced down at her note pad. “A site located at the corner of Wildwine and Brae streets.” She raised her eyes and met the mayor’s steady gaze. “I checked. The land is owned by billionaire Finstead Alexander Coble, a campaign contributor of yours, I believe.”

The mayor’s jaw tightened and his fierce, bushy eyebrows lowered, shading frigid eyes. “This service station assertion is new information to me.” He rose with fists balled, looking like he might come right over the desk at her. “I assure you I’ll follow up on it and get back to you. Whatever the situation, I can guarantee you that no wrong doing has been perpetrated by anyone from this office.”

Her facts had hit their mark. One way or another someone was in big trouble. Diego’s searing look sent prickles to her neck and she wondered if she could be that someone.

Dory signaled with a slight nod that she’d gotten enough pictures. Jen thanked the mayor for his time. She gave him her business card and shook his hand. “I knew if I brought this to your attention, you’d take action on it.” She squared her shoulders. “I’ll look forward to hearing from you, soon?” The rise in her voice made it crystal clear that she had no intention of letting this matter drop.

“Of course. I appreciate that you came to me before printing anything.” He flicked some dust from the sleeve of his jacket, probably wishing he could get rid of her as easily.

Seconds later as the reporters hurried down the concrete steps, Dory said, “How about that pompous ass? What an obvious fast shuffle.”

Jen laughed. “And the way the Greek PR man tap-danced around issues, I’d bet a bottle of Ouzo that he can dance the Zebetako without music like a pro.”

Dory frowned. “Wasn’t Gordon working on the toxic waste story when some lowlife murdered him?”

Jen nodded. She took a deep breath, fighting a twinge of fear. It was immediately overridden by anger. “That’s another reason why I won’t stop until I get to the bottom of the toxic waste issue.”

* * * *

At The *Boston Globe*, Jen sat down at her computer and looked up at Dory. “Okay, Domestic Goddess, how do we start this letter to Mr. Billboard?”

Dory pulled a chair up close. “He’s a man. Compliment his ego. Maybe something like: Your direct approach proves you’re a strong-minded man who knows what he wants and has the courage to go for it. As a home-loving woman, this greatly appeals to me.”

Jen groaned. “You’re laying it on too thick.”

“Trust me. He’ll eat this stuff up. A little editing and our letter will be a finalist.”

“It doesn’t even have to place. He just has to pick up his mail so I can find out who he is.”

They pared four pages of drivel down to two pages. Jen laughed. The words sounded so homey that Mr. Billboard would actually smell the bread baking in his little rose-covered cottage.

When Jen got a call from Connie Allison, the City Refuse Director’s secretary, she gestured to Dory that it might take some time. Dory nodded and ducked out of the office.

Jen put her ear back to the receiver. “Go ahead, Connie.”

Connie lowered her voice and said, “The mayor’s assistant just called. He said the mayor wants everything we’ve got on the landfill soil reports.”

Yes! Jen made a triumphant fist. She wanted action and she got it.

“Gordon—” Connie’s voice choked and she paused as if fighting tears.

Jen’s momentary elation died at the tender way Connie said the murdered reporter’s name. Connie and Gordon were to be married on December first, and now he was gone. Jen bit her lip, fighting her own tears. She missed Gordon’s witty, upbeat nature, missed competing with him for top assignments.

The silence went on too long. She couldn’t give in to this. Connie needed her to be strong. “We’ll get the guy who did this.”

Connie cleared her voice. “With all the secrecy, I think Gordon was right about the cover-up.” Her voice grew stronger. “We need his notes.”

“I’ll keep looking.” Jen had already gone through Gordon’s desk and skimmed his computer files. Someone had deleted every file on the story. “What do you know about Diego Zombolas?”

“The mayor’s pit bull? He eats people like us for breakfast. Don’t quote me, but the guy’s a sociopath capable of killing without any twinge of conscience.”

Jen rubbed her aching head. Connie should know, she thought. Her sister, Danielle, worked for the mayor. “Are any of the union wildcat bunch still after the mayor?”

“There’s been at least one more attempt against his life. But I think he’d keep Zombolas around no matter what. Like I said, the big Greek is a pit bull. And the mayor likes that about him.”

Jen’s stomach knotted. If the mayor was a good guy, how could he admire someone like Diego? “Keep me informed of any new developments, and I’ll keep digging around on this end.”

After Jen hung up, she checked her email, and handled all the messages quickly—except the last one:

It read: *Drop the story, or you won’t live to write anything else.*

Outside, in the street below cars hummed. Someone honked. Overhead a helicopter’s rotors whirled. Inside vibrated with the usual white noise of busy news staff getting a paper out. But Jen only heard the sounds inside her head, the pulsing of cold fear. Her hand trembled on the mouse. She closed her eyes briefly. *Don’t let this get to you.* She stood and paced the length of the room. Did this idiot think she’d know which story he meant? She was working on a half dozen right now. Receiving the warning email here at the office wouldn’t have worried her too much—reporters get stuff like this from time to time—if she hadn’t also received the same kind of threat at home last night.

It read: *Back off or you’ll strangle on your own words.*

She wasn’t given to panic, but last night, in the quiet emptiness of her thirteenth floor apartment, in her closely held private world, she came as close to it as she’d ever come. The threats should be reported, but for the police to take them seriously, she needed documentation. No one had listened to Gordon and look what happened to him. She printed out a copy and tucked it in the manila envelope with the message from last night.

She ran her stories through her mind. Her most recent interview had been with the mayor. Was it from him? Maybe his pit bull? After all, Gordon *was* murdered while working on the same landfill story. But how would the mayor know she was investigating the toxic waste story before today? *Easy*, she thought, *if he had a spy in the newsroom.* It was no secret that she’d taken over Gordon’s files.

Wait a minute...maybe... She rushed to her filing cabinet and pulled out her folder on the copycat Boston Strangler story. It wasn’t really a story yet; the police wouldn’t confirm anything. Still, she saw the patterns forming as her shadowy informant alerted her to every new strangling. She tapped the label. Was this the story she was being warned to drop?

She collapsed in her chair, weak kneed and rubbed her arms. *Dear God, I can’t do this with every story or I won’t be able to write anything.* She opened the folder and tried to force herself to concentrate on her notes.

“Hey, I’m back.” Dory wriggled her brows playfully as she entered Jen’s cubicle. “And look what I found.” She shoved a box of lacy, flowery stationery under Jen’s nose.

“What’s this for?” As if she didn’t know.

“For our letter to Mr. Billboard, of course. Use this paper to rewrite the letter in your most cursive, old fashioned handwriting. Sorta like old German script.”

Jen laughed, finding it easier to push the unnerving messages to the back of her mind with Dory around. “How about just readable?”

When she’d completed the rewrite, she signed the letter with the made-up name Jeanette Sumner.

“Hold it,” Dory said. “Don’t seal it, yet. Give me your *Wind Song*.”

“Oh, come on. This is ridiculous.”

Dory held out her hand until Jen reached into her purse, withdrew the tube of spray perfume and complied. Dory sprayed the fragrance over some heart-shaped confetti and tossed the bits into the envelope with the letter. Dory inhaled the envelope. “Ah, a scent to tame the wild beast.”

Jen laughed at the expression of mock rapture on Dory’s face then snatched the letter away. “I’m hand-delivering this to the South End post office, zip code 02104, before I lose my nerve.”

* * * *

The next morning, Jen camped out near Mr. Billboard’s post office box. She stationed herself behind a rotating postal display stand next to a writing counter. From there, she had a clear view of Mr. B’s post office box and through a glass partition, the service counter. The wide-brimmed picture hat and scarf covering her hair blocked the air flow, and the nape of her neck grew damp. What insanity made her wear this getup in August? It probably called more attention to her than no disguise. She blew some air upward and fanned herself with a booklet on moving hints.

Jen felt eyes fixed on her. She pushed her ultra dark sunglasses higher on her nose and lowered her hat a bit. Glancing around, she fought the prickly feeling of eyes devouring her.

A portly man in a long-sleeved shirt and baseball cap stood at a counter across the lobby, filling out some kind of form. His steel-wool beard looked pasted on. Although his eyes were hidden behind mirrored sunglasses, the silvery lenses seemed to be aimed right at her. She aimed her own dark lenses right back at him. He shifted his weight and yanked his baseball cap lower on his forehead, shadowing his already obscured features.

She scanned the rest of the people around her. No one else caught her eye as being suspicious, except maybe the gray-haired man near the newsstand just outside the lobby door. He lowered his newspaper slightly, and then lifted it again.

Is either of those men spying on me? She wondered. *Or is this creepy feeling the result of my own subterfuge?* Jen shook her head. *I can’t let this get to me. This stakeout is my only chance to get a look at Mr. Billboard. And I must admit Mr. B. has peaked my curiosity big time.*

If he showed up, it would be worth the wait. Besides, she was at a stand still on her other assignments until her contacts got back to her with the information she’d requested.

Her beeper went off. She flipped open the cell phone and, with rigid fingers, punched in the familiar number shown on her beeper. “This better be important, Dory.”

“Has he showed, yet?” her friend asked.

“Not yet.” Jen fought to conceal the exasperation that nearly choked her. That was the problem with beepers—you could never get away. She loved Dory, but right now she didn’t need the added pressure. After pacifying Dory, Jen checked her email. An icy chill of apprehension crawled up her spine as she keyed into her palm computer and scrolled through the messages. Finding nothing scary, she exhaled in relief and went back to people-watching. The day dragged by, but she forced

herself to stay past the dinner hour.

Wednesday morning her wait finally ended. The guy who showed up to pick up the mail from box 48613 had the most striking chiseled features she'd ever seen. He moved with the confidence of someone in authority. His white shirt and gray trousers suggested a measure of prosperity and a white collar profession. His well-defined thick, black brows arched over intelligent looking eyes. So why would a guy with so much going for him need to advertise for a wife?

He unzipped a black leather case and swept all the contents of the stuffed box into it, except for a yellow card, which he took to the postal counter and presented to the clerk. A lady holding the hand of a boy of about three got into line behind Mr. Billboard. Mr. B's eyes lit up at the sight of the boy, and he began to play peek-a-boo with the child while he waited for the clerk to return. The boy squealed with delight.

His mother smiled at Mr. B and batted eyelashes that were too long to be real. *Flirt.*

Within seconds the two were talking like longtime friends. The boy's mother must've said something funny. It fascinated Jen how Mr. B's whole face brightened when he smiled. His lips fell so naturally into the charming upward curve that it would be difficult to believe the smile might be practiced.

Was he so friendly with all women? Was charm his secret? Charisma like that would come in handy if he was really running some sort of scam. What if he *was* the copycat Boston Strangler? Or what if he was just as he seemed—a nice guy?

The clerk returned and handed two baskets of mail to Mr. B. He extracted a large green trash bag from his pocket and emptied the contents of the baskets into it. After waving bye-bye to the child, he tucked his leather case under his arm and hoisted the bag over his shoulder and left the building.

Staying well behind him, Jen followed. He slid behind the wheel of a new white van, Massachusetts license plate number RENO777, and sped away. She barked the number into her recorder, then raced to her own Toyota Camry and tailed Mr. B at a non-threatening distance. He increased his speed and zigzagged in and out of lanes. He disappeared. Damn. She'd lost him in the maze of traffic. She inhaled a calming breath. No big problem. She had his license number as well as the make and model of the van, more than enough for her connection at the DMV to run the ownership for her.

The van turned out to be owned by Thurlo Wade. She checked on him through a buddy at the police department and learned Thurlo was serving sixty days in jail for nonpayment of parking tickets. So how could he be out driving the streets? She looked at a mug shot of Thurlo and discovered he wasn't the man who'd picked up the mail. This didn't add up. Who was Thurlo Wade to Mr. Billboard? Friend? Relative? Partner in crime?

She could visit Wade in jail and ask, but she wasn't ready to go that route.

Later that afternoon, she and Dory wrote a second letter. They were really getting into this now. "Let's end with something to play into his male fantasy," Dory said. "Like—being a thoroughly old-fashioned woman, I am a virgin and plan to remain pure until after I marry."

"I won't write that," Jen said laughing. "Who'd believe it?"

"This egotistical male who thinks women will line up to be his old-fashioned bride, that's who."

"Are you kidding? Plenty of women would line up if they got a gander at his wide shoulders and flat stomach. You should see all the mail he's already received."

"Well, I'll keep Clark, my own sexy doctor. You can have Mr. Billboard."

"I don't want him, or any other man on a permanent basis. I just want the interview."

Dory groaned. "Oh, I forgot. Your whole life is the pursuit of that elusive Pulitzer. What a drag."

On this story she wanted more than that—she wanted to expose Gordon's killer. Dory already

knew that. “Don’t knock it. The goal is so close I can feel the electricity from it, and I won’t let myself get distracted by any mere man.” Her mother had set aside her dream for a lousy hunk of testosterone and Jen wasn’t about to make the same mistake.

“That’s what I thought until Clark came along.” Dory picked up her camera and fine tuned the focus. “Back to Mr. Billboard. What we need to reel him in is a picture.”

Jen threw up her hands. “Of whom? Not me.”

“Yes, you. Don’t worry. When I get through no one will know it’s you.”

Dory’s enthusiasm and the heady excitement of the game were too much. “Oh, all right.”

The next day, on their lunch break, wearing the outfit Dory had coordinated, and with her hair flowing in loose waves down her back, Jen met her partner in the subterfuge in one of the Garden Club’s prize-winning gardens. Dory posed her on her knees next to a wealth of marigolds, holding a basket and pruning shears. Dory arranged Jen’s long dress to suit her photographer’s eye, then tilted Jen’s wide-brimmed straw hat a little lower. “I’m trying for an interesting shadow to conceal your identity.”

Later that afternoon when Jen examined the photo, she laughed in satisfaction. Her figure had never looked more slender, or her hair more glamorous. Dory had captured a breathtaking composition of light, color and shadows. Jen smiled. Nobody would recognize her as the woman in the photo. The outfit and hair style were nothing like her usual tailored work getup.

Dory dropped the photo into the envelope with the second letter and sealed it. She removed the camera hanging from the strap around her neck. “Take this with you. The long range lens might come in handy.”

Jen didn’t refuse. If Mr. Billboard eluded her in traffic she’d have his picture to show to her connection at the police department. Mr. B wouldn’t get away this time.

Jen hand delivered letter number two to his post office then camped out the rest of the afternoon in case he came by to check his box for other mail. When the post office opened the next morning, she continued her vigil. She camped out all day Friday in her car in the parking lot without success. She didn’t try again until Monday. After several hours, she glanced at her watch for the umpteenth time—it was almost eleven. She was sweaty and her neck ached from looking up from her laptop at every person who entered the post office. She was seriously considering giving up her surveillance—it had been eight days since she first saw the billboard and trying to track down the man behind the ad was taking entirely too much time. She told herself that the only thing that kept her here was a gut feeling that the ad might somehow be connected to the Boston Strangler story. An image of Mr. Billboard’s laughing eyes and outstanding body flashed in her mind. Okay, she had to admit it, she was curious on a personal level. After all, why would such a good looking guy have to advertise for a wife?

Another long hour passed. Then she saw Mr. B! She could have kissed him!

He entered the post office in a fast stride and ten minutes later came out with another bulging plastic bag. She adjusted the long range lens and chuckled as she snapped his photo. Obviously his billboard ad was working. It didn’t matter that her letter was buried in the deluge of mail, she had his picture and soon she’d have his name. With excitement bubbling inside, Jen followed Mr. B from the South End post office into the desirable and well-located Beacon Hill area. It was like driving back in time. The modest hump of land still retained its 17th century air of grandeur and refinement.

Mr. B headed up a narrow, two-lane cobbled road, lined with brick sidewalks and dotted with gas streetlights. Could he live in one of these elegant, row-style homes?

Abruptly, he swung to the curb and stopped in front of a brick dwelling with a quaint shuttered window and gracefully arched doorway, the nicest on the block. Leaving the door on the driver’s side open, he raced inside the home carrying his satchel and bulging trash bag of mail. Jen drove to the end of the block and made a U-Turn, while gathering her courage to confront him,. Before she

could find a parking space, he came out and sped off.

Since catching him didn't look promising, she parked in his space. Maybe he lived with someone. But no one answered the door and there was no name over the mail slot. With her heartbeat thudding in her ears, she rang the bell of the attached unit and heard a shuffling inside. Jen shifted her weight and glanced up the street. For such an exclusive area, the brick sidewalks and planters around the trees were in a terrible state of disrepair. She'd read somewhere that when the mayor wanted to repair the walkways, the local women picketed against it. They didn't want anything changed, not the sidewalks or the facade of their historic homes. She knocked again. Finally a gray-haired lady answered, and Jen introduced herself.

The well-coiffed, sharp featured woman looked Jen up and down with narrowed eyes. "A reporter, you say?"

Jen nodded. "I need some information about your next door neighbor for a human interest story I'm working on."

"Is it about the way he redecorated his place?"

Jen tendered her biggest smile. "These houses always fascinate our readers."

The woman's eyes lit up. "They're quite wonderful, aren't they?" She twisted her long strand of pearls thoughtfully, then held out her hand. "I'm Mrs. Thacker. Since my Henry died, our house has been on the historic tour three times. Would you like to see it?"

"I'd love to. This is a real treat." Jen stepped inside. Her breath caught as musty lavender swirled around her, giving a sense of being transported back to the Old World of yesteryear. Imagine, she was in one of the homes of the city's social and cultural elite—the Astors and the Cabots. Perhaps Oliver Wendell Holmes or Louisa May Alcott had once lived here.

She followed Mrs. Thacker, fighting her desire to touch things. The spotlessly clean unit was four levels of 17th century furniture, portraits of family long dead, and bookshelves in every room. They walked out the back door into the small walled courtyard. The woman made several comments about Beacon Hill that pushed the edge of snobbery. In spite of that, Jen liked her. She was like a character out of a book.

Mrs. Thacker gestured to a silver tea pot on a circular wrought iron table. "Tea?"

The table was set with four China cups and a large plate of scones garnished with red grapes. The quirky little lady was expecting company. "No thanks. Can't stay away from my office too long. But back to your neighbor—"

"York Wylinski," Mrs. Thacker provided. "He bought his unit about two months ago. Practically gutted the whole inside before he moved in. Thank goodness the historic society prohibits him from changing the outside."

Jen moistened her lips. "Sounds like he stirred things up a bit."

A fluffy gray Persian cat crossed the brick patio and rubbed against the widow's ankles. She picked him up and petted him with so much gusto he meowed loudly in protest. She eased her strokes. "Mr. Wylinski got our attention. That doesn't mean I don't like him. Quite the contrary." She pointed to a crooked willow tree that shaded the tiny walled garden, then looked down at her cat with love in her eyes. "Mr. Wylinski helped me get Muffy down from that tree. That makes him okay in my book."

"Do you have his phone number?"

"I suppose being neighbors and all...maybe when we get to know each other better..." Her voice carried a trace of loneliness.

"Do you know where he works?"

"Never said, although I asked him twice. Rather closed-mouthed, that one. But judging by how easily he rescued Muffy, and the fact that he's gone so much, I'd guess he's a fireman."

Jen sensed that was all the information she was going to get. She thanked Mrs. Thacker and

exited quickly.

She checked with a few more neighbors before leaving the neighborhood. They knew even less about York Wylinski, only that he was a pleasant fellow who seldom stayed home.

He wasn't listed in the phone book, so later that evening Jen decided to go cold turkey to his door and straight out ask for an interview. The lights were on, but Wylinski wasn't home. She tried again the next day. He wasn't home that morning, afternoon or even later that night. It was Tuesday already and she still hadn't managed to catch up with him. Days were passing. Didn't he ever stay put?

* * * *

The next afternoon—ten days after her first gander at the billboard and the hand delivery of the first letter—Jen waited for Dory to meet her for a quick lunch in the food court in the Prudential Center. Dory rushed up to the table waving an envelope. “It’s from him!” she squealed. “It arrived at Aunt Kate’s post office box this morning.” It had been Dory’s idea to use an address that couldn’t be traced back to them. “That’s why I’m late. I had to pick it up.”

Jen’s heart almost stopped as Dory thrust the letter into her suddenly icy hands. Jen read it quickly, then read it again to be sure she’d read it right.

“What does it say?” Dory asked, slipping into the wrought iron chair across from Jen.

“He wants me to meet him tomorrow morning at 7:30 A.M. at Lobough’s coffee shop.” Jen handed the plain white half-sheet to Dory, feeling a little cheated. “We worked so hard to get back one measly sentence!” It was just the invitation and his first name. “There’s not even a phone number in case tomorrow morning is a bad time for me. Guess Mr. York Wylinski’s ego is so big he didn’t consider I might be busy.”

Dory leaned forward. “But you’re going?”

Jen laughed. “After all the trouble he’s put me to, I wouldn’t miss it.”

As Jen stuffed the letter into the giant tote bag holding all her news gathering gadgets, the yellow manila envelope she’d been collecting evidence in fell out, spilling the contents.

Dory’s gaze locked on them. “More threatening emails?”

As the nonstop throng of shoppers rushed past their tiny round table, Jen saw only a blur of color. She stirred her clam chowder, stalling to bring her quickened heartbeat under control. “Snail-mail notes, too. I’m getting quite a collection.”

“I don’t like it. When’re you going to the police?”

Jen wiped her clammy palms on a napkin. “When I have enough for them to take the threats seriously.”

Dory frowned and gripped Jen’s arm. “Don’t wait too long. Remember what happened to Gordon.”

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning at seven thirty sharp, Jen paced outside the door of Lobough's coffee shop. Just *open the door and go in. No big deal*. She nibbled at the corner of her lip. Perhaps Mr. Billboard hadn't even arrived, yet. It amazed her that he'd actually chosen her letter. She wiped her damp palms with a tissue. She looked down at herself. Her purchase of the flowery Laura Benedict dress was a mistake. She never wore stuff like this. When she and Dory spotted the creation in the window of the Newbury Street Boutique on their way back from lunch yesterday, Dory insisted that Jen would be more apt to get her story if she looked the part of Mr. Billboard's ideal woman. Dory had even persuaded her to wear her hair loose and flowing down her back. Now she felt ridiculous. She'd given in to foolish romantic thoughts about this perfect stranger with whom she had nothing in common. Well, she was here now, and she'd worked hard for this. She pushed her sunglasses onto the top of her head, gripped the restaurant's door handle and stepped inside.

Aromas of waffles and bacon swirled around her as she scanned the crowded room. A couple with cameras around their necks huddled together over coffee and a map. For a moment her view was blocked by a waitress delivering an order to a family of six.

Her breath caught—there he was—at the back of the room at a table for two. She felt like running, staying.

Recognition glinted in his eyes, and the corners of his lips turned up in a welcoming smile. He couldn't have recognized her. But obviously he did, because he stood and hurried toward her, carrying a small bouquet of violets. His impressive shoulders filled out the coat of a gray suit that looked fresh off the racks. She groaned. The man had gone all out for his dream woman.

"Jeanette," he said in a deep voice that vibrated through her and drained her knees of all strength. "You look just like your picture."

She had hoped the shadow of her hat's wide brim would obscure her real looks. "Everyone calls me Jen," she said, easing into the truth. "Actually, my name isn't Jeanette Sumner. It's Jen Lyman and I'm—"

"Smart girl," he interrupted with admiration in his tone. "Never give your real name until you know who you're dealing with."

He handed her the bouquet. "I hope you like violets."

"I love them. But—"

"You're trembling. Relax. I'm a nice guy, honest."

She looked up at him. "You probably are, but—"

He took her by the arm, sending warm sensations through the fabric of her long sleeves to the bare skin beneath it. She felt her tension building and tried to tell herself that it wasn't his touch that disturbed her, but the fact that he wouldn't let her finish a blasted sentence. Still, she had to admit that she liked the way he firmly guided her to their table and gallantly seated her. His eyes were warm and steady. "Let's order first," he said. "Then we can talk." He motioned to a waitress with upswept red hair knotted atop her head.

"Just a vanilla latte, please." She didn't know if she could even get a latte down with her stomach so jittery. For eleven days she'd worked toward this meeting and now that it was here, she felt as inept as a rookie reporter.

After giving the waitress their order, York sat back grinning like he'd won the lottery. "Both of your letters were wonderful."

She laughed, releasing some tension. "Your note was short—like your billboard ad."

"I'm not much of a writer." He blatantly stared at her, steady, unyielding.

She shifted and lowered her gaze to the antique car magazine on the table. The cover displayed a shiny, black 1940 Ford coupe. "You're into old fashioned cars, too." She groaned inwardly. How

lame. She was usually better at interviewing than this.

"I plan to own one of those classics someday," he said.

His delicious, deep voice vibrated along her nerve endings again. Suddenly, an image popped in her mind. "I can just see you in your antique car with your old fashioned woman beside you, her hair blowing in the wind." Jen's breath caught.

Oh, God. She was the woman in her mental image! She met York's gaze. His eyes were such a brilliant blue. Heat crawled up her cheeks. Her tongue felt thick. "Why..." She cleared her throat, trying to regain her composure. "Why the billboard ad? Aren't there better ways to meet women?" She'd intended to clear up who she was before getting too deep into the interview; but without planning it, she was already asking personal questions and couldn't seem to stop.

"It's because of my job," he said. "I don't have much time. And, as I stressed in the ad, I want a very special kind of woman."

"Why old-fashioned?"

He leaned forward, looking willing to open up to the woman he thought she was. "I'm a cop." He paused as if waiting for a reaction.

Jen sat very still, trying not to show her relief. She shouldn't have been surprised. All the indications had been there: odd hours, authoritative swagger in his walk, even his curious association with a jailbird. "And that relates how?"

"Cops' marriages are risky. Dad was a cop, too. He always said the only reason his marriage lasted was because he married an old-fashioned girl."

"So you want to marry someone like your mom?"

"Affirmative. Mom kept things on an even keel when Dad couldn't be there." His face brightened like a kid with a new bike. "And boy could she bake."

Jen thought of her own mom who'd done her best to hold things together while Jen's step dad chased every female who caught his eye. Then one day he'd left her mom with a mountain of debt and a child to raise alone. Anger flooded through her and she couldn't control the bitterness in her words. "Do you want a wife to love, or a babysitter-housekeeper who bakes?"

Wylinski frowned, lowering his dark eyebrows. "I don't find those things contradictory. From your letter I thought you understood what I wanted."

"I think I do. But I want to be sure I get this right."

"Get this right? Wait a minute. Exactly who are you, Ms. Lyman?"

Sharp guy. His quick uptake made her confession easier. "I tried to clear that up. You kept cutting me off. I'm a reporter for *The Globe*." She extended her hand, which he ignored. "I came to ask for an interview." She drew a business card from the bag concealing her recorder and beeper, and placed it on the table in front of him.

He shot to his feet, tumbling his chair on its side with a crash. The fury in his eyes and his rigid stance made her think he might turn the table upside down. "And you waited until I spilled my guts before you asked?"

Her stomach knotted. "You should try listening."

The waitress picked that moment to bring their order and Wylinski waved her away with such ferocity that Jen thought the girl might call the manager. Couples and groups at the other tables stared, obviously curious and perhaps a bit worried about his savage behavior.

Jen softened her voice to a near whisper. "Don't be so melodramatic. You haven't said all that much, yet. I have just a few more questions. It'll be painless." She tried to smile even though her face felt like hardened plaster. She gestured toward the overturned chair. "Please, sit back down and hear me out."

He threw some bills on the table. "I've never liked reporters," he growled. "They're a sneaky, insensitive, prying bunch of sharks. But you've just lowered my opinion, if that's possible." He

leaned over the table, practically in her face, sparks in his eyes. “Don’t you dare print a word about me, my ad, or anything I’ve said here.”

Jen stood and glared up at him, fighting the effect of his intimidating size and presence. “Maybe you don’t understand about freedom of speech.” On an impulse, she grabbed the violets. For a moment, she considered throwing them in his face, but couldn’t. Instead, she spun around and rushed for the door. Before leaving, she turned and shouted, “For your information, Mr. Wylinski, I don’t need your permission to write my story.”

* * * *

York yanked open the door on the driver’s side of his unmarked car where his partner, Ted Smothers, ex-marine and by-the-book cop, sat catching up on paperwork. In a service station restroom, York had changed back into his standard white shirt and dark trousers. He tossed his work sports coat and pocketed tie into the back seat along with the clothes bag protecting his new suit and said, “Don’t say a word!”

Ted grinned. “That bad, huh?”

Damn. It had been a mistake to tell Ted about his ad the other night. A few beers and the live Irish music at the Black Rose Pub had loosened his tongue. He could trust his partner to keep the secret to himself, but Ted would never let him live it down. He recalled Ted’s warning: “*Watch out for yourself, buddy. Any woman who’d answer an ad like that is either after something, or a nut case.*” Then Ted tossed his lucky silver dollar in the air and added, “*bet you dollars to doughnuts that you’re going to get more than you bargained for.*”

Now talking to Ted about his encounter was asking for more razzing, but if he didn’t let off steam he’d explode. “She’s a reporter.”

Ted laughed. “A reporter?”

“That’s what I said,” York growled. “Under her sweet, modest dress beats the heart of a gorgeous female vulture, preying on the carcasses of humanity.”

“Gorgeous. You said gorgeous. Tell me more about that.”

“She had the gall to ask for an interview after I blew her cover.”

“Really gorgeous, or just so-so gorgeous?”

“Really gorgeous. Now shut up about her appearance!”

York didn’t need to be reminded that the instant he saw her alabaster face and long auburn hair, he had thanked God for sending him, not only the old-fashioned woman he wanted, but a terrific looking angel, at that. Then there was the great way she made him feel when he looked into her warm, green eyes. His heart had soared, and for a few moments he’d had it all.

“So when do you see her again?”

Jen Lyman’s business card burned through York’s shirt pocket as though it had a flame of its own. “Never would be too soon.”

* * * *

Jen couldn’t wait to swap her flowery dress for her pantsuit and twist her hair back into its usual conservative upswept French braid. She ducked into *The Globe’s* first floor ladies’ room and made the changes. She felt like the female version of Superman reverting to an un-heroic Clark Kent. In the elevator, she nodded to Curt Powell, a likable guy with glasses who worked in accounting. At another time, she would have chatted with him on the ride up.

Minutes later, as she entered her cubicle, she looked down at the violets clutched in her hand. Her mood darkened even more. Like a robot, she withdrew a small crystal vase from her drawer.

After adding water to the violets, she flicked on her computer and stared at it, seeing only an image of York and the anger and disappointment in his face. She'd handled everything all wrong.

Before she could berate herself sufficiently, Dory came rushing toward her. "I just came from accounting. Curt said you seemed down." Dory looked at her watch. "I expected you to be gone the whole morning. And it's only 9:15. Didn't Wylinski show?"

"He showed," Jen said, fighting a muddle of feelings she wasn't ready to share, and didn't come close to understanding.

"Well, how did it go?" Dory asked, looking a bit worried.

Jen fought a baffling rush of tears. "If you mean did I get my story, the answer is yes."

"I hear a *but* coming."

"He ordered me not to print it."

"The jerk."

Dory's typical show of support failed to curb Jen's unexplainable hurt. "That's the trouble. He isn't. He's a nice guy. He really went all out for his old-fashioned woman. Sharp suit, polished shoes, the works." Jen gestured to the bouquet in the tiny crystal vase. "He even brought his dream lady the sweetest violets."

"Uh oh." Dory's eyes darkened. "How did that make you feel?"

Jen would have laughed if she hadn't felt so miserable. Dory's night classes in psychology had turned her into an amateur shrink. "Lousy and a little jealous."

"Jealous? But he brought them to *you*."

"Not in this lifetime. The way he feels about reporters, he wouldn't even bring me stink weed."

Dory shifted from one foot to the other. "Hate to cut this short but—"

"Sorry," Jen said, "guess I got carried away."

"It's not that." Dory's eyes clouded. "It's just that the boss man wants to see you right away. Don't get mad, but I might've mentioned your threatening letters and emails."

"Darn it, Dory. I told you I'd handle it." Jen grabbed the manila envelope that held the notes. Her editor would want to see them. "You know it's like pulling teeth to get Dirk to give me the kind of tough assignments he gives the men around here." She took a deep breath. "Oh, never mind. It's done now."

She spun on her heels and marched to Dirk Hudson's office.

His lean, leathery face had never looked grimmer. "Why did I have to hear this from someone else?" An angry flush crawled up his cheeks, splotching the coppery tan he'd picked up while vacationing in Florida.

She lifted her chin. "Because I can handle it myself."

Sparks flashed in Dirk's steel-gray eyes. "That's what Gordon said. What did the notes and emails say?"

Jen handed him the envelope.

He took out the contents and thumbed through them. "When did this start?"

"About two weeks ago." She recalled it was just before her interview with the mayor.

"You're still working on the landfill and strangler stories. Any connection?"

She swallowed and moistened her lips. "None that I can prove."

Dirk held her gaze. "Emails leave trails."

"Right. But each one has a different IP and we traced them to different physical locations. The guy's probably using other people's computers without their knowledge. Or he has a way to make it appear the messages are coming from others. Hackers can do almost anything these days."

Dirk's brow furrowed. "I don't like it. Getting hate mail here is one thing; getting it at home is too damned personal. Trade assignments with Butch, and keep a low profile."

She slammed the desk with her hand. "Don't do this to me, Dirk. It's discrimination."

"Wrong. It's about keeping one of my best reporters alive and protecting a friend."

"Is Butch so dispensable? Isn't he a friend, too?"

Dirk loosened his collar. "You know what I mean. He's big and works out."

"Being a well-built jock didn't keep Gordon alive. Don't you get it? It'll take more than strength to deal with the killer...especially if he's the strangler. With my inside information about him, my chances are better than Butch's or anybody else's."

"That *inside* crap is what bothers me most."

"You have to trust me on this. I know how to deal with my source." Her mouth felt dry. Jen wished she was as certain of the whispery voice who was giving her information as she sounded. "Come on, Dirk. I've worked too hard and too long to lose it all now."

Dirk stared at her for what seemed like endless, arduous moments. "Two conditions—no more secrets," he said. "And you have to cooperate with the police."

Relief flooded through her. "Done."

"I'll call the detective who's investigating Gordon's murder." Dirk handed the envelope back to her. "When he contacts you, give him these notes and your full cooperation."

"No problem." She smiled. "By the way, I'm working on another story on my own."

"Connected to the threats?"

"Hardly. It's a light piece with humor potential. I think you'll like it."

Dirk began digging through his plastic business card file box. After coming up with the card he wanted, he slammed the box closed. "This is the homicide detective who'll be contacting you. If there's a connection between your threats and Gordon's murder, this cop'll find it."

Jen glanced down. Her heart pounded and the blood drained from her head so fast, the letters blurred. But she'd never forget them. The name printed in bold black letters on the card was Homicide Detective York Wyllinski.

* * * *

York and his partner sat in silence, both lost in their own thoughts. York wiped the sweat from his forehead with a cotton handkerchief. It was hot as hell, but it was his 'run in' with the sneaky reporter this morning at Loboughs' Coffee Shop that had sent his body temperature soaring. The scene played over and over in his head. When she walked through the door, looking like his ideal woman, he wanted to propose right then and there. Then he uncovered her cruel, underhanded deception and an ugly side to himself that he didn't know existed. He'd never dreamed he could get so angry at a woman. Just thinking about her dirty trick was revving him up again which was dangerous on a stakeout where he needed a cool head. *Damn it woman, get out of my head.* He glanced at his watch for the third time in fifteen minutes. His snitch, Kenny Duncan, A.K.A. Sniffles, had promised to meet him at the main entrance of Waterfront Park. "It's already eleven," York told his partner. "Where the hell is he?"

"Maybe the lowlife won't show," Ted said.

York shook his head. Dating a lady minister had really toned down Ted's tough language. Ted pounded an erratic drumbeat on the dashboard as though fighting to contain his irritation within his five-foot-nine frame. In spite of his short fuse, the brown haired, Tom Cruise look-alike was the best cop in the department to cover your back when trouble went down.

"He'll show," York said. "Only his funeral could keep him away."

"Could happen. Snitches live on borrowed time."

"Not this guy." York sure as hell hoped not, anyway. "He's doing well in rehab. Might make it this time."

Ted groaned. "His half-truths give me a pain in the tail feathers."

York laughed at Ted's euphemism. He couldn't wait to meet the woman who'd stamped out his partner's cussing. "That's just the way Sniffles operates."

Ted arched a brow. "We're getting some strange looks. What do you think this looks like: two guys in plain clothes sitting in an unmarked car in a park?"

York gave him a dirty look. "Rather be tagged as cops?" Not expecting an answer, he flipped through the pages of his *murder book* with all the interviews and clippings on the Boston Strangler case, hoping something new would strike him.

Ted glanced down at the newspaper lying on the seat between them. "Didn't get a chance to study the financial page for a couple of days. How'd the DOW and NASDAQ close yesterday?"

"Good for us. Several of our technical and financial stocks reported significantly higher earnings, sending them soaring."

Ted gave his Tom Cruise grin. He took off his mirrored sunglasses and looked at York like he was some curious specimen. "With the stinking salaries we make," he said, "investing sure helps. Until I met you, I didn't even know what a portfolio was. Now all I have to worry about is that the internal boys don't think I get my dough from being on the take."

"Dealing with those bastards goes with the territory. Just keep good records."

Ted gestured with his head toward the pasty-faced man heading their way. "Here comes our snitch."

Sniffles wore a bright yellow flight jacket that looked brand new and a pair of mismatched shoes, one brown and one black.

"How'd you ever get mixed up with that loser?" Ted asked.

"Would you believe he was the top computer specialist at Kesslers, pulling down six figures until he snorted it all up his nose?"

"You gotta be kidding."

Sniffles approached their car on the passenger side. "Got my money?"

York peeled off a hundred dollar bill from his money clip, leaned sideways across Ted's lap and dangled it out of reach. "Let's hear what you've got first."

"Your Boston Strangler isn't just a copy cat. He's a mimic's mimic. If you get my gist."

York frowned. The city had become a magnet for every kook who wanted to call himself The Boston Strangler and all he got was riddles. He started to shove the money back into his money clip. "We don't pay for double talk."

"Okay. Okay," Sniffles muttered. "A big shot in city hall is tell'n your strangler who to hit. The guy isn't a serial killer in the usual sense, but he's paid to make it look like he is."

Ted reached through the open window and grabbed Sniffles by the collar. "What have you been sniffing today, glue?"

"You're cut'n off my air, an' I'm not lying."

"Give us names," Ted shouted. "Or take a hike."

York wanted to tell Ted to take it easy. With his compact muscles and knowledge of judo he could take down men three times his size. Lightweight Sniffles was no match for him. York took a deep breath and forced himself to trust his partner to dish out fear without causing permanent damage.

"Need a few days." Sniffles could barely choke out his words. York's neck muscles relaxed when Sniffles jerked away from Ted's eased hold. "I gotta get at least two hundred today."

York glared at him. "Payment on delivery. You know the deal."

"My reason's legit. Gotta have the cash to talk this computer babe into zipping me some deleted emails after she lifts 'em from this big shot's hard drive."

York knew what he was talking about. The process was called computer forensics, where, instead of examining fingerprints or DNA, a computer forensics specialist focused on data left

inside a computer system. If Sniffles spoke the truth, an unethical specialist was about to use her skill to pick up some extra cash. “What’s the babe’s name? Does she work in the big shot’s office?”

“Forget it. You’re not cut’n me out of the loop.”

“Why two days?” York asked.

“She needs time to access the guts.”

“Is she a data systems operator? File clerk, what?” When Sniffles remained silent, York said, “Maybe she’s pulling your chain?”

“Hey, I’m a hacker myself, remember? Besides, have I ever BS’d you?”

York and Ted said in unison, “Yeah.”

In the end, York gave Sniffles a hundred with the balance to follow if the information turned out to be worth anything. He had to play his hunch on this one. They needed a break too badly to let a possible lead slip through their fingers. Besides, as usual, the snitch’s double talk made a scary kind of sense. York had gotten information from other sources hinting that there was a link between the mayor’s office and the murders.

After Sniffles scurried away with the money in his sweaty palm, York revved the car to life and headed back into traffic.

“You can’t believe that crap,” Ted said.

York shrugged, and rubbed the base of his throbbing skull. “There’s enough substance to his story for me to give him a chance.”

“Watch it, buddy. Wanting to save everybody might turn into a fatal flaw.”

“Worried it’ll get you killed, too?”

Ted laughed. “Hell no!” he said, obviously forgetting his vow not to swear.

As York headed back to his office his traitorous mind returned to Jen Lyman. He’d seen something in her eyes that had touched him, disturbed him in ways he didn’t want to examine. Why couldn’t she have been on the level? Damn, he hated reporters.

* * * *

At 11:30 A.M. Jen returned to her cubicle and dropped weak-kneed to her chair. With elbows on her desk, she rested her aching head in her hands. With a whole department of cops, why York Wylinski?

She flinched at the nerve-jangling ring of the telephone. She glanced at the unfamiliar number on the caller ID. When she ran a check on the number last time, she’d discovered it was a phone booth. No one answered her repeated hello, but someone was on the line. The fine hairs at the nape of her neck prickled. She heard heavy breathing and busy street noise. Before the line went dead, church bells tolled, like those of the Old West Church near the Government Center. First, emails, now silent hang ups. There was an eerie significance to all this. Thank goodness Dirk had called in the police, even if it meant she’d have to see Wylinski again.

She wrote down the date and time of the call and her comments about the background noise and tucked the data into the manila envelope. Detective Wylinski could handle it; she had his billboard story to write.

Jen listened to her recorded notes. She had everything necessary for an amusing piece. But, with Wylinski working on Gordon’s murder case, should she write it? If she didn’t, some other journalist might. Besides, how could she dump a good story after she’d spent so much time and energy on it? Darn it, if she worried about the backlash from her stories, she’d never write anything. All she had to worry about was the one ruling force in her writing—responsible journalism.

She scooted her chair close to the computer and began to type. Her fingers flew across the keys. Her neck muscles tightened, but she kept going, letting her thoughts and emotions spew onto the

screen. Her face began to burn. She knew where the resentment was coming from—her childhood. But she couldn't stop. Instead of the light article she'd envisioned, the piece was an angry commentary about men who wanted Stepford Wives in a modern world, while they reaped the benefits of progress on the backs of their homemaker slaves.

When she finished, she ran a spell and grammar check, then printed the rough draft. She scanned the pages. "Ugh. I definitely need to rethink this." Jen tucked the draft into a folder. "Better let this copy perk in my head a while before trying again."

She checked her email. Among the bits of information she'd requested from several city departments regarding her landfill story, was a note with only three short words.

Home alone tonight? Jen began to tremble. She closed her eyes a moment, breathing in and out deeply. Back in control, she printed the three words on a separate sheet of paper, time stamped it, and added it to the envelope with the other threats.

* * * *

At 12:30, Jen and Dory—whom she'd already forgiven for tattling to Dirk—hurried to join Connie Allison and her boss Tim Tormont at the Skyline restaurant atop the Prudential Tower for Connie's promotion luncheon. She was being promoted from secretary to Tormont's assistant. Jen smiled, determined not to let her unpleasant encounter with Wylinski this morning at Loboughs' ruin her mood. She caught sight of Connie. "There they are by the window."

"Wow," Dory said. "Will you look at Connie's new hairdo."

The fuller style mimicked Dolly Parton's platinum hairline curlicues and looked terrific on Connie's angular face. Connie's eyes brightened, and she waved.

Tim stood as they approached. The redheaded City Refuse Director was in his early-forties, medium height with a wiry build. He shook Jen's hand, and she restrained from wincing at the power in his grip. Her gaze flew to his. The man's eyes were two cubes of blue ice. Why? How could someone she'd just met dislike her? Suddenly, Tim's lips curved into a winning smile. She must have imagined his hostility.

When Jen seated herself in a chair next to Connie, she felt a large envelope slide onto her lap. She gripped it tightly and covertly slid it into her oversized bag that sat on the floor between her feet.

"I understand you're keeping the good mayor on his toes," Tim said, with a perplexing undercurrent in his tone.

Jen kept a smile plastered on her face. It wasn't a secret meeting with the mayor, so why was Tim making a big deal over it? Was he just making conversation, or was there more behind it? "The mayor told you that?"

"No. But I have my sources."

Jen narrowed her eyes, uncertain what Tim was getting at. "Like who?"

He leaned back in his chair and tucked a thumb inside the trim waistband of his tailored trousers. "Like you reporters, I never disclosed my sources."

For Connie's sake, Jen bit her tongue to keep from asking Tim pointblank what the devil was bugging him.

Tim unhooked his thumb from his waistband, and toyed with his water glass, squeezing the stem between strong looking fingers. "Must take courage to be a reporter." His voice hardened. "Sticking your nose into dangerous places can get you killed. Look at what happened to Gordon Michaels."

Under the table, Jen held her feet firmly in place, fighting her desire to kick him in the shins for bringing up Gordon's murder at this celebration.

Connie squeezed her eyes closed for a moment, then opened them. They glistened bright with

moisture. “How about getting a waiter over here,” she said in a shaky voice.

Jen sighed. Poor Connie. Being the assistant to Tim-the-tormentor would be hell.

At 1:45 P.M. when Jen and Dory returned to Jen’s office, Dory asked, “What was all that tension about? Did I miss something?”

“If you did, so did I.” Jen suspected it had something to do with her meeting with the mayor, but at the moment she couldn’t make sense of it. She tucked the incident away for later reflection. One thing she knew for sure, Tim Tormont was a man who bore watching.

After Dory left, Jen pulled Connie’s envelope from her bag. She unsealed the flap and thumbed through the contents. Connie had supplied her with a list of the truck contractors who had bid on landfill jobs in the past five years. Lorenzo Monroe’s former employer Atlantic Trucking Company was on the list. Jen didn’t know if that fact would lead to anything, but many times innocent-looking records often became vital later. Imagine, the missing piece that could tie everything together, could be right here in her hands.

When nothing specific jumped out at her, she decided to rewrite her Billboard Cop feature. The second time around her humor had returned, and, using no name, only his profession, she whipped out a good story and dropped it on her editor’s desk, along with the pictures Dory had taken of the billboard. Jen smiled. She’d barely made the Wednesday afternoon deadline. It would make Friday morning’s paper.

As a courtesy, she always called the people she interviewed, even reluctant interviewees like Wylinski, to let them know when their story would appear. She made a note to call the detective.

Jen was rereading the list of trucking contractors when the phone rang. Before it could ring again, she grabbed up the receiver. “Jen Lyman,” she said.

“It’s me,” a familiar voice said.

Her heart pounded with excitement. It was the shadowy man who’d been supplying her information, incident-by-incident, about the rash of stranglings in the Boston area. Although he refused to give his name, she wasn’t afraid of him. Good sense told her she should be, but his voice had a warm quality and sonorous tone that reminded her of Gill Thompson, a college friend who’d been closer than a brother—a young man who’d died too soon in a car accident at the hands of a drunk driver.

“Can you meet me in the Commons?” the enigmatic informant asked.

Her grip tightened on the receiver. “When?” A tingle of excitement slid down her spine. *What a break!* Until today, she’d only had telephone conversations with him.

“In an hour. By the rose gardens.”

It was 2:45 now. That would just give her time to swing by her apartment on the way. “Okay, but make it by the children’s wading pool.” There would be more people in that area. “How will I recognize you?”

“I’ll be the skinny man wearing a bright yellow flight jacket inside out.” He laughed a little hysterically. “And to be sure you know me, I’ll also wear an unmatched pair of shoes—one black, the other brown.”

She chuckled. “In that getup I definitely won’t miss you.”

“Come alone,” he said before hanging up.

Her first contact with this nameless man had been on one of her volunteer shifts at the Suicide Crisis Center. The empty tone in his voice had touched her heart. He’d been a neglected and abused child, beaten down until he felt like a nobody. Even though he managed to put himself through college and eventually got a good job, he couldn’t erase his damaged self-image. She understood. She had to work hard to bolster her own. The poor guy believed people only liked him for what he could give them. She stressed that she didn’t want anything from him. And she didn’t.

He admitted later that he’d never planned suicide; he’d just needed someone to talk to. He liked

that she listened to him and insisted he'd find a way to repay her kindness. She told him again it wasn't necessary. Although neither of them ever used names, he waited around after her shift one night and somehow found out who she was. She hadn't seen him, but he admitted this when he called her office the following day. This invasion into her work world should have terrified her, but because he sounded so much like Gill she was drawn to him. It was almost like having her friend alive again. The calls had been going on for six weeks now. He always had information about the strangler.

She shivered. What if he was the copycat Boston Strangler himself? The thought had crossed her mind more than once. Always aware of that, she courted caution. Still, she couldn't ignore the fact that he was feeding her with sensational leads which always turned out to be right.

It didn't hurt that he sounded like Gill. That gave her another reason to want to believe him. Still, she didn't want to believe it, yet she wasn't about to leave her life to the fickle whims of fate. Jen quickly packed her tote bag with everything she might need including a mini-recorder, a camera, and a cell phone, preset to dial 911 in case of emergency.

Then she swung by her apartment to pick up her .38. Lee, an antique gun salesman, had taught her enough about the "detective special" to protect herself. He'd even set her up with a dealer's permit so she could legally carry the weapon. Before they mutually decided to end their two year romance, they'd spent many weekends at the shooting range. While she felt competent about handling the gun, she didn't feel completely comfortable. Shooting at cardboard images was one thing, but she wasn't at all sure she could shoot a human being. She closed her eyes briefly. *Please, Lord, don't let this lonely man be a bad guy.*

She was almost there when her cell phone rang. The caller's number was unfamiliar. In case it was her informant, she answered it. "Too late," someone with a low, chilling whisper said. It definitely wasn't the guy who had been giving her information, but she heard the same familiar street sounds coming over the open line as before. It was a classic terror technique. God help her, it was working.

CHAPTER THREE

At the entrance to the Boston Common Park, Jen paused. Though it was mid-afternoon and warm, she couldn't stop trembling. In the street, cars zipped by, sending a noxious fog of exhaust fumes swirling around her. Her gaze fell on a curbside telephone cubicle. The receiver dangled off the hook. A shiver slid down her spine. Had someone interrupted her informant when he'd tried to call again? Who had made the whispery call? Was this dangling phone another scare tactic, or mere coincidence?

She didn't put much stock in coincidence.

Throngs of people passed her at a quick pace, some hurrying to catch a bus or taxi, others simply intent on their destination. Surely she was safe enough with all these people around. Besides, she had her gun.

She entered the Boston Commons' grounds, heading for the children's wading pool. It should be easy to spot a skinny man wearing an inside out yellow flight jacket and an unmatched pair of shoes. The breeze caught wisps of hair and tickled her face. She swept a trembly hand over the strands to contain them.

A few yards into the Commons, she froze. At the side of the path next to a thicket of dense bushes lay a man's discarded brown shoe, then a black one, half hidden. Jen stared at them, afraid to move. Don't let this be what I'm thinking. Her heart pounded as she pushed the overgrowth aside and peered into the tangle. A hollow-faced man with bulging dead eyes stared up at her, his bright yellow jacket inside out. Once she began to scream, she couldn't stop.

* * * *

It was 4:30 in the afternoon when York and Ted ducked under the yellow tape that cordoned off the homicide scene and approached the body. York knelt and uncovered the face. He recoiled. Sniffles! He felt like someone had kicked him in the gut, but "Poor bastard," was all he managed to say. He glanced at Ted; his partner's face revealed nothing. Cops couldn't let feeling get in the way. Closing off his emotions, York examined the body. Murphy, the first officer on the scene, briefed him. "Jones is questioning the woman who found him. So far she hasn't made much sense. In shock, I guess."

"A relative?"

Murphy shrugged. "Maybe. She fought like a wildcat to stay with the body. Didn't want to let go of the victim's hand, kept telling the stiff that she didn't want anything from him."

"Where is she?"

Murphy pointed to a bench shaded by a huge maple. Officer Jones, the only female officer on the scene, had a consoling arm around a young woman who was bent over, hugging herself. Their backs were to him.

York crossed the lawn and circled in front of the bench.

The woman had a bunched up tissue to her eyes. She wore an expensive pantsuit and low heeled leather shoes. Her braided hair had been swept up in a classy style. She was way above Sniffles' league. What was her connection to a guy like him?

As York approached, she removed the tissue and glanced up at him.

"You!" he said. "What the hell was the devious reporter doing here?"

"Detective Wylinski," she said softly without even a trace of surprise.

Although the faint quiver in the way she said his name, and her vulnerable demeanor touched something deep inside York, he also felt a rising anger. He'd bet her messing around for a story had gotten Sniffles killed. York's throat tightened. "I'll take over here," he told Jones. "I want to get Ms.

Lyman's statement myself."

"She's had a terrible shock," Jones whispered as she left. "Go easy."

He took a deep breath, trying to reign in his anger. "You found the body?" he asked, his voice gruffer than he intended.

Jen Lyman expelled a double catching breath, making the kind of sorrowful, heart-wrenching sound small children made after crying for a long time, then she nodded.

She'd put on a phony act when she answered his letter and when she'd met with him. Was she doing the same now? Whatever her motivations, more than likely her emotions weren't all for Sniffles. Perhaps some were for herself and the mess she stepped into. She had to know she'd missed running into the killer by minutes.

York's hands curled into fists, as he battled feelings he couldn't quite identify. "What's your connection to Sniffles?"

Jen looked at her hands fidgeting in her lap, then up at him with sad green eyes. "Who?"

"The deceased."

"Oh. What's his real name?"

"You don't know?"

She leaned forward and clutched York's hand. Her fingers and palm were icy. "No, but I want to. Please, tell me. It's important."

"For some damned story?" The degree of bitterness in York's tone surprised him, but he didn't pull away from her hold. He couldn't; it was if they both needed the connection.

"It's nothing like that," she said, looking wounded, sad, even sincere. "It's for me. I may be his only friend."

The reporter was one hell of an actress. "Kenny Charles Duncan," he told her. She closed her eyes a moment as though setting the name to memory. When she looked up and met York's gaze, he asked, "What's your connection to him?"

"He's been giving me information."

"You mean selling?"

She challenged his gaze. "I said giving."

"Sniffles never gave anything for free. What did you offer in exchange?"

"Friendship."

"And you didn't even know his name?" Bile rose in York's throat. He'd lost his snitch, a skinny little guy he couldn't help caring about. And here she was pretending to give a damn about him. And it burned York's butt that he was almost buying it. "Let's finish this downtown." He gripped her arm.

She shook him off. "I want to go home."

York snorted. "So do I. But we're going downtown."

* * * *

In the interrogation room, equipped only with a metal table and a couple of stiff-backed chairs, York poured two mugs of coffee and offered Jen one of the burgers he'd picked up from the drive-thru on their way back to the station. She accepted the coffee and refused the food. He couldn't eat either, but the bitterness of the steaming coffee was just what he needed to get through this. He flicked on the recorder and took a pad and pencil from his pocket. "Okay, what's the deal with you and Sniffles?"

She told him how Sniffles had called into the Suicide Crisis Center where she volunteered. "He didn't have anybody," she said so softly that it touched York's heart before he could stop it. Tears filled her eyes and she brushed them away with her crumpled tissue. "He's been calling me for about

six weeks now.”

“You mean you had contact with an important informant in a murder case and never reported it to the police?” He didn’t try to hide the anger in his tone.

Fire flickered in her eyes. “I did report it. The chief denied any knowledge of a copycat Boston Strangler, and said he didn’t want the press stirring up the public.”

York stared at her for several seconds. Her story rang true. Although they’d been working on the case for months, the chief felt the less said the better. “But you continued your contact.”

She took a sip of coffee. Her hands trembled. “Of course. I have the death certificates of each victim he mentioned. The dates check out. Everything he said was correct.”

“But you didn’t print anything about it?”

“When I do, I’ll have all the facts.”

“You’ve put yourself in a lot of danger.”

“I was already in danger. I’d hoped Sniffles’ tip today would change that.”

“Instead you got him killed.”

She froze as though he’d slapped her. With the silence between them, came regret for being so hard on her. After a moment, she met his gaze. “You seem to know this man better than I do,” she said, “maybe *you* didn’t do enough to protect him.” The truth of her words shook York. Before he could recover enough to respond, she withdrew the manila envelope from her oversized bag and shoved it toward him. “My editor left a message on your recorder earlier today that explains this.”

He checked. “Your Editor’s message is there, but it doesn’t explain a damn thing.” In fact, it created a whole new bunch of questions. Before he asked them, he reviewed the contents of the envelope. “After what happened to that other reporter, why didn’t you report this right away?”

“My experience with cops is that if you don’t hand them everything on a silver platter, they just sit on a case. I needed to collect enough data to spark your interest.”

York snapped his pencil in half. “My experience with reporters is that they print things prematurely, blow our cases and force us to let guilty perps go free.” He recalled the Cassidy case where the reporters covering the story gave away the evidence found at the scene, and the murderer of a family of eight, four of them small children, walked because of it.

Jen stood abruptly. “I’ve told you all I know. I want to go home.”

“You’ve stuck your nose into a whirling fan, Ms. Lyman. Based on these emails and notes, you shouldn’t be alone. Do you have someone to stay with you?”

“Lots of people,” she quipped. “I just have to choose.”

He’d just bet. All men, no doubt.

York felt a muscle twitch in his jaw. Small world. Jen Lyman, a woman who’d answered his ad, was part of Gordon Michaels’ murder investigation. Her talk was tough, but she was trembling. He shuffled the notes and emails, trying to distract himself from the way her vulnerability tugged at his heart. “If you get any more of these, I want to see them right away.”

She nodded and headed for the door.

He grabbed her arm and the electricity of the contact shot through him. “I’ll take you home,” he growled, trying to ignore the emotional impact she had on him.

“Back to my car, you mean?” She hesitated, and then shrugged. “That sounds fair since you forced me to come here without it.”

His stomach knotted. Vulnerable or not, Jen Lyman had a sassy mouth on her.

Tightening his grip, he hustled her out the door. This case had taken a turn for the worse. Sniffles died before revealing the big shot behind the strangler, who the woman computer sleuth was, and what the hell was really going on. And now he had another reporter in danger to worry about.

The sun set in an orange blaze as York Wylinski swung by the government parking structure and let Jen out next to her car. He watched her jam the key into the lock with enough force to break it off. He shook his head. She had let him know without mincing words, that she believed he was dragging his feet on Gordon's murder investigation and thought he'd been callous about Sniffles. He sensed another factor in her anger—her fight against the attraction between them. York was certain that a sharp young woman like Jen Lyman understood all too clearly that they were linked until this case was over. Still, when she slid behind the wheel, she flipped him a wave that was more of a kiss-off than a farewell gesture.

Did she think that would get rid of him? With the strangler on the loose, he couldn't let her drive home alone. He made a U-turn and followed her gold Toyota Camry. The task wasn't easy. Her car was a common make, model and color, and she sped through every yellow light, leaving him to barely clear the intersection as the light switched to red. *Dammit*. She was "pushing-yellow" just to annoy him.

He managed to keep the Camry in sight as Jen weaved in and out of traffic. Suddenly she swung into a dimly lit parking structure. He knew it was the parking accommodation for the Mayfield Apartments, the place she gave as her home address. Apparently, Mr. Toad's wild ride was almost over. York's tires screeched as he raced up the ramp to catch up with her. Although she'd given every indication that she wished he'd disappear, she waited in her car until he pulled up next to her. If she secretly wanted him there, you'd never know it by her greeting. "You still here?" she quipped when he opened the door for her. "Get a life, Wylinski."

She propelled herself to her feet and as she zipped by him, leaving a trail of light fragrance, he tried to take her arm, but she shook him off.

"In case you've forgotten, Ms. Lyman," he said, starting to lose his patience, "your editor asked for my help. He promised you'd cooperate."

She shrugged, and York followed her up to her thirteenth floor apartment. "Not superstitious?" he asked. The four-leaf clover on her key chain had led him to believe otherwise.

They approached her door and he put a finger to his lips to stop any response. Curled in front of the door was a piece of brown string. It wasn't twine and was probably nothing. He gestured for her to hand him the key. She rolled her eyes but complied. The lock was standard and the key fit loosely. He twisted the handle and eased the door open. He stopped, listened. All was quiet. He sniffed the still air. There were no obvious lingering smells of cigarettes, sweat, or anything to put him on alert, but if an intruder was in a back bedroom... York was familiar with this building and knew that the apartments above the tenth floor were all two-bedroom units. "Wait here," he whispered.

He cursed under his breath when she stepped into the entry hall, but quickly buried his annoyance, knowing even a moment of lost focus was deadly. Starting with the living room, he crept through the lighted unit, keeping his back to the walls with his gun at ready. He sensed she was watching him. With disbelief? Intense interest? It was natural for a reporter to be fascinated by police procedure, but letting her avert his attention, even for a second, put them both in danger. He held up his hand in a stop gesture, warning her to freeze and remain silent. Ignoring him, she trailed behind on tiptoes. To her credit, she armed herself with a poker from the fireplace. Now he had one more thing to worry about—that she might mistakenly hit him with it; civilians often made things worse when they tried to help.

York eased down the hallway, too aware of her strong and distracting presence. In the master bedroom, he slowly slid open the mirrored closet door, gun ready. His gaze darted over color coded clothes. Blues with blues, pinks with pinks. But no intruder.

York stepped into the marble bathroom. A feminine floral fragrance similar to ginger or

honeysuckle wafted over him. He yanked the shower curtains aside. Tiny bells on the hooks tinkled softly like wind chimes. The empty tub conjured images of Jen soaking leisurely, ringed by mounds of frothy bubbles.

Needing to put a distance between himself and the arousing image, he moved swiftly and silently to the guest bedroom. Nothing was amiss there either. The day bed had simple lines without pillows or fringe, and the white-gold color scheme paralleled the rest of the apartment. He eased open the closet door. On a hook to the side, he found a contradiction to the tailored Ms. Lyman—an exquisite emerald green silk negligee. Heat rushed through his body. Maybe the wispy thing was left behind by a guest, but he doubted that. He could imagine Jen wearing it, and resisted an urge to stroke the silkiness. He averted his gaze to check the rest of the closet. Beneath more color coded clothes, unframed oil landscapes lined the wall. All signed by Jen Lyman. So she dabbled in oils. He clenched his jaw, fighting the emotions stirred by the vivid yellows and passionate reds. He'd checked many homes in the line of duty, but this was the first time the process had touched him exactly this way, making him feel like he'd opened a door into big personal trouble. If he knew what was good for him, he'd slam it shut pronto. Jen Lyman was a hundred and eighty degrees away from the kind of woman he was looking for, yet from the moment she'd stepped into Loboughs' Coffee Shop, all feminine, and exactly as he'd imagined his future wife to look, she had intrigued the hell out of him. Unfortunately, knowing who she really was hadn't diminished the impact of that moment.

Feeling her presence, inhaling her summery fragrance, he turned and faced her. "The place is clear," he growled, battling dangerous emotions and stretched tight nerves.

"I could have told you that," she said. But her words didn't match her vein-swelling grip on the poker.

Fighting an urge to take her into his arms, he spun around and headed toward the living room. Her apartment was exactly what he'd expected—whites and golds and ultra modern furniture with low smooth lines and lots of glass and silk plants. Nothing real. Nothing out of place. Perfect. Too perfect.

Everywhere he looked, the glaring proof of Jen Lyman's true nature hit him in the gut: the unmistakable, irrefutable confirmation that she didn't have an old fashioned bone in that slim body. He crossed to the sliding glass door and checked the inadequate lock. Over an easily scaleable balcony blinked an incredible evening view, Boston lights.

Sensing her behind him, he turned and watched her cross the thick carpeting to the fireplace. Her slacks tightened over the curve of her cute butt as she bent, and returned the poker to its stand. When she straightened, she hugged herself as though if she let go she would shatter. Fighting another urge to pull her into his arms, he asked, "Got anything sweet?" Maybe his *bolt-from-the-blue* question would distract her from any lingering fear—and himself from his anger and disappointment that she wasn't the woman who, for an instant in that coffee shop, he'd fallen in love with.

"Pardon?" she asked.

"Cookies, cake? Thought we could have something while we wait for your friend to get here."

"What friend?" Jen furrowed her brow, causing the cutest crinkle on the bridge of her nose.

York couldn't contain a grin. "The one you're going to call to stay with you. Remember the one of many?" For a reason he couldn't explain, he hated to think of her with some big brute of a jock. It wouldn't take Rambo to get her through the night. Her mom or a girlfriend would do. And he would stay close by.

She nibbled her lower lip, clearly feeling pressured, then diverted his attention by smoothing the line of her hips. He'd bet that under those tailored slacks she had a terrific set of long, slender legs. He'd only seen her in a pantsuit and that ankle-length flowery dress, but anyone with delicate ankles

like hers had to have great legs.

He raked his hand through his hair. This woman triggered desire in him without even trying. He turned away and checked the terrace doors and all the windows. "Better get a locksmith over here tomorrow. Your locks wouldn't keep out even a rank amateur. Have him install window locks, too."

"Are you serious? I'm on the thirteenth floor."

"That won't stop a determined multistory man." He gave her the name of a good alarm company and suggested she contact them along with the locksmith. He picked up the receiver and handed it to her. "Now call your friend. I can't hang around here all night." Although he'd love to.

A spark fired in her eyes and when he shoved the phone piece into her hand she gripped it like a weapon and raised it just enough to make him wonder if she'd contemplated hitting him with it. "No one asked you to come here. And I can take care of myself."

So why was her hand trembling? "Call," he repeated.

* * * *

Jen wanted to scream at the intimidating way he widened his stance, folded his muscular arms over his impressive chest and waited, tapping his foot. Tapping. Tapping.

She dialed Dory who promised to come right over. Jen would let her return home to her husband as soon as Wylinski left. Scared or not, she didn't intend to "impose on" her friend without more reason than just a few threatening notes.

What about the murders? She reminded herself.

Thinking of them made her glad Wylinski was there. Even hostile company was better than staying alone tortured by the image of Sniffles lying dead. Oh, God. She shuddered and headed out of the room, trying to flee the inescapable vision. Wylinski had asked for something sweet. Food was the last thing she wanted. But finding something for him would take her mind off the still, dead body.

Wylinski followed on her heels. The kitchen seemed to shrink in his imposing presence. Without invitation, he shrugged out of his jacket and draped it over the back of a chair as if he were settling in for the evening. Then he pulled a chair away from the table, and straddled it like he owned the place. After a moment, he folded his arms across the top. The long sleeves of his white shirt didn't hide the brawny taper of his forearms or muscled bulge of biceps. The room seemed suddenly very hot. Jen flipped on an overhead fan, then went to the refrigerator, opened the door and basked in the escaping coolness. She stared inside. The white barrenness increased the empty feeling that accompanied her disconcerting feverish sensation.

He'd asked for something sweet; maybe he had low blood sugar. "All I have to offer you are some red grapes and cheese. I'll make us some tea. You can sweeten that." She put two cups of water with tea bags into the microwave.

York's gaze followed her movements. "I had hoped part of the letter wasn't a lie."

Damn him. He was rubbing it in that she was a big disappointment. Jen grabbed the grapes and cheese from the refrigerator and slapped them onto a plate. She didn't try to rein in her annoyance, or try to disguise the irritation in her voice. "What are you talking about?"

"You claimed to make the best brownies in Boston."

"I do." Although she rarely baked anymore, she was good at it. But she didn't have to prove it, especially to him. Weeks had passed since Gordon's death and this lead investigator in the case hadn't made any headway that she could see. And now Sniffles was dead. She snatched a paring knife from the wall holder and began to cube the cheddar with a vengeance. "Unlike your usual donut shop, I don't keep sweets on hand. There's a *Dunk'n Donuts* in the shopping center. On your way back to police headquarters stop by and flash your badge. They'll probably give you a free

sample. But if you spent less time in donut shops and more time investigating Gordon's murder..."

Wylinski shook his head. "So that's what's eating you. Think about this. If you'd come forward immediately with the info Sniffles gave you, both the snitch and the reporter might still be alive." He darted a sharp glance at her. "And do you know how many times I've heard that tired donut stereotype? Where's your originality, reporter?"

She stabbed the toothpicks deep into the cubes of cheese as heat rose in her cheeks. "I'll show you originality, Wylinski. Check out the billboard story in the Friday morning *Globe*."

His eyes darkened to a stormy deep blue. "If you know what's good for you, Ms. Lyman, you'll forget that story."

Jen grabbed a pen and wrote his words on a sheet of paper and handed it to him. She tried to ignore the jolt of electricity that shot through her as their fingers brushed.

"What's this?" he growled.

"You said if I received any more threats to let you know. That sure sounded like a threat to me."

His eyes narrowed. "Maybe that's why you're getting them. You go out of your way to step on toes."

"Just like a cop. Blame the victim."

"Got a gun?"

".38."

"Can you use it?"

She hated his ability to keep her off guard. He kept her from thinking of anything but how much she'd like to slap his arrogant face. "Would I have it if I couldn't?"

"Lots of people have guns. Few know how to use them properly."

She removed the steaming cups from the microwave and the tantalizing aroma of wild berry tea filled the room. "Does two years on the shooting range qualify?"

"It's a start." He turned the chair around and moved back to the table. "So the notes started after you met with the mayor? Significant? Or coincidence?"

She slid the tea in front of York and joined him at the table. "You're the cop. You tell me."

He took a sip and frowned. Obviously the detective wasn't a tea lover. He stuck a piece of cheese in his mouth, followed by a grape. "Did Sniffles say anything to you about a big shot in city or state government pulling the strangler's strings?"

"He told me not to trust anyone."

"Did he mention the name of a woman computer expert?"

"Computer expert? Does she have something to do with Gordon and Sniffles' murders?"

"At this moment, I don't know if she even exists."

"Sounds like par for the course with cops. Are you going to ignore my threatening notes like you did Gordon's?"

"I just checked your apartment. That's not ignoring. And because of what you've gone through today, I'll ignore your rudeness, and the fact that you're totally out of line."

"Wow. For a man of few words, you really get wound up when someone pushes your buttons, don't you?"

He glared at her. "As far as the emails go, I'll check the points of origination and make a list of the people behind the code names. If you recognize any of them, we'll go forward from there."

"And tonight?"

"Check your answering machine and email."

He stood very close behind her, so close she felt his heat. Her fingers hit the wrong keys. That was a first; she was a flawless typist. She calmed down and checked her email and found nothing new. It was the same with her answering machine. "Now what?"

"I'll arrange for taps on your phones, both home and office."

"No way. I have to guarantee my tipsters total privacy."

Before he could respond, Dory was at the door. Jen introduced her to Wylinski. "You're a woman!" he said as though expecting a man.

Dory's dark eyes glinted with amusement. "Thanks for noticing, detective."

He didn't respond to that. "You got here fast," he said, stroking his chin. "Live close by?"

Dory shrugged. "Less than ten minutes with nighttime traffic."

"You live alone?"

Dory sent Jen a *what's-with-this-cop?* look. "With my husband, two Dobermans and a mynah," she said with amusement in her voice. "And you?"

"Two car family?" he asked.

Dory rolled her eyes as though she were about to lose patience with his terse questions. "Clark has a motorcycle and a Porsche. I have a Volkswagen convertible. If you're into transportation, we also have two Schwinn's."

"If you called, could your husband come right over?"

Dory grinned as though finally understanding where he was going with his inquisition. "Faster than a speeding bullet," she quipped.

York pressed a card into Jen's hand. The brush of his fingers against her palm sent little currents racing up her arm. "I can't get here quite that fast, but if you even suspect trouble, call."

In spite of the thrill she got from York's mere touch, and that she'd received threats from an unknown person who was murdering people she'd had contact with, this male protector thing rubbed her wrong. "Gordon and Sniffles were men, and they're dead. Why can't you recognize that?"

York stared at her a moment. "Don't make this a women's lib issue. My point is there's strength in numbers. Call 911 for the closest beat cop if you'd rather. But don't take chances."

He turned back to Dory. "Nice meeting you, Mrs. Kincaid." Then he slipped out the door.

"The detective's a dream boat," Dory said. "But can't he talk without giving the third degree?" Without waiting for an answer, she continued, "So, what's going on?"

Jen briefed her over tea.

When she finished, Dory said, "I don't like any of this. I think you should go on vacation until the cops catch the killer."

"I can't run away. I believe I have bits of information that if strung together will break this case wide open."

"If it doesn't break you first."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"I have confidence in you. But what about reality? Like you pointed out, Gordon was a big guy and the strangler got to him. If you have to stay, at least get the detective to station someone here."

"Okay. Makes sense. I'll call him in the morning." Just the thought of hearing his voice again made her heart thud.

"Good." Dory popped a grape in her mouth. "Tonight we have each other. And like the gorgeous cop suggested, if we get scared we can always call my honey."

Jen took Dory by both hands and pulled her to her feet. "You're going home to your honey."

Dory stared at Jen with huge dark eyes. "I don't get this. I mean...why did you call me to come here if you didn't intend for me to stay?"

"To get rid of Wylinski."

Dory wrinkled her forehead. "Maybe that was a mistake."

Jen took Dory's arm and walked her to the door. "I'll be fine. With no new emails or recordings, tonight will be quiet. The worst has already happened today." She tried to sound flip. "Even killers take a night off now and then."

* * * *

York passed his brilliantly lighted billboard. The black print on the white background mocked him. He frowned. Putting up the ad was the dumbest thing he'd ever done. He remembered the moment that harebrained idea popped into his head. Dad had just come out of surgery, and seeing him so still and pale was a shock. In that instant, it hit home that his father might not always be around. His dad was always after him to start a family and time was running out. The idea to take action grew after York completed the rehab on his new home. He'd expected to feel a great sense of accomplishment—he finally had the home of his dreams. Instead, he felt only incredible loneliness. What good was all of it with no one with whom to share the place?

He'd tried to find someone—tried even harder in the past twelve months, since his thirty-fifth birthday. Whenever he met a woman who attracted him, he'd ask her out, but between his job and coaching big brother basketball in areas with less fortunate kids, he'd had little time for go-nowhere dates. He decided he needed to date only marriageable women. To him that meant someone like his mom, with old-fashioned values who'd be satisfied to be a cop's wife and to stay home and raise a noisy brood of kids.

He still wanted that. Had to have it! But he knew now you couldn't order up a wife like a tailor-made suit. The heart and chemistry and all sorts of emotions got in the way. Meeting Jen Lyman had proven that to him. He wanted the sassy creature like he'd never wanted any woman. Yet the lifestyle she'd chosen for herself would never fit. And to make the situation really bad, he hated reporters and she hated cops. Even worse, they were symbolically handcuffed together until this was over.

York grabbed his cellular and dialed Max the guy who'd painted the billboard for him. When the whiskey-voiced painter came on the line York said, "I need you to whitewash the ad. I'll pay extra, but it has to be done tonight."

"No problem. What happened? Get buried in mail?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

* * * *

After Dory left, the apartment seemed unusually quiet. Jen picked up Wylinski's card and stared at it. A ridiculous prickling at the back of her neck made her carry it into the bedroom and place it on the night stand by the phone. She told herself her uneasiness was understandable, and headed for the shower. Thank God it wasn't every day that she found a dead body. Poor Sniffles. She'd have to ask if he had anyone to make his funeral arrangements. If he didn't, she wanted to take care of it. Everyone deserved to have some sort of last rites and someone there who cared.

Fifteen minutes later, smelling of gardenia shampoo, she slipped on her favorite red Mickey Mouse nightshirt. The shirt wouldn't brighten her mood, as it usually did, but its familiarity comforted her and that was enough for now.

The phone rang. Jen considered not answering it. She checked the caller ID. The unfamiliar number wasn't Dory. She let it ring a couple more times, then curiosity got the best of her. "Hello," she said with as much courage as she could muster.

"At last," a husky voice whispered, "you're alone. But not for long. I'm just outside your door." The line went dead.

Jen tried to grab York's card. It slid around the night stand under her grappling fingers. Using both hands, she cornered it and clutched it tightly. She took a deep breath, then dialed. After repeated rings, York's answering machine clicked on. She closed her eyes briefly, then shouted into

the receiver, "Pick up, dammit!"

"Jen! I'm here!" York sounded out of breath. "What's wrong?"

She fought the rising hysteria in her voice. "The killer called. He's in the building."

"I'm on my way. Call 911." The concern and assurance in his deep voice bolstered her determination to remain calm.

Jen slammed the phone down without waiting for York's end of the line to disconnect. Wanting mobility, she rushed to the darkened living room, and in the moonlight pouring through the open drapes, she spied her purse and withdrew her .38 and her cellular. Trembling, she pressed the preprogrammed autodial button for 911. Her hold on the phone tightened as she listened to the ringing the line.

When the emergency dispatcher answered, Jen gave her name and address in a low, clear voice. She heard footsteps stop outside her door. Jen didn't usually exaggerate, but with memories of the murdered Sniffles still fresh in her mind, she felt no guilt. "Someone's breaking into my apartment right now! Send help."

"Stay on the line," the female dispatcher told her.

A noise like someone jiggling her door knob sent icy prickles down her spine. Jen's heart thudded against her ribs and her upper lip broke out in a cold sweat. Crouching, she quickly moved to the far side of the room, taking her cellular phone and gun with her. She ducked behind an overstuffed chair and put the cell phone down beside her without breaking contact. She cocked her .38. Holding the gun in both hands, she pointed it at the door. Her finger tightened on the trigger. She swallowed, barely breathing. Something rammed against the door. A loud click told her the lock had given way. The door swung open. The silhouette of a big man loomed in the doorway. She fired.

The intruder swore and disappeared into the shadows. Her heart pounded. Had she scared him away? A muffled thud that seemed to come from within the room sent a new surge of adrenaline shooting through her. Oh, God, had he slipped in through the open door?

CHAPTER FOUR

Jen heard doors opening and voices in the hallway. Mr. Lee from down the hall said, “I heard a shot.”

Other voices Jen didn’t recognize joined in. “Has anyone called the police?” a woman asked.

The buzz of curious and concerned neighbors discussing the situation suddenly stopped. The hallway became deadly silent. What was happening out there? Seconds passed. A chill slipped down her spine. *Dammit, someone...anyone...say something!*

From the corridor, eerie shadows framed the slice of light coming through the entryway. Jen’s heart pounded. Her ears ached from listening for any sound within the room. Keeping her breathing shallow, she scanned the darkness watching for movement. She tightened her grip on the gun, trying to steady her shaking hands.

From the hallway a deep voice shouted, “Police!”

Was it really the police?

“Ms. Lyman, pick up your phone,” the deep voice said. “Talk to the dispatcher.”

Jen had almost forgotten she’d left her hanging on the line. She grabbed the phone. “I’m here,” she whispered. “But I don’t know if I’m alone.”

“I heard a shot,” the dispatcher said, with a question in her tone.

“I fired at the intruder.”

“Is he armed?”

“I don’t know.”

“Can you get to the door?” the dispatcher asked. “We need you out of there.”

If she cut to the right, she’d be cloaked in darkness most of the way. “Yes. I think so.”

“Place your gun on the floor just outside the apartment. Then go out with your hands where the officers can see them,” the dispatcher said.

Suddenly Jen felt like the criminal. Following the line of the wall, she made her way to the open door. She stooped and put the gun down. “I’m coming out,” she called as she flattened herself against the door frame and slipped into the corridor.

Burly arms grabbed her around the waist. She gasped. It was a moment before it registered that the arms belonged to one of the SWAT officers and she was safe. She closed her eyes briefly. *Thank you, God.* She struggled for breath. “Thank you, officer.” She couldn’t say more, but her words didn’t begin to express her deep gratitude.

A SWAT team swarmed into her apartment, guns drawn. She rubbed her arms, but she was unable to stop trembling. It was all so unreal. So overwhelming, so frightening.

* * * *

With his heart pounding, York answered his cell phone on the first ring. “She’s all right,” the dispatcher said.

York let out a sigh of relief. But he had to get to her. He pressed harder on the accelerator and zigzagged in and out of traffic. After speeding down three long blocks, he skidded to a stop in front of her building. Strobes flashed from police units parked askew; in the maze was a SWAT van. He raced to the door and flipped his ID to the officer guarding it. “Got the intruder boxed in,” the officer said. “All floors are covered.”

York nodded, already heading for the elevator. He jabbed the button several times in rapid succession. He paced until the lift came, and then rushed inside. The minute he reached the thirteenth floor, he ran to Jen’s open door. He passed an officer inspecting the opposite wall, probably looking for a discharged bullet. Full of questions, York flashed his ID to the crouched

policeman, who was dusting the door frame, then he entered the den of activity. Radios crackled and several officers bustled about. York's throat tightened. This was more than a threatening phone call and a break in.

Jen sat at the end of the couch with her bare feet curled under her. She wore only a mid-thigh red Mickey Mouse nightshirt. He drew in his breath at the well-rounded mounds and taut nipples straining at the fabric. Why hadn't someone gotten her a robe? Officer Norwood hunkered over his note pad, asking her questions.

York remembered seeing a robe inside the bedroom closet when he was here earlier. He quickly retrieved it, and gently placed it over her shoulders.

She looked up at him with wide, emerald green eyes. "Thank you," she said softly.

The robe didn't conceal nearly enough. He grabbed the lapels and tugged it tightly around her. "Are you all right?" he asked, his throat tight.

She nodded, but she was trembling. Flowery fragrances of soap and shampoo floated around her, invading his senses.

Officer Norwood scowled at him. "I'm trying to get Ms. Lyman's statement, Wylinski."

"I need a briefing," York said. "Now."

Norwood glared at him. "I'd tell you to f..." He stopped and glanced at Jen, then cleaned up his language. "...back off, Detective, but it looks like this is your case anyway. The intruder left his calling card, a two-foot length of fishing line."

York's heart thundered. "Our mimic Boston Strangler?"

"Looks like. Same type of twine."

Damn. The guy who had murdered the reporter Gordon Michaels and Sniffles had been here! York's throat felt dry. He shouldn't have left Jen after what had happened to his snitch today. Having a friend with her wasn't enough. And where the hell was the friend while all this was going on?

"The perp jimmied the lock," Norwood said. "But Ms. Lyman managed to get off a shot."

York met Jen's gaze. If she hadn't fired, she'd probably be dead. Dead. He forced himself to concentrate on Norwood's words.

"We didn't find any blood," he said, "but that could be explained. If we don't find the discharged bullet, chances are she winged the guy. We'll check the ERs for guys with gunshot wounds."

"Where's Ms. Lyman's gun?" York asked.

Norwood handed it to him. "The perp's quick disappearance makes me think he might live in this building, or perhaps he knows someone who lives here."

"I'll take charge of this," York said. He checked the safety and dropped the gun into his pocket. "And I'll take over here."

Norwood shrugged and moved away. Before taking Norwood's place on the couch, York knelt down in front of Jen and took her icy hands in his. She trembled. "Can I get you anything?" he asked. "A glass of water? Coffee?"

She shook her head, sending shimmering lights over the cascade of ringlets that hung down her back. He hadn't remembered her being so tiny or so young looking. He gave her fingers an extra squeeze then joined her on the sofa. "Where's your friend, Mrs. Kincaid?"

"I sent her home." Jen lowered her gaze to her fidgeting hands.

York flipped open his note pad with a loud snap. "Before or after the break in?"

"Before."

He shook his head. "I should've known you'd pull a trick like that. I promised your editor I'd protect you. Don't force me to take you into protective custody."

Her eyes widened, moisture shimmering in them. "Custody? Dammit, I'm not the criminal here!

And I can help you catch this guy.”

York laughed without humor. “How?”

She hugged herself as if struggling to hold her body together. “The strangler wouldn’t be after me if I wasn’t on to something to implicate him in the murders.”

York fought the desire to put his arms around her and give her comfort. He forced a hardness into his tone. “Like what?”

She shrugged. “If only I could remember everything Sniffles told me. I took notes on the important things, but maybe some little thing that seemed insignificant slipped by.” Jen leaned forward and gripped his arm. “You have to work with me on this.”

He could feel his mind and body giving in to her. York clenched his jaw and glared at her. “In other words, help you get your story. No sale, Ms. Lyman.”

In spite of his anger, he didn’t withdraw from her hold.

“I won’t deny that I want the story,” she said passionately. “But that’s just part of it. I can’t live like this, afraid of answering the phone, afraid of being alone in my own place.”

Her voice was a bit shaky, and the sound twisted York’s heart. “I know you’re afraid,” he said, “but—”

“I want to put Gordon and Sniffles’ killer behind bars. If I know something that’ll stop this guy and his senseless killing, you have to help me uncover it. It’s the only way I’ll ever be safe, the only way others in the city will be safe. Don’t you see that?”

York winced. She was good at this. Too good. “Look, reporter, I can’t let you foul up this case, or get yourself killed.”

“But I have a plan. The start of one, anyway.” Her grip on his arm tightened. “Sniffles is the key. He told us both information, probably not all the same stuff. I say we share it, and check out the leads together.”

Her steadfast use of Sniffles’ given name touched him, but it was the hope and eagerness in her eyes that really got to him. What the hell, he thought; he had to keep her close by to protect her anyway. “But I call the shots,” he said.

The tiniest smile played at her lips. “You won’t be sorry.”

“I’m already sorry. And you might be, too. I’m staying the night. Tomorrow you take the day off and we’ll burglar-proof this apartment. While nothing is fail-safe, a good alarm system and heavy-duty security locks are a step in the right direction.”

“Whatever you say, detective,” she said softly. “You’re the expert.”

He didn’t believe the attitude switch for a minute. She’d probably go along with his terms only when it suited her.

Norwood approached and cleared his voice. “We’re finished here.”

York turned. The officer who’d been dusting the door for prints had packed up his equipment to leave, and he and the other officers headed out the door.

“SWAT’s already completed the twenty-two floor sweep and came up empty,” Norwood told York. “We’ve started an apartment-by-apartment search.” He gave Jen a reassuring smile. Don’t worry, we won’t leave until we’ve covered every inch. If he’s here, we’ll get him.”

Jen managed a smile. “Thanks for getting here so fast.”

He nodded then met York’s gaze. “Shall I leave an officer here with Ms. Lyman?”

“Got it covered,” York said.

Norwood gave a little salute and left the apartment. Silence settled over the room. York became acutely aware that he and Jen were now alone, sharing the electrically charged quiet.

Jen pulled her robe tighter around her, then stood and faced him. “You can use the guestroom. Everything you need is in there.”

He patted the back of the couch. “I’ll sleep out here so I can keep an eye on the slider and entry

doors. Got an extra sheet?”

She lifted the base of the sofa and revealed a made up bed. “This ought to work for you.”

“Looks too comfortable for a night on guard duty.” He grinned and tried for humor. “Got any tacks?”

She yanked open a desk drawer and handed him a small box full. “Never say I’m not a good hostess.”

He laughed, amazed she could still joke. “I don’t want to scare you, but they should’ve found the perp by now.”

“I know. But Officer Norwood is wrong. The strangler couldn’t live in this building. Too much of a coincidence, and I don’t believe in coincidences.”

York didn’t believe in them either. But he didn’t know any other way the killer could’ve escaped, unless... “Are there any chutes or hidden walkways in the building?”

“Garbage chute. It’s a direct slide down to the basement.”

York checked with Norwood and then relayed the news to Jen. “They’ve got that exit blocked.”

“With all the noise you guys make,” she said, “the killer knows that. He probably just slid part way down and is hiding on one of the maintenance tiers until your men leave. Then, he can climb out, free as a bird.” Her eyes held York’s with an intensity that warmed him. She continued with a new excitement in her voice that he found arousing. “Remember, that was the way the cat burglar operated at the Dunningham Hotel? Except he used laundry chutes.”

York wasn’t surprised by her knowledge of the case. Perhaps she’d even covered it. This bright reporter was as capable of seducing him with her brains and resolute spirit as with her feminine wiles. York reached Norwood on his cellular once more. “Have someone check the maintenance tiers inside the chutes,” he told the officer.

“Already working on that. Just as soon as Bill at engineering downloads the building’s engineering maps to our computer, we’ll do a complete sweep of the duct system. Maintenance is standing by.”

“Any tenants refusing to cooperate?” York asked.

“A few, but nothing we can’t handle. We get in one way or another. But don’t expect too much. So far, SWAT’s found zip.”

York hung up and faced Jen. “All that can be done is being done. Better get some rest. Tomorrow will be a busy day.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Oh? We’re doing more than burglar proofing this place?”

He ignored her mocking tone. “That’s just the beginning. I’ve already contacted local Internet servers. They should be able to ID the email holders by morning. You can check the list for any familiar names.”

“And if there aren’t any?” There was a tiredness to her voice that touched him.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. One step at a time.”

“What you mean is—the list could be a dead end.”

“Negativity coming from *The Globe’s* top reporter? I’m surprised.” He paused to see if his dose of humor was working. He needed to keep her on track and focused on the positive. “And you’re wrong. It’s merely a place to start. I’ll check with your building manager to see if any of the people on the list live in this building. And from there anything can develop.”

“Sorry. Guess I’m just unnerved by the killer finding a way to get closer to me without my getting any nearer to exposing him.”

“Everything will look better in the morning after you get some sleep.”

Jen stared at the broken lock. “We’d better push a dresser in front of that door.”

York heard the tremor in her voice. “I have something for you that’ll work better,” he said, drawing a thin leather case from his jacket pocket. He handed it to Jen. “After I left you and Ms

Kincaid, I stopped at a hardware store and brought you a present.”

She slipped the wedge-shaped gadget from its case. “A doorstep?”

“Not *just* a doorstep. It has a battery-operated alarm. No one can get in when it’s in place, and it makes a piercing screech if anyone tries.”

As he took the gadget from her hands, he brushed the tips of her fingers. Heat shot through him. The pupils of her eyes constricted, making him wonder if their touch had affected her, too.

“Here,” he said. “Let me show you how it works.” He jammed the wedge under the door. “See? It keeps the world out without trapping us inside.”

She took a step toward him, arms extended, as though she planned to hug him. He opened his arms to welcome her, then dropped them at his side when she stopped short. Perhaps she decided that walking into his arms wouldn’t be wise. It was a good decision; if he ever got her in his arms he wasn’t sure he’d ever let her go.

“Thank you, Wylinski. Under the circumstances, I can’t think of a better gift.”

He pulled Jen’s gun from his pocket and handed it to her.

“Better stow this in a safe place. Think you can get some sleep now?”

“It helps that I’m not alone. Thanks for staying...”

“I hear a but coming.”

“Things are piling up, getting more personal. Tonight the intruder wasn’t here just to scare me. He wanted to shut me up for good.”

The tremor in her voice touched York. He knew how frightened she must be. It took all his strength not to go to her and gather her in his arms. “You’re safe tonight.” *From the killer. And on a different level, from me*, he thought. He couldn’t promise more than that.

* * * *

It was Friday morning and, as usual, York was up with the sun. He pulled on his pants and shirt and headed for the kitchen, his stomach growling like a hungry bear. He opened the refrigerator. Not a damned thing. All he found in the cupboards was a supply of fancy teas. What the hell did this woman eat?

He couldn’t leave to go buy food. The SWAT team, in spite of the apartment by apartment search last night, hadn’t found the perp and the guy could still be around. And probably was. Meanwhile York was still hungry, and they had to secure this place before they went out. That could take hours. But first, he needed the security kit.

His mind raced, trying to figure out how to get all his needs handled. The best way, he decided, was to tie them all together. The email list should be ready by now. If he had it, they could move ahead with their efforts to determine who was behind the threatening emails and the murders. York snapped his fingers as a three-pronged solution hit him. He dialed Ted and invited him and his minister lady friend to come to Jen’s house for York’s famous chili omelets. The catch: his partner had to pick up a security kit from the hardware store, some breakfast stuff from the market and while he was about it, bring the email list.

York headed for the living room and tucked away the foldout bed. Maybe if the place was tidy, Jen wouldn’t be as upset about her surprise visitors. Perhaps the guests would even take her mind off last night’s break in.

An hour later, Ted appeared at the door with the security kit and big brown bags of food—and a woman who didn’t look like any minister York had ever seen. Wow! Were formfitting jeans and a bare midriff the standard attire for off-duty clergy these days? With her television-thick makeup and a figure most women would kill for, she looked more like a model. When she smiled and shook hands with York her wrist full of bracelets jangled loud enough to wake the dead.

He herded his guests to the kitchen and they pitched in like family. With the three of them working together, the kitchen soon smelled of coffee, bacon and toast. Ted diced some onions in big chunks.

"Cut those smaller," York demanded with a smile in his voice. "Part of the secret recipe, good buddy," he said.

York heard the shower running. In spite of the noise of the spray, Jen had to have heard their voices. He was getting nervous now, anticipating her possible explosive reaction to finding strangers in her kitchen. Last night he'd learned what she was made of when she faced a killer. Now he'd find out how she handled a man who had overstepped his bounds.

"Looks like a party," Jen said with amazing good humor as she walked into the kitchen. "Am I invited?" She wrinkled her brow playfully. "I mean this is still my place, isn't it?" She looked around pretending to verify that she was really in her own apartment.

York laughed. "You've heard of Pizza Man, he delivers? Well, this is breakfast guests, they deliver." York hurried on to cover his unease. "This is Ted Smothers, my partner, and his friend, Loraine Stuart, TV Evangelist. Maybe you've caught one of her services?"

Jen shook her head. "Pleased to meet you," she said in a hospitable voice, then turned to York. "When you take over, you really take over, don't you Detective Wylinski?"

"We needed the security kit. And Ted also brought the email list." He grinned and gestured with the folder of names. "All in the line of duty. Food's a bonus."

She smiled sweetly. "Didn't doubt that you'd have some sort of an explanation."

"Everything's ready." York was surprised at how relieved he was that she'd accepted his takeover of her kitchen so graciously. "Please, sit down, milady." He bowed low and pulled out a chair for her.

"Smells wonderful," Jen said, sitting down.

Loraine scooted her own chair closer to the table. "Ted's been raving about York's omelets ever since we met. At last, I get to try one. Of course, Ted could have given me more than ten minutes notice." She patted his hand lovingly. "I guess we have to be spur-of-the-moment gals with cops for boyfriends."

Jen stopped eating mid-bite, her fork frozen in place. "Detective York is not my boyfriend. He's just here to protect me."

"Protect you?" Loraine frowned. "Good heavens. Why do you need protection?"

Jen recounted the break in, skimming over the details, making it sound trivial. York admired her efforts to override the fear she must feel.

When a silence fell over the group, Ted made a thumbs up gesture. "You got the best protection available, Jen. And he's not a bad cook, either."

Jen captured York's gaze and looked at him over the rim of her coffee cup with twinkling eyes. "It is a good omelet, Wylinski."

"You liked my omelet?" Suddenly he felt like a young boy again and her praise made him feel like doing a backward leap the way he used to do when things were too good to express with words alone.

Jen nodded. She looked so damned amused. Her gaze held his for a moment, then abruptly she asked, "Where's the list I'm supposed to review?"

Ted handed Jen several sheets of paper from a folder.

York pointed at the names. "Jen, these are the people with internet addresses where your threatening notes originated." Sharing the list, she moved closer. Her fresh fragrance wafted around them. Their bodies touched. Struggling to ignore the warmth that quickly engulfed him, York cleared his throat. He could barely speak. "Any names ring a bell?" He hoped no one noticed the new huskiness in his voice.

"There's a common thread," Ted said. "All the addresses end with Kesslers.com." When York glanced up, Ted added, "Wasn't Kesslers where Sniffles used to work?"

York nodded. "I have another job for you. Find out if any of the women on this list are computer specialists."

"Done. Shelly Drake and Irene Newberry fill the bill."

Loraine beamed as though Ted had sprouted angel wings.

Jen studied the list closely, then looked up. "Shelly Drake sounds familiar."

York felt his neck muscles tighten. "Could Sniffles have mentioned her to you?"

"When he called the crisis center that first time, he mentioned a girlfriend." Jen shrugged. "That might have been the name."

Loraine exchanged looks with Ted. "This may not be important but—"

Ted winked. "Everything you say is important to me, Rainy."

York shook his head. His partner had it bad. "Gettin' deep in here. But Ted's right, Loraine. Any scrap of info could be important."

Later, he'd rib Ted about the lovesick talk as payback for the billboard jibes.

Loraine leaned forward. "Well, Shelly Drake's a member of my church. Lovely young woman. Always volunteering, and smart as a whip. She even set up our computer system at church."

"Hey," Jen said, gripping York's arm. "Sniffles mentioned he'd helped his girlfriend set up a church computer. According to him, they worked on the church system for weeks. The girlfriend seemed happier than she'd been in a long time. Then for no reason that Sniffles knew of, the girl told him she wanted to see other men." Jen's breath caught. She paled.

"There's something else, isn't there?" York felt a tightening in his gut. He gripped her hand, giving support.

"Sniffles said the girl used to work for the mayor before she got the exec job at Kesslers."

* * * *

Installing the new security system had taken most of the day. Jen faced the panel of buttons mounted on her entryway wall and repeated the coded sequence that York had shown her. He was so close she could feel his warm breath on the back of her hair and the heat radiating from his body. She stepped away and took a calming breath. It didn't help much. She closed her eyes. *Focus on why he's here.*

The security system made her feel more in control of her life, except where he was concerned. Having him around all day kept her on an emotional high. "Thanks for making me feel safe again, York."

He shrugged. "I just installed it. Something you could've done yourself."

The casual lift of his shoulders and his humble words told Jen this gruff cop found it difficult to accept gratitude. Was he afraid it would make him seem human? Well, too late. She'd already seen a few of his unguarded moments and knew there was a kind man under all that gruffness. Still, he puzzled her.

She righted a crooked sterling silver relief sculpture of The Lord's Supper that had tipped during all the hammering. "Until last night," she said, "I didn't think I needed all this extra protection. Living on the thirteenth floor surrounded by neighbors only steps from my door, I felt safe enough."

He lightly touched her shoulder. The effect of his simple touch rocked her senses and rippled down her nerve endings.

"Don't let stronger locks and the new system lull you into a false sense of security," he said. "You still have to stay alert."

“Darn it, York. Couldn’t you allow me a few moments to enjoy this? I think you get a kick out of scaring the pants off me.”

The corner of his mouth twitched in an effort to retain his serious expression, but his grin won. “Your words certainly paint a vivid picture for me, Reporter.”

Heat crawled up her cheeks. She had walked into that one. Which was the real York—the gruff, abrupt cop or the playful flirt who made her smile, and to her dismay, even blush? She glanced at her watch to cover her embarrassment.

“My interview with Shelly Drake is at 5:30 P.M.” York had insisted upon accompanying her. They had about an hour to kill.

“Good,” he said. “I’m counting on you to draw her out.”

Warning signals went off in Jen’s head. “Don’t you dare interfere with my interview. If you decide to take her downtown, do it later.”

“Don’t tell me how to run my investigation, Ms. Lyman.” His face hardened. “I can help you get your story, or take you out of the loop. Your choice.”

Jen wanted to tell him to go to hell, but the story was too big to let her temper foul up a great inside contact like Detective York Wylinski. She decided to switch tactics. “If you’re going with me, maybe you should shave.” The dark shadow on his jaw looked too sexy for her comfort. “There’s an extra razor in my medicine cabinet.”

York arched a dark eyebrow. “Do you have men stay over often, Ms. Lyman?”

Before she could think of a good comeback, the doorbell rang. Grateful for her reprieve, she hurried to answer it. She flung the door open and gasped. “Lee!”

Lee Brock’s spectacular golden tan emphasized his wheat-blond hair and vivid blue eyes. The antique gun dealer was definitely history, but the excitement of seeing an old friend made her abandon caution. She threw herself into his arms and hugged him.

When he held her too long, she twisted away. “What a surprise, Lee. Come in, for heaven’s sake.” She took him by the arm. “I didn’t know you were back in town. Why didn’t you call?”

Lee stopped abruptly and his smile faded. His grim look raked over York. “This the new boyfriend?” he asked.

Jen laughed. “Oh. No. This is Detective York Wylinski.”

In spite of her denial, her stomach got all fluttery at the suggestion. She couldn’t help comparing the men. Lee’s surfer-blond hair reminded her of sunshine and golden beaches. To her aggravation, York’s tall, dark looks made her think of midnight and thrashing around on rustling silk sheets.

“Detective?” Lee frowned. “Is there a problem?”

“No,” Jen said. “Everything’s fine now.” She smiled, wanting to glaze over her fears and stay in the moment, enjoying watching the interaction between these two men. Both were at least six feet in height, with York perhaps a bit taller, with longer, leaner muscles. Until she’d met York, Jen had thought Lee had the ideal male body. Now, he came in a lagging second.

The men shook hands, coldly measuring each other. Lee folded his arms and swelled his chest.

York stared at the gauze and tape on Lee’s ear. “What happened to your ear? Could that bandage cover a bullet wound?” he asked.

Jen hadn’t noticed it before. Strange that York would jump to such a conclusion. Was he always so suspicious, or did he know something about the intruder that pegged Lee as a plausible suspect?

Lee’s eyes darkened. The air crackled with electrified testosterone. Mentally, they were well matched, both intelligent and hard edged. Suddenly, Lee laughed without humor. “How the hell did you guess that?” He shifted his weight. “I’m an antique gun dealer, and last night some lowlife tried to rob me of my collection. In our exchange of fire, one of the jerk’s bullets grazed my ear.”

Jen’s first impulse was to reach out to Lee and comfort him. An image of the big man she’d fired at flashed in her mind and stopped her. Lee’s build fit the silhouette she’d seen. She rubbed her

temples, trying to ease the onslaught of a headache. Wait a minute. Even considering him was ridiculous. He was a friend. A man she'd known for two years.

York sent her a knowing look as if he'd guessed her uncertainty.

Lee's eyes darted back and forth between them. "What's going on here, anyway?"

York pulled a pad and pen from his shirt pocket. "What's your address, and phone number?"

"Mariott. Room 1452."

"How long have you been in Boston?" York demanded.

The corner of Lee's eye twitched. "A couple of weeks. Why?"

"What?" Jen's eyes widened. "All that time and no call?"

He owed her nothing, but wouldn't a real friend call? She wanted Lee to say something to reassure her that they were still friends. And equally important, that he understood that was all they ever could be. Lee was her past. And as attractive as York was, he was too dangerous to her career goals to be her future. Yet with the irascible detective, she felt this undercurrent of something else.

Lee stepped closer to her. "Sorry. I wasn't sure..."

She feared he might slip his arm around her. Rather than follow her urge to step away, Jen forced herself to stay put. "I'm delighted to see you again, but—"

"She has plans," York finished for her.

"I can finish my own sentences, detective!"

Rather than responding to that, York tapped the crystal on his watch and gestured with his head. "We'd better get going, Jen." Then he locked gazes with Lee. "Don't leave town, Brock. You and I aren't through yet, but it'll have to wait. Ms. Lyman and I have an appointment."

To flaunt his indifference to York's command, Lee stepped closer to Jen and stroked her arm with his index finger. "How about getting together later tonight?" he asked in the same deep voice that used to give her goose bumps. "I have something important to talk to you about."

"That'll have to wait, too," York growled. "Ms. Lyman will be tied up all evening. Police business."

Jen darted a sharp glance at York, but due to the time constraints, remained silent.

"Are you under arrest or something?" Lee asked. "I still don't get what's going on here."

She wondered that herself. "I'm fine, Lee. Don't worry. I'll get this all cleared up and call you in the morning."

* * * *

As they sped across town in York's unmarked car, Jen fumed until she couldn't stay quiet anymore. "What the devil was that, detective?"

His hands tightened on the steering wheel as he smoothly maneuvered the five o'clock traffic. "You have to stay away from Brock until I can check his story."

"You can't mean that you really think Lee is the strangler?"

York changed lanes abruptly. "Not sure. But I believe he could've been your intruder."

She shook her head. "Based on what?"

"A bullet grazed his ear on the same night you fired at someone." He took his eyes off the road briefly and glanced at her. "If I ever heard an unbelievable coincidence, that's it."

She swallowed. If she didn't know Lee so well, she'd agree it looked bad for him. "I thought you cops needed motivation. He'd never hurt me. We're friends."

"More than friends, judging by the length of time he held you when you threw yourself into his arms. Maybe he didn't like it when you dumped him."

Jen couldn't identify the emotion in his tone for sure, but it sounded very much like jealousy. "It wasn't like that. After two years we simply realized we were wrong for each other."

York's hands relaxed on the steering wheel. "What about the wound?"

"It had to be like Lee said," Jen said with forced conviction. "He was the one who taught me to shoot, for heaven's sake. Believe me, Lee isn't a stupid guy. He'd never break into my apartment knowing I have a gun. Especially since he knows I usually hit my target."

"Sometimes a man wants a woman so much he does reckless things. Perhaps he wants to get back together with you and thought he'd scare you so badly that you'd take him back with open arms."

"That's ridiculous. What about the fishing twine on the floor?"

"If the guy who broke in isn't the strangler, he wanted us to assume he was. More scare tactics. Still fits Brock."

"What about the phone calls? The threatening notes?"

"Brock could easily disguise his voice, and he no doubt has your home email address."

"But the calls and notes started over ten days ago." Her throat felt dry.

"That proves nothing. Big point, he matches your description of the intruder. Second big factor, that bullet wound. And third, he was shot last night. The coincidences are mounting up, Jen."

York's rationale and ominous tone sent shivers up her spine. Lee couldn't have been the man who'd broken into her place, but she understood why York might think he could. One coincidence was bad enough, but three sent up a whole field of warning signals. York paused for the slow moving ambulance that turned out of the emergency driveway of the hospital.

"Shelly's apartment is just ahead in the next block," she said. She pushed aside her worries about Lee and concentrated on her approaching interview. Would this turn out to be the lead she needed?

CHAPTER FIVE

In his friend's gray Honda, the strangler hummed a mindless tune as he followed Jen and the police detective. He'd foregone speed for anonymity. A FedEx truck cut him off. He tensed, and then calmed himself, something he had to work at constantly. Without losing sight of his mark, he swung out and continued in the flow of traffic.

Cars full of people moved all around him, but he felt comfortably alone in his world. His mind cycled thoughts rapidly. Last night he'd gotten a real rush from watching the team of cops comb Jen's building searching for him. He had to admit it was touch-and-go for a few seconds as they methodically swept the ducts. The SWAT leader came so close that he and the man breathed the same stale air.

He'd acted on impulse, going to Jen's place last night. He wanted to scare her into backing off, not kill her. At least, not yet. Unless he lost control, he killed only when his client ordered it, with each killing carefully planned. His client didn't know his secret, that the job fulfilled a need to kill. Until he'd accepted the assignment to imitate The Boston Strangler, he hadn't thought of strangling people. His weapon of choice had always been a gun. But when Mr. Big Bucks asked him to play copycat, he'd found the idea intriguing and the change of mode exhilarating.

The copycat signature wasn't totally accurate, of course. The first strangler coined the 'Boston Strangler' by the media, had probably never used fishing twine. This new twist was his boss' idea. It was surprising how much he enjoyed it; nothing before had compared to the thrill of yanking the twine tighter and tighter. The adrenaline high he experienced from the choking and gurgling cries of his victim and the rush of power as he brought his prey to his knees, thrashing and clawing, was mind blowing. Strangling Gordon Michaels had given him the least pleasure. The client had insisted that he slip the husky reporter knockout drops ahead of time to assure success. That took all the fun out of it.

Killing Sniffles had more than made up for it. Since the mark was a little guy, the client let him strangle him without weakening him with drugs. So he had fun with it, made it a real challenge. It had been accomplished flawlessly on a sunny day in the Commons with hordes of unsuspecting people around.

The excitement built again just recalling the events:

I stuck my .38 in Sniffles' ribs and ordered him from the phone booth outside the gates into the Commons. As I forced the skinny little twerp to walk beside me down the winding concrete walk, he kept saying that the joke was on me, that he had no money. Pulling the twine from my pocket, I told him, "Then get lost." When he started to run, I circled his neck with the twine and yanked him right out of his shoes.

As I dragged Sniffles from the glare of the hot sun into the cooling shade of a bramble of bushes and dense trees, the air was fragrant with the smell of new mown grass and drifting scents from the flowered hedges. On the other side of the dense brush I heard the sound of children playing in a nearby wading pool, their laughter dancing on the wind while the slimy little twerp kicked out with his stocking feet, struggling and choking as I pulled the twine tighter and tighter until I heard the most stirring sound of my career, a helpless gurgling like a bathtub emptying to nothingness.

Chuckling at the memory, the killer tried to imagine the noise Jen would make. It would be more delicate, perhaps like the trickle of spilled champagne....

* * * *

Shelly Drake answered the door with a baby girl balanced on her hip and two small boys hanging onto her denim-clad legs. Red puffiness around her eyes showed she'd been crying. After introductions, Jen and York handed the young woman their business cards. Shelly didn't even glance at them. "I'm sorry, Ms. Lyman," she said, without making eye contact. "I shouldn't have agreed to

talk to you.”

Jen was used to this; when people had time to think things over they often got cold feet. But she could handle it. “You said you wanted to help get Sniffles’ killer. Has that changed?”

Shelly’s gaze flew to Jen’s. “No, of course not. Sniffles didn’t deserve to die. He never hurt anybody.”

“Without your help, the guy who killed him could go free. Maybe even come after you. Or your kids.”

Fear flickered in Shelly’s eyes. “My kids could be in danger?”

“Until this guy’s caught, everyone in Boston is in danger.”

Shelly looked down at her kids. She stared at them for a moment, and then gestured for Jen and York to enter the small studio apartment. Stepping around the clutter of toys and a couple of small blankets, Jen seated herself on the sagging couch.

Shelly joined her. “Sorry about the mess.” She put a bottle in the baby’s mouth and held her close. “I took off at four o’clock to talk to you, but after I paid the sitter I barely had time to change clothes.”

Jen smiled. “It looks lived in.” Actually, the clutter had barely registered with her; it was the small quarters that didn’t add up. A studio apartment with kids—especially for a woman who had held at least two very responsible, highly-skilled positions. Where did the money go?

York removed a toy fire engine and a rattle and seated himself in an overstuffed chair, dwarfing the room with his looming presence. Shelly watched him as though sizing him up. Then she met Jen’s gaze. “What do you want from me? I don’t know anything.”

“Even a small detail could help. What about Sniffles’ friends?”

“I don’t think he had any. He was a loner.”

Shelly’s rigid demeanor wasn’t a good sign. If Jen wanted to get anything out of her, she’d have to shake her up a bit. She touched her hand. “He loved you.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I loved him, too.”

Jen noticed that the older boy, who appeared to be about five, was having difficulty breathing. Shelly noticed it too and adjusted the baby in her arms and brought the boy close and held an inhaler for him to take a breath from it. “Honey, did the sitter give you your medicine today?”

He shrugged. When Shelly gently rubbed his back, he buried his head in her lap. Jen waited, giving Shelly time to handle her son’s problem before asking another question.

Her other son, who looked to be about four, stood beside York and stared at him.

York laid a hand on the boy’s shoulder and the child looked at York with wide brown eyes full of such neediness that it made Jen’s heart ache. Poor kid was not only a middle child, but it was obvious that his older brother needed the most attention and probably got it. York gently ruffled the boy’s hair and smiled at him. It was all the encouragement the younger boy needed and he climbed up on York’s lap.

Jen recognized that desperate emotional need and fought it in herself. Having no male role models in her life, she tended to seek out men to be father figures and brothers. After the breakup with Lee, she’d even tried to keep him around as the brother she’d never had, but he wouldn’t have any of that. He laughed and said, “Unless there’s incest involved, forget it.”

His comment made her even more certain that he wasn’t the man for her. And she told him that. So why had he come by to see her? He had claimed it was to ask her a question.

The middle boy was still gazing up at York like he was Superman. Maybe the child’s fascination with York was simply because of his rapport with children. The toddler in the post office had been charmed by him too. It was obvious York enjoyed kids, and they seemed to gravitate to him as if they knew it.

Shelly looked up from her son. “Sorry for the interruption. What were you asking?”

"Sniffles told me you two were having problems," Jen said in her most sympathetic tone.

"That's putting it mildly. I broke up with him. I feel terrible about that. It made him even more alone."

"If you loved Sniffles, why did you break up with him?"

Shelly sighed. "He couldn't stay clean. He tried. I had to end it for my kids."

"Yet you planned to extract deleted information from the mayor's hard drive for him," Jen said, trying to connect all the pieces.

Fear flickered in Shelly's eyes. "He told you about that?" She pressed her forehead with trembling fingers. "I shouldn't have agreed to do it. Honest, I called it off."

"But at first you went along."

"Not right away." Shelly stroked her son's fine brown hair. "But it's tough making ends meet with three kids. I was doing okay until Jeffy needed expensive asthma medicines." She bit the corner of her lip. "The prescriptions weren't covered by my medical plan."

Jen felt something squeeze her heart. She made a mental note to find out why the medicines weren't covered. If she could, she'd help Shelly straighten that out. "So you had to make a choice."

"Yes. I got two months behind in rent. The landlord threatened to evict me, and my utilities got cut off, then my car broke down. Sniffles gave me all the cash he had. But it wasn't enough."

York sent Jen a doubting look. She agreed with his assessment that maybe Shelly wasn't telling the whole truth. Maybe more money flowed from her to Sniffles than the other way around. A man on drugs could be a tremendous drain on a household. "So Sniffles pressured you to do the job for him?"

Shelly nodded. "He made it sound so easy. All I had to do was pull some deleted stuff off a computer's hard drive."

"Computer forensics takes special knowledge. Where did you learn it?"

"Before I worked for the mayor, I worked for the State as a data recovery consultant. Computer crimes. I gave testimony in high profile cases, stuff like that."

"Do you do the same kind of work at Kesslers?"

"Pretty much. I protect their system from computer crimes."

Jen wondered if Shelly's computer had been one of those used to send the threatening emails. *If so, by whom? And how?* "It sounds like a well paying job." Before Jen could catch herself, a challenging tone had slipped into her voice.

"Oh, I get what you're thinking. You wonder why the cost of medicine broke my budget." She gave an indignant twitch to her shoulders. "I'm not an addict like Sniffles."

Jen had no reason to believe her, yet she did. "What about child support?"

She laughed bitterly. "Never got anything from my ex but a slew of debt."

Jen moaned to herself. She had no right to judge this woman. "So Sniffles had the answer to your money problems?"

"I didn't want to get involved. Mayor O'Brien was good to me when I worked for him." Shelly jiggled her baby against her breast, careful not to disturb Jeffy, who now sucked his thumb as he continued to rest his head on her lap. "But Sniffles said the mayor was a crook, and I'd be helping the police get him."

Awareness flickered in York's eyes.

Jen wondered what he knew about all this, and if the young mother was once again holding something back.

Shelly took a deep breath and continued, "When I backed out, Sniffles came up with the money for me anyway." Her mouth quivered. "Now, I wonder if that's why he got killed. Maybe when he couldn't come up with the information he'd promised to deliver, the buyer killed him. Or maybe it was his former drug connection...or loan sharks." Tears filled her eyes. "I feel so guilty."

Jen felt a surge of compassion. What would she do if faced with a single mom's problems? She knew the answer. She'd do whatever it took to provide for her children.

York leaned forward. "Did he get someone else to do the job?"

"He planned to ask this guy Joel, a computer hacker he'd met at the drug rehab center."

Suddenly, Jeffy began to gasp for air. Shelly thrust the baby into Jen's arms and grabbed her gasping son. The young mother looked at York with terror in her eyes. "I need to get him to the ER fast. Hospital's in the next block."

York jumped up, lifting the boy sitting on his lap as he rose. He stood the boy on his feet. "Let's go," he said. He turned to Jen. "Can you handle things here?"

The baby began to cry. The boy who'd been on York's lap joined the baby's howls and ran to Shelly and clung to her pant leg. Jeffy, the boy in Shelly's arms was turning blue.

Holding the screaming baby crooked in one arm, Jen dragged the other boy from his mother's leg. "Piece of cake," she said, without the slightest idea how to soothe two terrified children.

* * * *

York gave a sigh of relief when the ER emergency team took over and rushed the boy away on a gurney. "Everything will be all right now," he told Shelly.

"I want to go with him," Shelly screamed, sobbing hysterically. "My son. Oh, God, my son is dying!"

York felt for Shelly. Her loss of control was understandable. Although this single mom was clearly used to handling crises alone and had years of dealing with a child with asthma, yesterday she'd lost the man she loved and from what she'd said was feeling a lot of guilt along with the grief. And now she had a son in crisis.

A burly aide held her back. "He's in good hands, ma'am," he said. "You'll only upset him if he sees you in this condition. As soon as you calm down, I'll take you to him." The aide looked at York with a pleading expression. The dark circles under his eyes revealed he'd already had a rough day. "Try to calm your wife down. The team with your boy is the best."

York didn't have time to play along. He flashed his badge, knowing it usually got action. "I'm just a friend. Can't you get a doctor to prescribe something to relax her? I have to leave."

"We're really busy, officer. I'll look for a doctor. Just stay with her for a few minutes. I'll get someone as quickly as I can."

York put his arm around the sobbing mother and guided her to a nearby couch. Damn it, he needed to get back to Jen, but how could he leave a hysterical woman? He glanced down at Shelly. Was it safe to get a doctor to prescribe something to a woman who'd been mixed up with a drug user? She claimed to be clean herself, but could he believe her? He'd have to brief the doctor on the situation, and let him decide.

Shelly clung to York's arm. "I need to be with my son," she screamed. "Why won't they let me go to him?"

"Easy. Quiet down and they will, soon."

"Don't leave me," she sobbed.

"I'll stay a while," York said. What else could he do? He was between a rock and a hard place. He squeezed Shelly's shoulder. "Jeffy'll be up and doing a jig before you know it. We got him here in time." Shelly's sobs subsided, but she held onto York with a death grip. Somehow, he managed to get to his cell phone. "I'll check on Jen and your other children for you."

Shelly nodded and eased her hold. When he'd first learned of Shelley's connection to the murders, he'd entered her number into his cell, knowing he'd probably need it before the case was over. The line was busy. He waited a minute and punched the buttons again. Still busy.

"Lissa. Buddy. Are they okay?" Shelly asked with a tremor in her voice.

"Line's busy. I'll keep trying." Why the hell hadn't he gotten Jen's cell phone number?

He tried the line again. Busy. Not a good sign. He hated unknowns. But he couldn't let himself get worked up. Everything was fine. Probably.

If a killer wasn't stalking Jen, he wouldn't be worried at all. Even with screaming kids and an emergency going on, she had kept her cool. He would've expected a career woman like her to object to being left with a couple of squalling kids. But she didn't bat an eye. *Piece of cake*, she had said. He knew better than that, and he admired her spirit.

He dialed again. Still busy. A prickle stiffened the fine hairs at the back of his neck. Something didn't feel right. He quickly called the PD dispatcher and ordered a patrol unit to check on Jen. Shelly's apartment was just a block away. He could get there before the unit. *Damn*. He couldn't stay here and worry—and he couldn't leave Shelly. What the hell was he going to do?

* * * *

Jen noticed that the boy had knocked the receiver off the phone cradle. She replaced it as she bounced the baby with one arm. When she grabbed the boy's hand again, he jerked away and threw himself onto the carpet and kicked his feet.

Darn, she should be able to handle two small children. She took a shaky breath. *Please, let this work*. In a voice loud enough to drown out the children's cries, she began to yodel, something she learned from a country singer she'd dated. Shelly's baby girl and small son stopped crying and stared up at her with wide, glistening eyes as if she were a character on Sesame Street. The boy got to his feet.

Yea! Success! Keeping a Western twang in her voice, she switched from the yodel to singing. To the tune of *Take Me Out To The Ball game*, she sang, "Take me out to the kitchenette. Show me where the cookies and crackers are hidden."

Through drying tears, the boy laughed loudly, revealing adorable dimples.

Balancing the cooing baby on her hip, she grabbed the boy's hand and swung it in time to her singing, while gesturing with her head toward the kitchenette. Jen squeezed past the apartment-sized refrigerator to get to the high chair. She secured the baby in it and handed her a set of toy plastic measuring spoons. Jen couldn't get over the cramped quarters. The microwave took up most of the counter space, and a metal card table and its two chairs occupied most of the floor area. She shook her head. She had a huge two bedroom place for just herself, and Shelly had to jam her little family into this congested studio. It didn't seem right.

The boy clambered onto a chair next to the baby.

"So, what's your name, little man?"

"Me Buddy," he said thrusting out his chest proudly. "And she Lissa." He tickled the baby's foot. A loose thread hung from the baby's sock.

Jen quickly broke it free, but not fast enough to block the image that flashed in her mind—the twine around Sniffles' neck, his bulging eyes. Trying to block out the grisly image and trying to ignore the rap music that suddenly blared through an adjoining wall, Jen said, "Glad to meet you both." She bent in a deep curtsy. *God, please let me forget about the strangler for a while so I can keep these children happy*.

Buddy laughed. "You a fairy princess?"

She ruffled his hair. "And you're the frog."

He slid from the chair, got down on all fours, and sprang up, making a croaking sound.

"Okay, Frog-boy, let's see what we can find in the cupboard." The only thing that didn't require cooking was a box with half a roll of Ritz crackers. "Ah, look! We've found a treasure." She danced

around with the red and blue box like a klutzy ballerina.

Buddy giggled. "Do again."

She did a few more steps as she opened the tiny refrigerator. "Another find," she squealed in her most delighted voice, gesturing with a can of Cheese Whiz. She took the food to the card table, and squeezed the spread on the salty rounds. Buddy climbed back up on the chair to watch. She smiled at him. "Want me to teach you to yodel?"

He nodded, his chin almost touching his chest with each big nod. She gave him a simple lesson, wobbling her voice up and down like a roller coaster ride. When he tried, he sounded like pint-sized Tarzan. Laughing, she grabbed a glass with a picture of a giraffe on it, and poured him some milk to go with the crackers.

He took a big gulp, sloshing a white film above his upper lip. "I saw lion. Real one." Curling his fingers into claws, he demonstrated its fierce growl.

Jen growled back at him. To her surprise she was having a wonderful time. The only dark clouds were the unshakable sense that the strangler was nearby and her concern for Buddy's brother. While Buddy ate, she made a quick call to the hospital and learned that Jeffy was stabilized. "Your brother's fine," she said as she hung up.

"Course," Buddy said, dancing his last cracker in front of him like a toy dinosaur.

Jen took Lissa from the high chair to the couch, where she cuddled her and gave her the rest of her bottle. Buddy leapt from his chair in the kitchenette and ran, skidding in front of Jen, almost knocking a lamp off the table. "Easy, partner," she said.

He grabbed a sheet of Mickey Mouse stick-ons from the end table and handed them to her. She peeled off a couple, and placed them on his hands. He clapped in delight. "You, too," he demanded.

Laughing, she peeled off another. "Where shall I put it?"

He reached up and patted her cheek with chubby fingers. She pasted the sticker on the spot still warm from his baby soft touch. She blinked away the puzzling rush of moisture that pushed at the back of her eyes.

"I know secret." He twisted about like a wriggly puppy.

She cleared her throat. "Really? I love secrets. Tell me."

Buddy grabbed her arm and yanked on it. "I show you."

"Easy, sweetie. Let's not jostle Lissa." Jen struggled to her feet. Buddy grabbed her hand and dragged her to a closet door across from the bathroom. When she opened it, he disappeared behind the clothes. Jen parted them and shook her head; the little dickens was climbing up some rungs on the wall. He pointed to a covered crawl space in the ceiling. "Me go up there."

Balancing the baby on her hip, she grabbed Buddy off the makeshift ladder. "No, I don't think so, partner."

"Mommy put presents up there. Me see."

Jen shivered. "Not a good idea. How about a story?"

She grabbed his hand and headed for the couch. He broke away and ran to an overflowing metal chest full of toys and dug through it, sending items flying, apparently searching for his favorite book buried somewhere in the disorder. He grinned when he found it and brought it to her.

Huddled together over the dog-eared pages, Jen soon learned that Buddy was more interested in telling her about the pictures than hearing the actual story. He'd memorized the plot enough to spout an imaginative version that sent them both into a giggling fit.

Pounding on the door stilled their laughter. Buddy jumped off the couch and raced to the entry. "Sniffles!" he shouted with glee.

Jen stiffened. *It couldn't be Sniffles. Sniffles was dead.* Gripping the baby to her breast, she ran after Buddy, reaching him just before he grabbed the door knob. She quickly jammed the security bolt into the locked position. "Wait, honey, she whispered, then in a stronger voice she called, "Who is

it?"

Silence.

She called again. Still no answer.

Buddy jumped up and down. "Me open. Me open."

"Let me look out the peephole first, sweetie." Jen closed one eye and put the other to the pea-sized hole. Her heart thudded against her ribs. Whoever was out there, they stood out of sight. If it were York, he'd call to her and stand where she could see him.

Jen flinched as the pounding started again. The baby began to cry. She bounced Lissa on her hip, crooning, "Hush, hush." Still unnerved from the break in last night, she tried again to get a glimpse of the heavy fisted caller. This didn't feel right. If only she had her gun. But she'd expected to be with York and never dreamed—

"Open door," Buddy insisted, yanking on her slacks. He stood on his tiptoes and stretched upward, making a grunting sound.

She grabbed him around the waist and whirled him away from the door. "A bad man might be out there," she said, keeping her voice steady. She hated to scare Buddy, but she had to tell him something. "We need to call 911."

His face lit up. He spun around, and raced ahead of her, getting to the phone first. "Me dial." He began to jab numbers at random.

Jen shifted the baby to her other arm, and grabbed the receiver out of Buddy's hand. He scrunched up his pixie face. *Oh, no. Don't throw another tantrum.* "You can help! Watch me." She jammed the hang up button and redialed. The line rang. The door rattled.

Someone, please, hurry. She couldn't wait. She had to block the door. She thrust the phone into Buddy's hands. His eyes widened. *Let him be able to do this.* "Be a big boy. Tell the dispatcher we need help. Now!"

Quickly, Jen put the baby on the couch and blocked her from the edge with a pillow. She ran to the metal chest jammed full of toys and, using all her strength, shoved it forward and barricaded the door.

The door knob stilled. She stared at it, shivering at the dead silence.

Out in the corridor, she heard glass breaking. There weren't any windows nearby, but there was a fire box with a glass cover. An alarm began to ring. It scared the baby and the infant started to cry. Jen snatched her up in her arms and patted her back.

Buddy was on the line with someone. She heard him say "I dunno" twice. She grabbed the receiver, and hugging him and Lissa tightly, she gave the address, forcing herself to say the numbers clearly. The dispatcher told her to hold a moment, and stay on the line.

No time. She handed the phone back to Buddy. "Talk to the lady for me. I need to find something to protect us."

The top of the door splintered. Jen flinched, and let out a cry. The tip of an ax glistened through the slit. She saw a glimpse of a nylon-masked face.

Buddy's eyes widened. Sobbing, he screamed, "Bad man breaking in. Now!"

Aborting her search for a weapon, Jen grabbed the kids and ran to the closet. "Buddy, climb up there and wait for me!"

With the baby on her hip, she raced a few steps to the bathroom, briefly placed the baby in the sink on a towel and opened the window. She spied a bottle of baby oil on the counter and dribbled a little onto the floor, hoping if the intruder ran in here the oil would send him sliding into a wall. She heard a loud crack. She grabbed the screaming baby back into her arms, whirled around, carefully avoiding the oil, and ran back to the closet and closed the door. In the darkness, she grabbed an item of clothing off a hangar. It turned out to be a jacket. She slipped into it, buttoned it around Lissa like a baby carrier; the soft suede must have comforted the baby because she stopped crying.

Walls shook as the intruder broke through the front door and charged into the apartment, from the sound of it, chopping at everything in his path.

Praying harder than she'd ever prayed before, Jen scurried up the ladder, feeling her way, expecting that any moment the madman would chop through the closet door. When she pulled herself into the pitch black crawl space, she reached for Buddy and the three of them huddled together. She put her thumb into the baby's mouth to pacify and keep her quiet. While trying to calm her own trembling, Jen clung to Buddy whispering, "Stay quiet and don't be afraid. We're going to be okay." But she knew that only God and a huge miracle would save them.

* * * *

York's neck prickled as he sped the long block from the hospital to Jen. The telephone line shouldn't have stayed busy. A fire engine raced down the street in his direction, blasting a warning. He skidded to a stop in front of Shelly's apartment. Sirens blared as the fire engine and two police units swung in behind him. An alarm jangled from the building.

York rushed inside the lobby. There was no sign of smoke, yet people hurried out of the stairwell and exited the building.

A bent, baldheaded janitor raced up the stairs from the basement. "Pipes breaking below," he shouted. "Pounding upstairs, fire alarms going off—" The man glanced around. "Cops in the streets. What the hell's going on?"

York's heart thundered. He raced up the steps two at a time, squeezing past people on their way down. The second level looked deserted. He drew his .38 police special from his shoulder holster.

A door opened.

He crouched, ducked into an indentation in the corridor wall and pointed the gun. A blurry-eyed teenager with a gold ring in his nose peeked out, then shut the door again. A lock engaged. Whatever had been going on here, the kid must've thought he was involved. Another door opened a crack. He saw a flash of gray hair and a cane before it closed again.

These tenants knew something the rest of the building didn't. No time to pursue that. York started to run again.

Glass from the fire box crunched under his stride; an ax lay on the floor. A few steps away, the splintered door of Shelly's apartment stood open, the lock hacked clean off. *God, no!*

With gun at ready position, he eased inside the room. Overturned lamps and furniture reduced to kindling wood met his gaze. His heart thudded against his chest. Nothing moved. He fought the bile rising in his throat. "Jen!"

His own choked voice echoed back at him. He called again.

Silence.

A splintered bathroom door stood partly open. A window curtain fluttered in the breeze. Panic knotted his stomach. He took a step forward and slid into the counter, almost losing his balance. Someone had poured oil on the floor. Jen? He looked out the open window. Nothing moved on the fire escapes. The alley was deserted. He fought the ache in his throat.

The damage inside the apartment and the ax in the corridor suggested that the madman who did this dropped the weapon on his way out. If so, he didn't leave by the window. Did Jen? Or did he grab her and the kids and take them with him?

Behind York, he heard someone shout, "Police. Freeze." He recognized officer Burton's husky, two-pack-a-day voice. York called to him, identifying himself. With gun drawn, Burton entered the bathroom. "Oh, it *is* you. You sounded different. What's going down here?"

"A woman and two children are missing. The perp may have grabbed them."

York followed Burton into the studio's short hallway. Officer Montgomery joined them,

crouched, gun ready. York noticed another door painted the same color as the wall. It had been easy to overlook. He cautiously opened it. The space was jammed with clothes, and an upright vacuum cleaner. York parted the clothing and found a wall with ladder-like rungs nailed on it. He looked up just as the rectangular cover of an overhead crawl space slid open. He stepped back, crouched and trained his gun on the black cavity. "Throw your weapon down and—

"York, is that you?" Jen said with a tremor in her voice.

Relief flooded York's senses so rapidly that his knees almost buckled. He holstered his gun. "Burton. Montgomery," he called past the constriction in his throat. "The woman and children are safe."

Shelly's little boy appeared at the opening. York held out his arms. "Don't worry, son. I'll catch you." The child scooted to the rim and dropped down to him. "You did good, son." He winked at the boy and passed him on to Burton.

Jen eased herself to the edge of the opening, clutching the baby to her breast. "I had to put my thumb in Lissa's mouth. After that, she didn't make a peep. I was afraid..."

"Take a couple of deep breaths. We'll talk after I get you down." He reached up. "Give me the baby."

Jen kissed the baby's cheek, and then handed her down. York gently gave the baby to Montgomery. "Your turn, Jen," he said.

She eased herself through the opening, backside first, and with the toe of her shoe reached for the top rung. York closed his hands around her hips and gently lowered her to the floor. She turned, trembling. He drew her into his arms, telling himself it was only to still her tremors. She relaxed against his chest and looked up at him with those incredible green eyes of hers. Tears rolled down her face. One clung to a Mickey Mouse stick-on pasted on her cheek. Careful not to remove it, he wiped it dry with the pad of his thumb. Wearing a stick-on to please children was something his old fashioned girl would do. His heart twisted. Lingering emotions flooded to the surface. He slid his fingers into Jen's hair, crushed her lips with his, forgetting where he was, and what he was supposed to be doing. The sweet, metallic taste of her jolted him, devoured him, and propelled him against her softness.

Jen wrapped her arms around his neck. Her tongue moved hungrily against his, unleashing a fervor beyond any he could have imagined. He groaned low in his throat. The intensity of her passion was too great to be born merely from the remnants of terror.

When they gasped for breath, she pushed him back a little. "I'm glad to see you, too." In spite of the waver in her voice, her tone was soft with a highly erotic rumble to it.

He was vaguely aware of Montgomery and Burton watching, probably disapproving, but York was too glad to see Jen alive to care. "Are you sure you're okay?" he asked huskily.

Jen nodded. Then as though snapping out of a trance, her eyes widened and her face flushed. "But the children..." She twisted from his hold and rushed to Montgomery who cradled the baby. She gently took her from him and said, "Good baby...such a good baby. You kept so quiet, my little darling."

Jen looked so natural holding the baby, so nurturing and warm. York couldn't stop himself from drawing her and the baby into his arms.

The boy broke away from Burton and thrust himself against York's legs, reaching up, begging to join the hug. York bent and lifted the boy into his arms, and then brought Jen and the baby back into the fold.

Jen kissed the boy on his dimpled hand. "Meet Buddy. My little hero."

Officer Burton cleared his voice. "Thought you'd want to see this right away." He held up a two-foot length of fishing twine.

Jen let out a little cry and swayed. York tightened his hold on her.

"It was on the floor by the refrigerator," Burton said. "Doesn't make sense, but I think this guy is your copycat strangler."

York's stomach knotted. *It made too much sense.* "He left his calling card...wanted us to know it was him." Now York knew for sure. This break in wasn't a random thing. The psycho was after Jen. "If you find anything else, let me know."

Burton nodded, and turned away to brief one of the fingerprint guys who'd just arrived.

York returned his attention to Jen. "Did you see the intruder?"

"He wore a nylon stocking over his head." She bit her lip. "And, he was tall. The slit in the wood where I saw his face was at least six feet high."

"What about his voice?"

"Just grunts like a wild animal."

"Who opened the bathroom window?"

"Me. A long shot," Jen said softly. She squeezed Buddy's hand. "But that was nothing. This little guy was incredible. He climbed up into the darkness and sat up there alone without a peep until I joined him. Perhaps he was too scared to cry out. Even if he had, the ringing alarm, and the noise of the ax man breaking the furniture would've covered any sounds he made."

Tears rolled down her cheek. York let her go only long enough to gently brush them away with his fingers. Oddly, his tenderness seemed to give her strength. "I kept waiting for the killer to open the closet door, or chop it down. But he didn't."

York shook his head. "I don't know how you managed to climb into the crawl space in the dark, carrying a baby."

"God, angels and miracles. The killer would have found us if the police and fire sirens hadn't scared him off." She paused. "Thank goodness they got here so fast."

"You can thank Detective York for that," Burton said, as he passed by. "His call came in before yours so we were already on the way by the time you called."

Gratitude glowed in her eyes. "Thank you," she said softly. "I'm afraid I've never said any two words that were more heartfelt, or more inadequate."

York winked. "All part of the service." He hoped the tightness in his voice wasn't noticeable to the other cops. He'd already behaved unprofessionally with that kiss.

No one seemed to be paying any attention. Montgomery and another officer who'd been talking on a two-way radio left the apartment to search the rest of the building. Burton stayed.

York surveyed the chaos. "I'm taking Ms. Lyman to another location to get her complete statement," he told him.

Burton glanced around at the mess and nodded. York knew it would be a while before the technicians finished. He frowned. Shelly couldn't come back here tonight. Not only was it unlivable, but with her connections to the case, she needed a safe house.

He gave Jen and Buddy a little squeeze. "Who wants hot chocolate?"

Buddy wriggled in his arms and pointed at himself. "Me do."

York grinned at the little group. Jen's gaze met his with such forthrightness that he found it difficult to swallow. He didn't know where their relationship was headed, only that his feelings for her were much more complicated than he had first thought.

CHAPTER SIX

Fighting lingering tremors, Jen found it surreal to be sitting in the almost deserted hospital cafeteria sipping a steaming cup of coffee only a block away from the hacked-up apartment full of police. As York told Shelly about the break in, his words *madman and ax* elicited the terrifying image of the blade splintering the wood and a glimpse of a grotesque face flattened by the nylon. But overall the deep rumble of his voice had a faraway calming effect. It vaguely registered that he'd gone on and was now discussing where the young mother and her children would spend the night. Shaking off her own trauma, Jen touched Shelly's hand. "Shelly, you can stay at my place until yours is repaired."

York shook his head. "Thanks for the offer, Jen. But even you can't go to your apartment for a few days."

Jen didn't like the sound of that, but she could straighten that out after they got Shelly settled.

York took a gulp of coffee as if to fortify himself. "Don't worry, Shelly. I'll get you set up."

Looking dazed, Shelly clutched her baby tighter to her breast. "Get me set up? Where? I have no money."

"I'll take care of everything. I'm working on getting you into a temporary safe house. And I'll see that your place is repaired and furniture replaced."

Shelly looked down at her baby. When she raised her eyes again they glistened with moisture. "I have no family, and without your help, Detective Wylinski, I'd have to stay put, regardless of the danger, or condition of my place."

York looked down, as though embarrassed by the gratitude. To take the spotlight off him and ease his discomfort, Jen turned the focus to someone who needed it; her little hero. She forced a smile and gently tweaked Buddy's nose. "This brave little guy saved our lives by showing me the storage area above your closet."

Shelly blinked and her mouth dropped open. "I didn't know he knew about that place."

Buddy grinned, his lips ringed with whipped cream and chocolate. "Me an' Jeffy saw you put his birthday present up there."

"I should be mad at you guys for peeking," Shelly said, giving him a hug. "But I'm not."

Jen felt a tightening in her throat, suddenly taken off guard by her envy of the love between Shelly and her boys. The rush of emotion surprised her. While she planned to start a family someday, it was a vague plan, nothing she was in any hurry to pursue.

York sipped his coffee in silence, looking darkly masculine and in control. The arrangements he was making for Shelly were beyond duty. He really cared. Jen's heart swelled. From the moment she'd met York, she'd known she was in trouble. Now, after that bone-liquefying kiss, she knew he could break her heart. She couldn't be what he wanted—the perfect homemaker—the stay at home wife and mother. He had no right to ask that. But he wasn't asking. It was her own heart, dreaming of what-ifs and knowing with her career anything permanent was impossible.

Before Jen could get her confused feelings sorted out, Ted joined them with a cup of coffee in his hand. "Everything is setup," he said.

York introduced him to Shelly and Buddy. Ted shook hands with Buddy. "Hey, I heard about you. You're the big boy who saved the day."

Buddy beamed. Jen appreciated Ted's praise. Buddy would need all the accolades they could give him to get past this terrifying ordeal.

York withdrew a wad of cash from his wallet and handed it to Ted. "This ought to cover the motel and dinner."

Ted pushed the money away. "Loraine said they can stay in one of the empty apartments on the church property. She's making spaghetti for us." He smiled at Shelly. "We'll have you fixed up and

back to your own place in no time.”

Shelly blinked back a rush of tears. “You’re all so kind. I don’t know what to say.”

York gently touched Shelly’s shoulder. “We’re all in this together. We just want to get that guy and keep you safe.” He paused a moment before continuing. “Before Jeffy’s asthma attack, you were telling me about a guy named Joel. Have a last name?”

She shook her head, looking apologetic. “The director at the rehab center would know. Sniffles said they had to put in a revolving door just for Joel.”

“I’ll call the director,” Ted said. “I know him from my work at the center.”

“Good. Thanks, Ted.” York turned his attention back to Shelly. “As soon as they release Jeffy, Ted will take you to your temporary home.” York handed her a card. “If you need anything or think of anything to help us get this psycho, give me a call.”

Shelly nodded solemnly. “He’s the same guy who killed Sniffles, isn’t he?” she asked with a catch in her voice. “I want him locked away forever!”

“Don’t worry. We won’t stop until he is.” York’s tight words came out low like a sacred oath.

Jen was surprised at the fierceness in Shelly’s voice, and moved by York’s repeated demonstrations of emotion. This close call had brought out unexpected things about everyone involved, including herself and her feelings for York. If only he hadn’t kissed her. She moistened her lips, imagining she still tasted him there.

Ted scratched his head. “This ax attack doesn’t fit. Any ideas what we’re dealing with?”

York’s expression darkened. “Just hunches. Let’s see what officer Burton and the fingerprint team come up with.”

Ted smiled at Jen. “Should make one heck of a story,” he said.

York frowned and placed his arm on the back of Jen’s chair. His closeness made it difficult to concentrate. Maybe that was his intention.

“Perhaps tomorrow I’ll want to write it,” she said. “Right now all I can think about is how lucky we were.” Jen glanced at Buddy. “He’ll probably have nightmares from this ordeal for a while.”

York patted Buddy’s shoulder. “Kids bounce back pretty quickly. If I read this little guy right, he’s got the grit to get through this with no serious effects.”

Jen vowed to show equal courage. If they were lucky, Joel, the computer hacker, would give them a lead to the strangler.

* * * *

Friday night traffic was stop and go. City lights twinkled merrily around York in opposition to his dark mood as they headed for Jen’s apartment. He’d decided they would stop at her place only long enough for her to pack a bag. At a red light, York glanced over at her. She was staring straight ahead. “You okay?” he asked.

She rubbed her arms and shrank deeper into the seat. “Fine.” Her voice was soft, quivery. “Just bushed.”

“No wonder. You went through hell today, but you handled it like a pro. You didn’t freeze.” His throat tightened. If she’d been less quick acting...

Jen brushed her hair away from her face with trembling fingers. “Two little children depended on me.”

The tremors beneath the core strength of her words made him want to pull to the side of the road and take her in his arms. The memory of their fiery kiss and how she’d pressed that soft body firmly against his stopped him. He tightened his jaw, fighting the overpowering urge. Why couldn’t Jen really have been the old-fashioned woman he was looking for? Damn, what was he going to do about the chemistry between them? *Nothing, that’s what.* When the traffic started moving again, he

gripped the steering wheel tightly, his foot firmly on the accelerator.

"York," Jen said as though she had just come to some decision. "I want to take care of Sniffles's funeral. Shelly can't afford it, and I want him to be buried with dignity."

"What brought that on?"

She shrugged and looked down at her fingers. "It's been drifting around the edges of my mind since I found him dead." Jen's soft voice tugged at York's heart.

"You really liked him, didn't you?" he asked.

She nodded. "I can't explain it, but he touched me. Regardless of his problems, I think deep inside he had a good heart."

"I'll chip in, too. I owe him that much. He risked his life plenty of times to get information for me." York decided not to add that his snitch only did it for money. Let Jen keep her illusions about the guy.

"No way," she said.

Her emphatic tone told him that something about his offer angered her. "Why?"

"I just need to do this alone." She paused. "I've been wondering something. What was the deal with Thurlo Wade? Why were you driving that jailbird's van?"

He sucked in his breath. "Whoa! I don't believe this. You followed me?"

She lifted her chin, looking so damned spunky. "So what if I did?"

"Oh, I get it. You were checking me out."

Jen locked gazes with him, her eyes glinting bright sparks. "If you were a woman meeting a strange guy, what would you do?"

"Point taken. How long did you have me under surveillance?"

"Long enough to get your license number and find out where you live."

His neck prickled. Damn. He should have seen her. He couldn't afford to slip up like that.

"So what's the deal with Wade?" she asked.

"Although it's definitely none of your business, I don't mind telling you. I used to date Thurlo's sister. Rosie needed the van to take her grandmother to chemo treatments. Thurlo asked me to help her out for old times sake, but I paid the fees and got the van out of impound more for Grandma Wade than for either of them. The old woman has had a rough life."

"Oh," was all Jen said.

"What did you think? That I was doing something illegal?"

She shrugged. "I've been thinking about what happened at Shelly's place," Jen said, changing subjects on him so fast he could hardly keep up. "The strangler had never used an ax before. If he hadn't left the twine behind, I'd think the attacks were unrelated. So why the change?"

The strength in her voice amazed York and her grit touched something deep inside him. "The bastard's lost control," he said, hanging onto his own control by a thread.

"From what Sniffles told me, the strangler didn't follow a typical serial killer pattern from the start."

"Right. He was detached, like a paid killer. You got to him, made him hotheaded, and out of control people make mistakes. We're getting closer to profiling this guy." If York had to grab a suspect out of a hat, it would be Jen's ex-boyfriend, Brock. His excuse for the bullet wound didn't wash. York knew if he uncovered a motive, he'd have his man. It wasn't very professional, but he'd really like to pin something on that SOB. "What can you tell me about Brock?"

Her body stiffened. "Right in the middle of talking about the strangler, you ask about Lee? For the last time, he's not the one who broke into my place. So, forget him."

"If you believe that, you shouldn't mind giving me a rundown on him."

"Ask him your questions!" Her voice had a cold edge.

"Why do you keep defending him?"

"Why is that so hard for you to understand loyalty between friends?"

"It isn't. I value it. But misplaced loyalty is extremely dangerous."

She folded her arms and looked out the window.

"Look, forget it for now," he said, realizing he was only making her mad and accomplishing nothing. "Hungry?"

She laughed. "Starved. Something quick though. I'm exhausted."

He pulled into a drive-thru McDonald's behind a couple of cars. It wouldn't take long; the front car was leaving. The late model Mercury entered the curve and passed close by Jen's side of the car.

She stiffened and leaned forward. "Did you see that car that just left?"

"Yeah. Black Merc with two men sitting in the front seat. Why?"

She nodded. "The driver is Diego Zombolas, the mayor's pit bull. That's Lorenzo Monroe with him."

The fine hairs at the back of York's neck prickled. He knew Zombolas worked for the mayor. "Pit bull? What are you talking about?"

"He's a 'goes-for-the-throat' kind of guy, a killer type. The mayor calls him his public relations man, but everyone in the media knows he's really his bodyguard."

York frowned. Everyone in the department knew it, too, and he wasn't surprised that the news hounds had figured it out. "Who is this Monroe guy?"

"He blew the whistle on some toxic dumping and made things hot for the mayor. Since the mayor's enemies are Zombolas' enemies, Monroe is the last person I'd expect to see him with. I wouldn't be surprised if he turned up dead by morning."

Jen had a point. The men together didn't compute. Were they conspiring against the mayor? What else could it be? But thinking Monroe was in danger didn't make sense. "You think Zombolas would buy the whistle-blower a burger in a highly public Golden Arches, then knock him off?"

"Why not? They're in darkened car. If they hadn't passed under that light I wouldn't have seen them. Besides, nothing makes sense." Her voice trembled. "What if Zombolas is the puppet-master behind the strangler?"

York's heart thumped hard against his chest. The connection to the mayor, and Jen's use of the term puppet-master spelled trouble. "Where do you come up with this stuff?"

Her eyes flashed. "Don't play games with me. I'll bet Sniffles told you the same thing. If you don't want to act on this, fine. I'll do it myself." She turned her head away, giving the effect of slamming a door in his face.

How could someone who looked so sweet be so irritating? Did *The Globe* run training sessions in how to provoke, or was this something that came naturally to reporters? "Don't get huffy. I'll check those guys out. I'm interested in anyone who works for the mayor."

Jen whirled around in the seat and faced him. She touched his arm. "Why? What do you know?"

Her warm touch sent adrenaline racing through his veins. He hoped his face didn't give away his struggle to control his desire. "Only that we have too many pieces to this puzzle that don't fit."

Jen flattened her lips into a fine line which, to York's amazement, he found unbelievably sexy. Her voice hardened. "Don't hold out on me, York."

The air crackled with enough sexual tension to explode an atom. They were losing the battle of keeping each other at bay, and York didn't know what to do about it. He forced a light tone. "Don't get wild with your naturally suspicious nature."

"What about yours? You think Lee is the guy I shot at?"

"Convince me he's not."

"You don't want to be convinced. I already told you he wouldn't break into my apartment knowing I have a loaded gun."

"Maybe he's not as smart as you think." York wished he could tie Lee to the mayor's office

some way. Maybe by Monday morning he'd find a reason to haul his sorry butt in for questioning.

Jen frowned. "And maybe he's smarter than you give him credit for."

The car ahead of them left and York pulled up to the order window. "Couple of Big Macs, fries and two shakes," he told the girl in the order window. He turned to Jen. "Chocolate okay?"

"Vanilla," she muttered.

He shook his head. It figures.

* * * *

Fifteen minutes later, they sat across from each other at Jen's kitchen table. York watched as she stuck a plain French fry in her mouth. "How can you eat that without catsup?"

Her lowered dark lashes flicked upward, allowing her fantastic green eyes to look straight into his in a way that kicked his heartbeat into double time. "Easy," she said. "I like the taste of potato, not sauce."

"That's un-American."

She laughed. "That's what makes me American—my individualism."

"Touché. I guess we're alike that way. I won't fit into some easy slot, either, Jen."

She laughed without humor. "But you expect a woman to fit into some old-fashioned mode for you."

"Back to the interview, huh?"

She popped the last of her burger in her mouth, stood and headed for the door. She glanced over her shoulder. "What's wrong with that? You do nearly the same thing—only you call it interrogation."

When Jen started to open the door, he made a dash for her and grabbed her wrist. "What the hell are you doing?" he asked.

"Seeing you out, so I can get to bed."

"I told you. You can't stay here. Now go pack that bag. When the killer took an ax to the door, it changed things. All the security in the world won't keep him out now. You need a safe haven. Somewhere no one can find you."

She placed her hand over her heart as though to quiet it. "And where would that be?"

"My place."

* * * *

As the bells of a nearby church tower struck ten, Jen followed York into the already lighted foyer of his Beacon Hill home. Of course, a cop would have a timer on his lights to discourage burglars, she thought.

Watching the masterful symmetry of his back and shoulders sent an odd quiver to her stomach. Wasn't it enough that her lips carried a permanent brand from his possessive kiss? Her cheeks warmed remembering how she'd clung to him, pressing close. With all that heat between them, it was insane to come here.

An image of the grotesque masked madman as he chopped his way through the door flashed in her mind. She rubbed her arms. She didn't want to be alone. Yet, how could she accept the safety of York's home, his protection, when every time he touched her, desire flared to the surface?

Smells of virgin-cut cedar and fresh paint wafted around her. York flipped on more lights. "Oh, York," she murmured as the step-down living room came alive with the warmth of an old-fashioned Christmas card: the beige velvet rocking chair, the fireplace with its wide mantle, the white silk poinsettias with a burgundy bow.

He put down her suitcase and overnighter. "Like it?" His deep voice vibrated within her. He stripped off his tie and opened a couple buttons on his white shirt.

With her heart beating erratically, she managed to say, "Who wouldn't?"

The room's masculine burgundy and beige colors and the strong lines of the oversized leather furniture suited its virile owner. Jen gripped one of the high backed chairs and forced her gaze to keep moving, to look anywhere but at him. Newly varnished hardwood floors gleamed between scatterings of rope-weave throw rugs. Logs and paper waited to be ignited in the fireplace, the same way she waited in anticipation of his touch.

She forced a smile and gestured with her head. "Too bad it's August."

York grinned. "The space looked empty. Now I'm ready for that first cool day in September."

"And the poinsettias?"

"Silk. On sale, and I liked them. Did I break some decorating taboo?"

She laughed at his simple explanation, and how she'd thought it might reveal some mysterious secret in his childhood. Dory's psychology classes must've rubbed off on her. "Who cares? They look great."

Jen picked up one of the group photographs on the mantle. "Nice looking family."

"Big noses and bigger hearts," he said.

She made a face at him. "You nut, they don't have big noses." York came close and identified each person. The love in his voice was unmistakable. His breath stirred her hair like a warm breeze. She stepped away and cleared her voice. "You look like your dad." How lucky York was to share his father's life.

Did she look like her dad? Jen bit her lip—hating that she cared—hating that she'd never know. She circled the room and paused at a staircase spiraling upward toward bedrooms. She ran a quivering hand over the mahogany banister seeking reassurance from its firm, smooth coolness.

"This place is fabulous, York." She took a deep breath, damning the tremble in her voice. "I love the way you modernized without losing the old Boston charm of the place."

He laughed. "Did most of it myself." Pride deepened his voice. "All it takes is a little talent, and lots of money."

Lots of money echoed in her mind.

He picked up her suitcase and overnight bag and started up the stairs. "Come on. I'll show you to your room."

She stayed rooted to the spot, warning signals exploding in her head like illegal fireworks. None of this jibed. She knew the high selling prices of Beacon Hill homes. Then there was the expense of restoration. Even if York did most of the work himself, it would be costly. With the extensive renovation and top quality furniture, how could he handle it on a cop's salary? And what about getting Thurlo Wade's van out of hock, and footing the bill to repair Shelly's apartment and furniture? She closed her eyes briefly, remembering the wad of cash he carried, and his offer to help with Sniffles' funeral. He didn't come from a wealthy family. His dad was a cop too.

In spite of needing a safe place to stay, how could she trust a man on the take, even for a night? She swallowed to moisten her cottony throat. "York, I can't stay here."

"What?" The blue in his eyes deepened with intensity.

"I can't stay here," she repeated firmly.

York placed her suitcase and overnighter on the first landing, then came back down the stairs and gently grasped her shoulders, sending heat radiating through her. "Okay. What's going on, Jen?"

Every time she tried to form the words they got all tangled up with her memories of their kiss and how kind he'd been to Shelly and her boys. She tried to turn away from his searching gaze, but his hands held her firm. "I don't like the way things are adding up," she said, staring straight at the fine tangle of coal black chest hair exposed by the open neck of his shirt.

“Quit talking in riddles!”

The brusqueness in his voice made her raise her gaze to meet his. “How can a cop afford all this?”

She tried to gesture with her arm, but his grip held her immobile. Silence thundered between them. It occurred to her that a cop on the take could be a bigger story than the billboard piece. Her stomach knotted. She blinked in surprise as she realized she’d trade both stories for proof of his innocence. “Having trouble coming up with an answer, detective?”

His mouth tightened to an angry line. “You wish,” he growled. “Ever hear of the stock market? Been investing successfully since I was thirteen.” He glared down at her. “Are you trying to manufacture some sensationalism, reporter?”

She glanced around the room. “You must’ve been very successful.”

“Want to see my records, my income tax returns?” His eyes didn’t waver.

Oh, God. He was telling the truth. He was innocent. She exhaled slowly. Her face burned. If only the floor would open up and swallow her. “I’m sorry, York. But you asked me. I should have known better after what you did for Shelly.”

“You’re giving me too much credit,” he said gruffly. “Although I want to keep Shelly and her kids safe, she’s an important person in this case and keeping close tabs on her is part of the job.”

“Still, you’re really a nice guy, York Wylinski.”

He shook his head. “First you think I’m a crook, then a nice guy. Do you get a kick out of throwing me off balance?”

She did. But she’d never admit it. She put her hand to her mouth to stifle an inappropriate nervous chuckle. “Why didn’t you tell me to mind my own business?”

A muscle twitched in his jaw. “Why let something so trivial escalate into a big deal? Besides, it’s late, and we’re both too bushed to play games. Now, do you want to see that room, or not?”

She ran up the stairs ahead of him and paused at the top landing until he joined her. She grinned. “What took you so long?”

He shook his head. “It seems I was wrong. One of us isn’t too tired to play.”

She didn’t feel playful or energetic, but spurts of action usually got her out of uncomfortable situations. Besides, hurrying up the stairs kept her from running out the door—and from thinking about the bedroom she was racing to.

He led her to a gigantic suite. She glanced at the king-sized bed and quickly looked away, forcing her gaze to trail over the desk and built-in book shelves. Jen ran her hand over the dresser’s solid, dark, cherry wood. “Wow. Ashley Williamsberg furniture,” she said fighting the constriction in her throat. “I almost chose this same set for my bedroom, but it was too large to fit.”

York smiled. “At last. Something we have in common.”

She knew by his glances at the bed that another thing they had in common was their awareness of it only steps away.

To quiet a quiver and escape her dangerous observation, she glanced through the French doors to a balcony facing the street. If only she had wings—or a parachute.

He took a step toward her. She tried to step back, but her legs wouldn’t work. “The set is big,” he said in a voice too husky to be discussing furniture. “I had to convert the whole second floor into this suite to make mine fit.”

She picked up a decorative pillow, crushed it to her breast as a barrier, and pretended to admire the gold-striped comforter with its darker, richer gold skirt. “Gold your favorite color?”

He looked into her eyes and grinned. “Used to be, but now I rather favor green.”

A scent of spice lingered in the air. Men’s clothing hung in the partially open walk-in closet. *His room. His bed.* Her heart pounded out of control. “I can’t take your room.”

“House rules. The host decides where guests will sleep. You’ll be comfortable here. Private

bath.” He bent and pushed down on the bed. “Nice firm mattress.”

“But where will you be?”

A sardonic grin flicked across his lips. “Not here, if that’s what’s worrying you.”

Abruptly she got images of them sharing his bed, his arms around her, ardent kisses....followed by hot, skin-glistening passion. “That didn’t even enter my mind, detective.”

Amusement glinted in his eyes. “I doubt that, reporter.”

Jen went to the door and leaned on the handle. “You’ll want to be going now to wherever you plan to sleep.”

He came close and braced himself against the door with one hand, towering over her and trapping her in a fog of ...awareness...desire.

“Not yet.” His voice lowered to a sonorous rumble. “I thought we’d have some chocolate cookies and cocoa.”

He touched her shoulder; velvety heat rushed to her core. She could scarcely breathe. “That’s right. You like sweets.”

He grinned, deepening the sexy creases at the corners of his mouth. “You remembered. Good. The cookies are homemade,” he said, not giving her a chance to respond. “Mom sent them over.”

Get him out of this room, before you let him know how much you want him to stay. “Can’t pass up your mom’s baking,” she managed to get out. “Not after the raves you gave it.”

In the kitchen, York opened packaged chocolate, stirred some milk and vanilla into two mugs and shoved them into the microwave. He handed her a couple of antique-looking small plates and two burgundy paper napkins.

She placed them on the table and sat down. “Exquisite china.”

“From Grandma Winter’s set. When she died at the ripe old age of one hundred and one, we all got a few pieces.”

Jen traced the circle of gold around the rim. “And you got the dessert plates for the obvious reason.”

York chuckled. “Quick on the uptake, Ms. Lyman.”

The microwave bell dinged and York exchanged the mugs of chocolate for a basket of cookies and zapped them for thirty seconds.

She watched him drop dollops of whipped cream into the cocoa. “No calories in any of this, right?”

He passed the warm cookies to her. “After what you went through today, a few calories won’t hurt.”

Jen didn’t want to think about the man with the ax now. She sighed, and let the warm, rustic tones of the kitchen with its used-brick walls and brass pots close around her like an old friend.

York took a chair across from her. She couldn’t help notice his leanly muscled body and the agile way he moved. He was a gorgeous guy, but the best part about him was his generous heart.

He’d brought her to his home and given her a glimpse of his life. The family photographs on the mantle had struck a cord. She didn’t have anything like that in her place—just a treasured black and white studio photo of her mom when she was young. There was no one else. Her step dad had left her life quickly; he was only in it long enough to make her determined not to sell out her goals for any man.

As if it were a bracing shot of bourbon, she gulped some cocoa. The warmth, along with the cozy kitchen and York’s openness was unlocking some of her reserve. “You’re lucky to know your father and be a part of his life.”

York captured her gaze. “You don’t know yours?”

“Sperm donor.” She regretted the words the moment they escaped her lips.

York raked his coal black hair from his forehead. “You’re kidding?”

"I wish I were." Her heart pounded. She couldn't believe she'd allowed York's probing blue eyes and warm hospitality to seduce that closely held secret out of that dark, obscure place in her soul.

He stared at her for what seemed like an eternity. "You must feel special. Your mom wanted you badly enough to risk raising you alone."

"Mom was great." Jen took a small sip of the cocoa. Its heat couldn't warm her heart against the surge of bitterness she felt toward the sperm donor. She'd lived with the resentment too long. "What about the thoughtless guy who just deposited some sperm in a cup for a few bucks and never looked back, never considered the impact on the life of the child?"

"Maybe when he got a little older he did look back. He might be tortured every time he sees a kid who looks like him."

York's words rang with passion. Had he been a donor? Jen closed her eyes briefly. She wanted to ask, but couldn't bear it if a man who valued family so much would willingly leave the seed of a child...part of himself...with an uncertain future.

"Why don't you just ask me if I know from experience?" he asked. "I can see by the expression on your face that you want to."

"All right. Were you a donor?"

"No. Although when money got tight and my college pals were doing it, I thought about it. After I talked to Dad, I knew I couldn't live with the consequences, the eternal wondering. Was a kid born? If so, did he or she have a good life?"

"Your dad sounds like a wise man."

"He is." York stared at her. "How long have you been holding that secret inside?"

"A lifetime."

He touched her hand, sending ethereal shivers tracing over her skin. "It's nothing to be ashamed of. I would think a modern woman like you would chalk it up as one of the costs of progress."

She withdrew her hand. "Maybe I'm not as modern as you think." She sighed. *Nor as old-fashioned as he wants.*

He smiled. "Perhaps not. How about doing a feature about sperm donors and their offspring? Might be healing."

"I'm not sure I could handle it objectively." She was surprised when her muscles began to relax.

"Judging from what I've read so far, you like to shake people up. This would let people see a child's view of the issue. Kids need more understanding people in their corner."

"You like kids, don't you?"

"They're what it's all about."

She hadn't thought much about it until lately, but when she'd cared for Shelly's youngsters, she'd learned how deeply children could touch her heart. Jen bit her lip. "I hope Buddy gets over this."

"Don't worry about him. He's probably bragging about his terrifying experience to his older brother right now."

"That would be good. Being a hero might be just what he needs to give him a sense of importance in the family."

York closed his warm hand over hers, sending soothing currents of heat over her fingers. "How about you? You okay?"

"Fine." She didn't withdraw her hand for several seconds, and then only reluctantly. "But I keep thinking about it. That cop told you they found fishing line in Shelly's apartment. What if it was just a ploy? Sniffles said the strangler was a puppet with someone else pulling the strings."

"Right. A bigwig official."

Jen stirred the dregs of her chocolate. "Since Sniffles wanted Shelly to retrieve deleted files from the mayor's hard drive, he must've suspected him."

York stroked his jaw. "Sniffles...or as you prefer...Kenny had to be getting his information from

somewhere.”

Jen’s heart warmed at York’s attempt to appease her with Sniffles’ given name. “What if Sniffles knew the killer personally? And what if, since Sniffles and Shelly were close, Shelly knows the killer, too.” Jen felt her excitement building. “If we go with the premise that Sniffles knew the killer and that Shelly knows him, too, then all we have to do is ask her.”

“I intend to do that. But she may not be aware that she knows him. I’ll call Ted and ask him to try to trigger her memory. He’s good at getting into a person’s subconscious.”

“I’ll bet you are, too. Maybe you’re digging into mine right now. Are you?”

“You’d know if I was. I’m uncompromisingly direct.”

Jen nibbled on a cookie. “Me, too. So what do you make of all this, detective?”

He laughed, but his eyes darkened with worry. “The only thing I’m sure of is that one of your stories is involved.”

A chill slipped down her spine. “Puppet with someone pulling the strings,” she said softly. “Like a hit man.”

“Hit men don’t get emotionally involved. This guy today was crazed with rage.”

She knew that only too well. “What if he usually keeps his emotions hidden, and his boss thinks he’s just a hired killer, not a maniac who gets his kicks from the hits?”

“I don’t know. I might’ve doubted Sniffles’ claim of a bigwig’s involvement if I hadn’t heard the same thing from another source.”

Jen sat up straight. “What source?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jen tapped her fingers on the table. York's country-kitchen walls felt like they were closing in on her. He had dangled the word *source* before her to shift her reporter instincts into high gear. Well it worked, so why was he just sitting there, silently sipping his chocolate and looking smug. "Are you going to tell me who this source is or not?"

"Have a little patience. I'm working up to it. Ever been to Salem, Jen?"

She blinked. "What?"

He grinned. "You know, Salem. Little town about twenty-five miles northeast of here."

The word *source* still echoed in her brain while York, with his damned blue eyes twinkling brilliantly, veered off in another direction. This tough detective's lighter side might be charming under other circumstances, but at the moment it was setting her teeth on edge and making her want to pound his impressive chest. But she refused to give him the satisfaction. After all, two could play *his* game. "Oh, sure," she said with artificial lightheartedness. "It's a charming little community—in spite of its witch-burning history."

"We could take a ride up there tomorrow. It's a lovely coastal drive, and there's someone I want you to meet. And my folks live there."

She laughed. "While it might be enlightening to meet the folks who sired you, I can't leave the city in the middle of chasing a story. I have deadlines."

"Tomorrow's Saturday. Dammit, it's the weekend!"

"Nothing can get me out of town when I'm hot on a story."

York rubbed his jaw, slowly, provocatively, his eyes full of mischief. He arched a dark, devilish brow. "Except the story itself, right?"

This was undoubtedly a trick question, but as usual her curiosity intrigued her to continue playing the game. "What do you mean?"

"What if I told you the man next door to my folks plays golf with Coble? You know, the guy you said allegedly paid Monroe to dump the toxic dirt from his gas station site onto public land?"

The amusement dancing in York's eyes and his supreme enjoyment of the interplay going on between them, only made her more skeptical. "What's the neighbor's name?"

"Howard Hawthorne. I'll get Mom to invite him over for cocktails. A couple of drinks and the old guy just might share a few secrets with us."

"Are you making this up?"

"Come with me and find out," he said with a wink that both infuriated and seduced her. "No effort involved—your bag's already packed."

"You'd better not be pulling my leg, detective."

He grinned. "There you go again, painting those vivid pictures for me."

She raked her fingers through her hair. "What about the leads here? They could get cold by Monday. Besides, I'll bet you just want to dump me at your folks' place so you can come back and chase down the information by yourself."

"I know you have trust issues, Jen. But I'm not Lee Brock."

"What's my ex-boyfriend got to do with this?"

"Forget Brock for now. How about we do it this way—go into our offices and tie up loose ends for two or three hours, and if we're able to locate Joel, go see him, if not, we head for Salem?"

Jen studied him, searching for any signs of hidden motives. "*If*, big if," she said, "you're really on the level about this Hawthorne guy, I suppose it'll be worth my while to go with you."

That might work, she thought. She could learn first hand what was going on in the police investigation, and have a great bodyguard to boot. But she wasn't naive enough to believe his willingness to chase leads with her was only to protect her. He must believe that sooner or later

she'd remember something Sniffles had told her that would break this case wide open. She shuddered realizing that the killer was probably operating under the same assumption.

"Although you should be safe enough at work," York said, "we need to coordinate our schedules. If you have to go out, call me. I'll go with you."

"You're kidding?" She was used to coming and going at a moment's notice. News stories didn't wait.

"I'm not, Jen." Their gazes met, and electricity arched dangerously between them. "You know the strangler's after you now."

His ominous tone sent shivers down her spine. Struggling to keep the fear from showing on her face, she nodded and said, "I saw only a head covered with a stocking through the slit in the door. But the rage under that nylon—the grunts, the open mouth—left no doubt that he intended to kill me."

York ran his fingers lightly across her arm, sending tingles along her nerve endings, stoking a fire that she'd kept carefully banked since their kiss. How could she feel desire while gripped with fear?

"Based on what he did to Shelly's place," York said, "I'd say this guy has a short fuse. You shot at him last night and fouled his break in, and this afternoon at Shelly's you tried to keep him out again."

Jen pressed her lips tight, fighting a sense of helplessness. "What if this wasn't about me? What if he knew about Shelly and was after her? He couldn't have seen me clearly."

"In any event, Sniffles was the key." York's deep voice grew more intense. "Someone believes you're getting too close to the truth. Think, Jen. The catalyst had to be something Sniffles told you before he was killed."

She touched her forehead, racking her brain without success. "Maybe if I go over my notes again..."

"Whatever you learned, it was important enough to make the killer want to erase it from your mind—permanently."

"He didn't have to worry, unless..."

York's grip on Jen's arm tightened. "What?"

The strength of his fingers sinking into her flesh told her he was just as invested in chasing leads as she was. Maybe she could trust him after all. "It wasn't anything Sniffles said. It was Tim Tormont. He's the City Refuse Director. At my friend's promotion lunch, I got the idea he knew more about the toxic dumping than he was saying."

"I'll go with your reporter instincts on this one. Can you set up a meeting with this Tormont guy?"

"I'll see what I can do. But it may not be until Monday."

"Then I'll concentrate on Brock for now. Maybe after I haul him in, I'll have more answers."

She pulled away. "You can't still suspect Lee? He couldn't be that masked maniac."

"Everything about him fits, and he knew we were going out. He could have followed us to Shelly's place."

Jen closed her eyes, her nerves stretched taut between her loyalty for Lee and her fear that York might be right. How had she allowed herself to break the newspaper creed—don't get emotionally involved? But how could she not? When the man she was growing to trust and admire accused her friend of being a maniac killer, when a fellow reporter and a tenderhearted informant were murdered, and when her own life hung in the balance.

Exhausted from her race to escape the man with the ax, her need to protect Lee, and her spiraling, impossible attraction to York, she rose abruptly from the table, fighting the threat of tears. "Fine. Do your job, and I'll do mine. If I'm trekking off to Salem tomorrow afternoon with you, I need to be at my office by seven. Does that work for you, or shall I take a taxi?"

York's look hardened. "I'll make it work."

She knew he would. He'd already told her that whenever she was away from the office he wanted to be at her side. Comforted by the thought and sorry for her outburst, she gentled her tone. "Perhaps after a good night's sleep I'll remember more." *If I'm lucky, what the killer wants me to forget.*

* * * *

Their morning had been rushed, and to outward appearances, cool. But York had felt the heat simmering just beneath the surface. They'd skipped breakfast and had hardly spoken on the drive to work. But the air had crackled with tension and things they'd left unsaid. He would give a day's pay to know what she was thinking about as she stared out the passenger window. Throughout the ride he'd been too aware of the sun glinting on her hair and of every shift of her lovely body. He had kept his hands on the steering wheel, fighting that same overwhelming urge to take her in his arms. Even now, he was painfully aware of the throbbing sensations to the mere memory of their kiss. What did he want from her anyway? More than was wise. And now he had to deal with her damned ex.

Twenty minutes later at the Boston Police Department, York gestured with his thumb for Brock to enter the interrogation room. "Wait here," he growled. He needed a cup of coffee to ease his pounding head. He kicked the trash can on his way out. From the corner of his eye he saw Brock flinch. Good. The brawny ex was a little afraid of him. Did Jen defend Brock so staunchly because she wasn't over him? York massaged his temples. Her response to his kiss and the vibes she gave off when they were together told him otherwise. Could he trust his instincts, or was it just wishful thinking? It had been hell last night, knowing she was just steps down the hall in his bed—without him. But he had taken her to his place to protect her, not seduce her.

He entered the coffee room. Fellow officers stood clustered in a group, buzzing with excitement. Duty officer Cassidy looked down his gourd-like nose and watched York pour muddy coffee into his cup. Cassidy slapped at the newspaper with the back of his hairy fingers. "You're single. Is it you, York?"

York's gut tightened. "Is what me?" But instinctively he knew.

Cassidy shoved *The Globe* in York's face. "Read the article called Billboard Cop."

York scanned the article, assuming a facade of disinterest, but his mind exploded. He wanted Jen's story killed enough to wring her lovely neck.

"Whoever the mysterious moron is," Cassidy continued, "he's made it bad for all of us. Now everyone I meet will be wondering if I'm the cop who had to advertise for a woman." Cassidy had been divorced for two years and seemed surprised that women weren't beating a path to his bed.

"Well, are you?" York asked, his tone mocking.

"Don't even kid 'bout that," Cassidy said. "Tell ya one thing. I'll dig until I expose this SOB. Then I'll make his life a living hell."

York had to get out of there before his anger erupted. "Sorry, I don't have time to talk about your love life, but I'm in the middle of interrogating a suspect."

He returned to the interrogation room, wanting to pound Brock's pretty-boy face. He clicked on his tape recorder and slammed it down in front of him. "Where did you go after you left Jen's house?"

Brock slouched in his chair. "Back to the hotel, why?"

York leaned over him, eyes narrowed. "Make of your rental car?"

"I walked. Boston's the walking city, you know."

York banged his palm on the table. It gratified him when Brock flinched again. "Five miles?"

"I'm into fitness."

"I'll check with local rental car agencies."

Brock shrugged. "So I have a rental car. I wasn't driving it."

"Quit playing games. What kind of car?"

"Red Mustang. You got a thing for cars, detective?"

York held his gaze firm, clenching and unclenching his fists. "Can anyone vouch for you yesterday evening between 5:30 and 7:30?"

Brock smoothed his blond hair with steady fingers. "Who knows? I'm not a clock watcher."

York wanted to knock the smug look off his face. "Who dressed your wound?"

"Dr. Patrick Wagner."

"Know Kenny Duncan, A.K.A. Sniffles?"

"Who?"

"What about Shelly Drake?"

"Don't know her either. Look, I've had enough of this crap. I want a lawyer."

York wished he had enough to charge the smart mouth bastard. "You don't need one. Yet." He gestured with his head. "Get outta here."

He was getting nowhere. The last forty-eight hours had been a nightmare. He strode down the corridor to get some more coffee to brace himself before confronting Jen.

"Hold up," Ted called. "I located Lorenzo Geoffrey Monroe. He's downstairs."

"Good work. Bring him up. I want to talk to him."

"No can do, partner. He's on a slab in our morgue. Strangled. Garbage collectors found him this morning in a Dumpster over in old town."

York's gut clenched. Jen had called it right. Did that mean he was wrong about Brock? "Get Diego Zombolas, the mayor's bodyguard in here."

* * * *

York charged into Jen's office, looking like a thunder cloud. She gasped when he grabbed her by the arms, his fingers digging into her skin. He hauled her to her feet. "Let's go. Now."

She glared at him. "Something bugging you, detective?"

Dirk Hudson, who had just assigned her to cover the mayor's underground tunnel story, stood gawking at them with his mouth open.

Dory, appointed to take the pictures, yanked on the back of York's jacket. "Hey, get your hands off her."

York's hold tightened. His eyes flashed sapphire-blue sparks, startling Jen with their brilliance. "We need to talk now," he growled. "In private."

Dirk grabbed York's arm. "What's going on, Wylinski?"

With face flaming hot, Jen forced a calm tone. "It's okay. The detective missed his breakfast, and he's a bear until he gets something to eat." This had to be about the Billboard Cop story; it came out in Friday evening and Saturday morning editions. The scent of York's shaving lotion caught her in a tornado of swirling sandalwood. Fighting its impact, she glanced at the wall clock. "If we're through here, I'll take my lunch break and see what's on his mind."

York released one of her arms, but held tight to the other. He nodded a belated acknowledgment to Dirk and Dory. "Nice to see you again," he said with grim politeness.

Dory frowned. "Want me to go along, Jen? Looks like this cop is into police brutality."

York's probing gaze never left Jen's face. "Back off shutter bug. Jen's in danger."

Jen glanced down at his huge hand biting into her arm. "From who? You?"

The sparks in his eyes shouted yes, but he gentled his voice and said, "Don't be ridiculous."

"Will one of you tell me what's going on here?" Dirk asked.

"Your reporter takes too many risks."

The worried frown remained on Dirk's face, but he leaned against the door frame as though he no longer considered York to be a threat. "She knows. But she has ink in her blood and an unquenchable thirst for news."

York snorted. "If she isn't more careful, she could spill that blood."

"Convince her of that," Dirk said, "and I'll be in your debt."

"Hey, you two. I'm not a child who needs things explained to me. I saw that madman in action."

"Now you're seeing me in action," York muttered.

With a curt nod to Dory and Dirk, York hustled her out of the newspaper office and into his car.

"This better be good, detective," Jen said, feeling a little breathless. "You just interrupted an important meeting."

York slammed her door.

She rolled down the window and shouted, "The only immediate danger is from you, right?"

He strode in wide, angry strides around the vehicle. She inhaled to calm herself. She needed to take charge of this situation. Fast. She shifted and tried to relax into the soft leather seats. Then it struck her—this was one of his restored antique cars—a 1950 Thunderbird, a sleek set of wheels, primed and ready for paint. The perfect topic to defuse the situation. She fastened her retro-installed seat belt with a loud click. "Is this clunker street legal?" she asked as he slid behind the steering wheel.

He sent her a scalding glance. "The engine on her will outrun any car on the market today," he muttered, gunning the classic to life.

She bit her lip. "This temper tantrum is about the Billboard Cop story. Right?"

He sped from the parking lot, tires screeching against pavement. Jen braced herself by clinging to the dashboard. "Kinda rough on your tread, aren't you?" She gave a humorless laugh. "Bet you laid an ugly trail of rubber on that one."

Seconds passed as he wildly maneuvered in and out of traffic lanes. She slowly counted to ten. "Cut the silent treatment. Or take me back to my office!"

"Do you have any idea what you've done?" he asked in a ragged voice.

Jen moistened her lips. She couldn't change the repercussions from her story, and she'd be darned if she'd beg for his forgiveness. "When you put up the billboard you invited media interest. Don't blame me because you didn't consider the impact on your life when you got it."

His narrow-eyed glance pierced her heart, but she refused to wilt.

"You've made me the laughing stock of the department," he said.

The distress in his tone sent a surge of regret through her, but she fought it. "You don't get it. You did this to yourself." She folded her arms. "Besides, it could be worse. I didn't use your name."

"Every man in the department is determined to uncover the identity of the Billboard Cop to clear his own name. Picture it: a whole department after me. And it's all because of your damned story."

Jen winced. She reached out to touch his hand. His stern profile changed her mind. She dropped her hand back in her lap and locked her fingers so tightly they ached.

Her job was to write the story, and sometimes she hurt for those it touched. For York, she'd left out the who and compromised her work. It was a mistake, because neither of them was satisfied. "You're making too big a thing out of this. By tomorrow no one will even remember what I wrote."

"Wrong. Until the guys in the department ID the guilty party, everyone will be suspected of being the jerk-of-a-cop who had to advertise for a wife." He paused. "Don't you get what you've done? We're talking about my reputation."

Jen squirmed in her seat. The miserable part of her job always came from the backlash when

someone got hurt. She softened her voice. "Don't you know I'm on your side?"

"I'd hate to see what you'd do to those you're against."

"Come on. Be fair. I wrote about the way long duty hours rob cops of the time to court a woman. And when they do invest the time, how devastating it is to learn she's the wrong one. It's another way to show the public how much a police officer has to give up in the process of keeping them safe." She sent him a sidelong glance and decided to go for broke. "It points out how underpaid you guys are, for heavens sake."

He laid on his horn and passed a slow moving car in front of them. "Bull! All you've managed to do is make my life a living hell."

She smoothed the crease in her slacks. "York, I'm truly sorry if this causes you problems." Irrational guilt squeezed her heart. "I was just doing my job," she said, detesting the tired excuse.

His knuckles closed into menacing mounds of bone as they wrapped tighter around the steering wheel. Suddenly, he swung the car to the right, pulled over to the curb and came to a screeching halt. While she caught her breath, he sat looking straight ahead, his face a storm cloud of emotion. Jen swallowed to moisten her dry mouth. "Look," she said, trying for a tone of reasonableness. "I guess you feel really betrayed—"

He turned and faced her, probing her eyes with his intense gaze. "That's not it." To her surprise he took her hands in his and weighed them like one might do with an ounce of gold. "You exposed me not only to *The Globe's* circulation of readers and my department, but to myself, and I hated what I saw."

Her heart lurched at the pain in his voice. "What? That you're human?"

"That I forgot to be. Thinking I could order up a person to share my life like you order furniture or a new car."

"Sounds like you got in a hurry. Why?"

He withdrew his hands, and looked at her as though coming out of a trance. "My job is to protect you, not fuel another story."

"But I wasn't..."

His sharp look stopped her feeble protest. They stared at each other. The brilliant blue in his eyes cut through her like a shard of ice. She'd messed up, and the mistake would cost her the opportunity to really get to know this man.

He gunned the engine and swung back into the flow of traffic. "You want the big story, right?" His voice hardened. "If you want my cooperation, keep me out of print!"

"Done." She forced a small grin. "You're old news, anyway." She shifted in her seat, detesting the tremor in her voice. "Is there new information on the strangler?"

"No," he said, but something flickered in his eyes as though it wasn't quite the whole truth. Before she could call him on it, he ranted on, "But when I read the billboard story, I wanted to strangle you myself."

"Want to dwell on that, or hear about an interesting phone call I received this morning?"

He glanced at her, his expression still sullen. "Who from?" His flat tone didn't dampen her excitement.

"Joel Ferguson." She paused to see if she'd aroused York's interest. Seeing a new glint in his eyes, Jen continued. "When Joel left the halfway house, he rented a room on 10th street. Sniffles had been staying there with him for a couple of weeks."

York frowned. "That means Joel had access to Sniffles' things."

"And perhaps, innocently or purposely, destroyed evidence," she suggested.

York shook his head, and swore softly. "We tried to locate Sniffles' pad. Even Shelly didn't know where he'd moved to. What made Joel call you?"

"He got my name out of Sniffles' journal. Joel wants a \$1000 to recover the mayor's deleted data

from the hard drive.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That we don’t pay people to break the law. He said I’d better reconsider or he’ll alert the mayor that the media...and unspecified others...are interested in his old files. And then he’d offer his services to destroy the data for him. Permanently.”

“Damn. Gotta stop that. Sniffles was sure the hard drive contained important evidence.” York tried to change lanes and swore under his breath as a driver cut in. “Ted found Joel this morning, but he didn’t get anything out of him. Not even that Sniffles had been living at his place.”

“Not surprising,” Jen said. “Who would want cops crawling all over their place?” Jen sighed in relief; they’d finally moved past their differences over the billboard story. “Joel offered the journal to me for \$150.00 cash.”

“You accepted I hope?”

“Made an appointment to meet with him at 1:00 P.M. He’s the new computer guru at Goodwill’s main office. I told him I’d swing by there to see if the journal is worth the money he’s asking.”

“I’ll front the cash. We need that journal! It might be enough for a judge to issue a warrant to search the mayor’s hard drive.”

Her heart purred at the sense of unity and cooperation settling between them. “Wouldn’t it be great if the HD data identified the killer and the man behind him?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” A worried look crossed York’s face. “Things are coming together fast. Your toxic waste story and the strangler story collided this morning.”

Her pulse quickened. “What do you mean?”

“You called it right. Lorenzo Monroe didn’t live through the night. Strangled.”

Jen rubbed her arms, fighting a tremor. She’d known the alliance between Monroe and Zombolas didn’t make sense. “Then the strangler might be Zombolas.”

“Ted’s dragging him in. I hope the Greek’s answers are more forthright than Lee Brock’s.”

Her heart pounded. “Lee didn’t clear himself?”

“Dug himself in deeper. Maybe you can help. Tell me what you know about him.”

She wanted to support Lee, but when she tried to paint a picture of her ex-boyfriend, a man she’d known for two years, she realized she actually knew very little. “Never met any family or friends.” Jen had figured he avoided talking about his folks and childhood because the subjects brought him pain. Because of her own secret, she respected his desire to keep things hidden. “I’m not sure if his family is living. He’s a real private guy.”

“What attracted you to him?”

Jen gave a small sly smile. “Let’s see...” She tapped her fingernail against her teeth. “Hmmm. Well, he’s nice looking, devilishly charming and fun.”

At York’s expression of disgust, she laid it on even thicker. “Lee knew all the latest dance steps, and showered me with attention. You know, flowers, candy—the works. With him it was a continual party.”

York arched an eyebrow. “And you broke up with him?”

“Had to. He said it was my job or him. He felt it often interfered with the good times.”

“Did it?”

“You know a reporter’s life. When the story breaks, we go. We argued about it a lot. And believe it or not, two years of constant partying and arguing gets old.”

“So there was no real substance to your relationship?”

“I didn’t say that. I guess in some ways I thought of him as a father figure. He was protective, like you.”

York’s face darkened like she’d slapped him. “Like me?” he growled. “That man is nothing like

me.” York paused and took a breath as if to fortify himself. “Other than buying you a gun and teaching you to shoot, how exactly was he protective?”

“He enrolled me in a self-defense class, and he was always telling me to lock my doors. Things like that.”

“Well, he seemed to have your best interests at heart,” York said in a begrudging tone. “His preoccupation with guns and self-defense is interesting. Was he in the military?”

“He mentioned a stint in the marines and traveling a lot. Loves football and fishing.”

“What else?”

Her face burned. “That’s it.”

York shook his head. “I guess you two weren’t as tight as I thought.”

She lifted her chin. “Sounds like you get a perverse pleasure from that.”

An unreadable look masked York’s face. “Just trying to figure the guy out. A man who conceals family and friends generally has serious problems.”

“Or a rotten childhood.”

York’s expression hardened. “Always his little defender, aren’t you?”

She shrugged. Sticking up for Lee was getting harder. He hadn’t been open with her. Perhaps that was the real reason they had broken up; he hadn’t shown enough of himself to make her even want to work toward a compromise. He simply hadn’t held her interest.

York, on the other hand, in just a few short days, had shown many intriguing complexities to his personality, and the more she knew about him, the more she wanted to know. Yet, something told her it would take years to uncover the many aspects of this fascinating man. Her heart twisted, thinking that soon they would go their separate ways. They’d probably meet again professionally, but by then he’d have found his old-fashioned woman. Jen frowned. And she would... What? Still be alone?

York glanced at his watch, and drove toward Fan Pier with purpose. “If we’re going to make your appointment we’d better grab a quick bite.” He pulled into a parking space near the wharf. “Hot dogs on the pier okay?”

“Salt air and salty dogs. What could be better?”

They paused at an umbrella cart parked near the entrance to the pier and ordered a couple of fat, steaming, foot long frankfurters and iced Pepsi Colas from the vendor, then strolled out to watch the sail boats that dotted the horizon. Jen leaned against the rail and inhaled the sea air. York joined her, jostling her pleasantly as his elbow settled next to hers. She smiled. For this instant, the world seemed right.

She broke off a piece of the bun and tossed it to the gulls. One swooped and snatched the bread in mid air.

“Not hungry?” York glanced at her from beneath devilish, well-shaped eyebrows.

She fought her urge to trace the arch. “I always share with my feathered friends when I come here.” She tentatively bit into the steamy bun and discovered it was wrapped around the most juicy grilled wiener she’d ever tasted. “Hey, this is good.”

“Nothing but the best for you.”

At his teasing tone, she looked up and searched his deep-set eyes, bluer than sky or ocean, and more unfathomable.

She remembered their kiss. The fire, the instant connection. What would he do if she grabbed his head and drew his lips down to hers for a repeat performance? She tightened her hold on the icy, dewy cup, fighting the hot intensity of his gaze. Based on the passion shimmering there, he, too, battled the inferno raging between them.

They finished eating in silence, both hanging onto their control by a fraying thread, and then headed to Joel’s work place. He wasn’t there, yet his timecard indicated that he hadn’t punched out.

A coworker had seen him enter a black limo with two men, and speed away. He'd gotten a partial on the tags.

"I was supposed to pick up a journal from him," Jen said. "Do you know anything about it?"

The coworker shook his head. "Maybe Smithy does." He turned and shouted to another loading dock worker. "Did Joel leave a journal for this lady?"

"He said he was going to," Smithy said, "but the redheaded guy giving him a hard time grabbed it from him and tossed it into the limo."

Jen's heart pounded. "Redheaded guy?"

"Yeah, well-dressed, white collar type. He was one of the guys in the limo."

York took down the men's statements. When he finished, he turned to Jen. "No point in hanging around here."

Back in York's car Jen said, "As far as I know, the only redheaded man involved in all this is Tim Tormont, City Refuse Director."

"His toxic waste connection and involvement with the journal calls for a visit," York said, making a U turn and heading for the Public Works building.

On the way, he used his cellular to order an all-points bulletin for Joel and his limo companions, and he called his partner to get a report on Zombolas's interrogation.

The minute York hung up, Jen asked, "What did Zombolas say?"

"The Greek claimed the meeting with Monroe was the truckers own idea and that he offered to clam up for \$10,000. Zombolas further stated that since the guy was lying about everything, he told him to go to hell."

"So after they shared a burger they went their separate ways? Do you buy that?"

"He has a witness. The mayor."

Jen gave a humorless laugh. "But who'll vouch for the mayor?"

"Good question. Anyway, the mayor said Zombolas dropped off Monroe and came straight to the pub where the mayor was meeting with some local businessmen. The men verified the times the mayor and his assistant arrived and left."

"Even if those guys are honest, the mayor and Zombolas, together or separately could've hired a hit."

"No argument. But without proof, we had to let Zombolas go."

Jen shuddered. If he was the killer, he was free to kill again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

York turned into the Public Works parking structure, his expression tight. "I wish I could have grilled Zombolas before they cut him loose. Ted would have held him longer if he could."

Jen nodded. York didn't have to explain. She knew only too well that the police had to tread lightly when dealing with the mayor's office. She'd been strapped into a similar straightjacket herself a few times.

When they entered Tormont's office a few minutes later, his secretary Connie greeted York by name. Jen knew Connie had talked to the investigators after Gordon's murder, but for an instant she was thrown off guard to learn that York was one of them.

"I'm glad you're here, detective," Connie said, brushing back some of the blonde curls that framed her face. "I got this in the mail—no return address." She handed York a report and an attached note.

As York scanned it, Jen moved closer to take a peek and caught a whiff of his Sandalwood aftershave. He looked down at her, and for an instant their gazes locked. She fought the urge to step back from drowning in their blue depth, their probing intensity.

"The note says this report has a bearing on Gordon's murder," he said. He glanced at Connie. "Did you read it?"

"Twice," Connie said with a Bostonian twang in her voice. "It covers a service station property. But I don't know how the report applies to what happened to Gordon."

Jen thought she did. And maybe who sent it.

York flipped through the report. "Looks like someone wanted to bring things to light without getting involved. But why send it to you?"

"I wondered that myself."

"May I take it with me?" he asked. "I'd like to go over it carefully."

Connie nodded. "Is there something else I can help you with, detective?"

"I need to talk to your boss."

"I'll try to contact Mr. Tormont for you. But he may not answer his pager." Connie glanced at her watch. "Unless he missed his flight, he's on a plane heading for a refuse conference in Atlantic City."

"Does Tormont know Joel Ferguson?" York asked.

His hand rested lightly on Jen's back. Too aware of how right it felt there, she wondered, even as it curled around her heart, if his touch was meant to keep her silent.

"I don't recognize the name," Connie said, glancing through her journal of incoming calls. "No. No Ferguson called here, at least not in the last two months."

"What about Sniffles, A.K.A. Kenny Duncan?" York's voice took on an edge.

Connie shook her head.

"How about Lorenzo Monroe?" Jen asked.

"Don't even have to look it up. Lorenzo is an easy name to remember. Called here Monday. Really stirred Tim up. Tim shouted into the phone for several minutes; then like a bull seeing red, charged from the office."

The pressure of York's touch on Jen's back intensified. "Did you hear any of the conversation?" he asked.

"Something about repercussions and toxic waste." Connie paused and bit her lip. "That reminds me. That last night before Gordon was murdered, we went out to dinner at Ye Olde Union Oyster House. During dessert he got a call on his cellular. He mentioned toxic waste, and when he hung up he said we'd have to cut the evening short. That he had to meet a guy on a hot story."

The pupils in York's eyes contracted. "Excuse me, ladies. I need to make a few calls." He turned

and exited to the outside corridor.

Connie came from behind her desk, looking pale. "What's going on, Jen?"

Jen didn't dare tell Connie anything. Tormont could call. Connie wouldn't purposely tip him off, but Jen couldn't chance a slip of the tongue. "All I can tell you is that York has some strong suspects." She patted Connie's hand. "We're making headway."

"York? You and the detective are on a first name basis, I see. You guys kinda like each other, don't you?"

Jen lowered her eyes.

"Don't even try to deny it," Connie said. "A person'd have to be deaf, blind, and stupid not to feel the vibes coming from you two."

Jen hadn't heard York slip back into the office, and she jumped when he spoke. "We'd better get going." His husky tone vibrated through her.

Connie covered her mouth with her hand. Jen's face flamed. How much had York heard?

As they left Tormont's office, Jen worked to downgrade her embarrassment by concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. It wasn't until they were back in the car that she'd gathered her thoughts enough to speak. "Where to now?"

York faced her and took both of her hands in his. "I was hoping you could tell me. Brock gave his PD tail the slip."

"What does Lee have to do with all this?"

"Maybe nothing, but I'd like to keep tabs on him. Any idea where he hangs out?"

"Gun shows and the shooting range at Grover's Gun Club."

They tried the club, but he wasn't there. And hadn't been there.

"We're batting zero," York said. "I'm going back to the department. I'll drop you off at your office. Finish up whatever you need to do there. I'll be back at 5:00 and we'll head for Salem."

She blinked in surprise. "The trip's still on after what I wrote?"

"Why not? Like you said, it's old news. Past history."

Jen's stomach fluttered, and then knotted. "How can we leave with so many things hanging?"

"This isn't a big trek, Jen. If we need to get back it'll take us less than an hour. Besides, maybe Hawthorne has the info we need to fill in the gaps."

He squeezed her hand. "We can discuss this more on the way to my folks' place."

His folks' place. Why did the idea of meeting them suddenly make her palms sweat? "Why don't we put a rain check on this weekend? We're onto something here, and we should stick with it."

"I already set it up for you to talk to my neighbor about the mayor and Coble."

Darn, York. He knew that dangling the mayor's secrets in her face would make her cave. Yet, how could she forget the rising tide of intrigue here in Boston? But what if York's neighbor had the missing nugget of information to cut through the snarl of facts, pinpoint the most likely players, and make everything fall into place? She had to go.

* * * *

Jen had barely returned to her office when Dory's head popped into the doorway. "Did you set that cop straight?" she asked. She handed Jen a Styrofoam cup of tea, then perched on the edge of the desk, and swung her dangling leg.

"He had a legitimate gripe, Dory." Good God, now she was defending two men, but why did she feel the need to defend a man like York who certainly could take care of himself? Maybe it was guilt. "The billboard story gave him big problems at work."

"Poor baby. I hope you told him he brought it on himself."

Jen sighed. "Yeah. I did. But I don't feel good about it."

Dory shook her head. "You're falling for him, aren't you?"

Jen got up and went to the window. She stared out, but saw nothing but his face. "I could. But don't worry, I'm not willing to risk my heart on someone who couldn't love me." Her pulse quickened. But what was she going to do with her feelings for him?

"Good." Dory blew out a puff of air in disgust. "Him and his old-fashioned woman fetish. You're too smart to be seriously interested in someone with such inflexible ideas."

Jen wished it were true. At the moment, she didn't feel nearly smart enough.

Dory took a sip of tea. "What brought you into the office today?"

"What else? The strangler story. After he broke in on me twice and killed my source, I can't think about anything else." She paused, trying to tamp down her surge of fear. "The unnerving thing is that the strangler and toxic waste stories are becoming more and more entangled. And someone wants me dead!"

Dory gave her a little squeeze. "Maybe you should back away from this. Chasing a story is one thing, but..."

The phone rang.

"Better take this," Jen said, picking up the lighted line. She mouthed, *don't worry*.

Dory paused, biting her lip and looking very worried. When Jen made a shooing gesture, she disappeared out the door.

Jen stiffened at the sound of Lee Brock's voice. She took a deep breath and forced a teasing tone. "Tried to call you several times like I promised, but you're a hard man to reach. Where are you?"

"With friends. The hotel was getting expensive." He chuckled. "And since you didn't invite me to stay with you—"

That was the last thing she wanted, and he knew it. She grabbed a pen. "What's the address and phone number?"

"Meet me at Jimmy Diamond's bar after work, around 5:00 P.M." He paused. "Remember the first time I took you to JD's? It was St. Patrick's Day and you wore that shimmering green dress that clung in all the right places."

She groaned internally. "Look, Lee—"

"My friend's out of town. He has one of those pricy beach houses in a hidden cove. You'd love it. We can go to his place after, if you like." His voice deepened. "And be alone. Just like old times."

When newspapers are written in invisible ink! She closed her eyes briefly. Her heart pounded. She hated to betray a friend. But setting Lee up so York could put a tail on him again might be the only way to clear the guy. Once Lee was cleared, she would apologize. "I'll meet you for a drink, but that's all."

* * * *

It wasn't quite 5:00 P.M. when they approached Jimmy Diamond's bar. They weren't late, but York seemed to be in a big rush. With his tight grip on her elbow, Jen struggled to match his long, swift stride as they crossed the parking lot. York's alert gaze swept the area.

Jen's stomach knotted. "What's the hurry?" she asked a little breathlessly.

"Can't keep Brock waiting." The edge to York's voice added to her growing uneasiness.

The sun lingered low in the sky behind them. For an instant a shadow appeared in the alley next to the bar, then disappeared behind a Dumpster. A shiver slid down Jen's spine. "Is your undercover man here?"

"Across the street, green Merc." York narrowed his eyes and looked down at her. "Why, what did you see?"

Jen scanned the area around the Dumpster for further movement, seeing only cardboard boxes and the dark inward jut of a doorway. "Nothing, I guess. Just a shadow."

He pulled her along faster as though he wasn't sure it was nothing.

They entered the bar into a world of dim coolness, leaving the August heat and early evening brightness outside.

York's hand tightened on her arm as he cased the place. She fanned the stale, alcohol and smoke-filled air. The after-work crowd of giggly secretaries and overweight business men, still in their workday clothes, sat in clusters around tiny, circular tables, flirting outrageously with one another. Bursts of rowdy laughter came from a table of college-age guys.

From a jukebox in the corner, blared a song about a lost love, its words drowned in the buzz of partying. She scanned the sea of dark-haired men. Not a sunny blond among them.

"Looks like he stood you up." The relief in York's voice didn't make sense. The sole reason they were here was for his undercover man to pick up Lee's trail.

A sense of disloyalty washed over her again. "Lee wouldn't do that. I'll ask around."

Jen described the tall, muscular blond to the barmaids. None had seen him. "Wouldn't forget a guy who looked like that," one said.

York shook his head and scoffed. Jen headed for the corner of the bar. York followed close on her heels, mumbling something about this being a complete waste of time.

When she elbowed her way between two guys on leather stools, she heard York's low growl behind her. "Not a good idea," he said.

She ignored him and smiled at the hawk-nosed bartender. The harried barman slid a straight shot onto a tray full of drinks. "Pick up, Vic," he called to the waitress.

"Have you seen a blond guy in here?" Jen asked. "About six feet tall, good looking?"

The bartender opened two bottles of beer. He sloshed jiggers of gin into a couple of glasses and added mix. "Too busy to notice."

The guys Jen had squeezed between swiveled on their stools and boxed her in. "Me and my buddy were born blond," the one in the baseball cap slurred. "Yeah," the other man said. "So how about a threesome, honey?"

Jen sensed a swift movement behind her and before she could tell the men to get lost, York stepped close and put his hand on her shoulder. His eyes narrowed and darkened dangerously. "Watch it, guys. This is my wife."

They looked him up and down, then released her and turned back to their beers.

Caught off guard by York's comment and by how much she liked being called his wife, she muttered, "I can take care of myself."

"This was quicker." York glanced at his watch. "With the Friday night traffic, it'll take us thirty minutes to an hour to drive to Salem. How long do you want to give Brock to show up?"

She started to say fifteen minutes when a barmaid shouted, "Is there a Jen Lyman in here?"

Jen waved her hand and hurried to the end of the bar to take the call.

With a sisterly wink the waitress said, "Lucky girl. The guy on the line has a 'to-die-for' deep voice."

Jen swallowed. *To-die-for* echoed in her head. Forcing a smile, she took the receiver from the woman's outstretched hand. "I'll tell him you said so. It'll make his day." She took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. "Hi. This is Jen." She covered an ear with her fingers to close out some of the bar noise.

"Sorry about the delay," Lee said, "but this damned rental car broke down. Might take a while to get things squared away."

Jen exhaled in relief. She hadn't realized until now how much she'd dreaded their get-together. "I can't wait, Lee. I'm on my way out of town."

"Where to?"

Damn. Why did he have to ask? Why did he have to be a murder suspect? "Give me your phone number and I'll call you for lunch the first of next week."

The line went silent for several heartbeats. "I'd better call you. Something's come up. I might be moving again."

She laughed nervously. "What's all the mystery, Lee?"

"I could ask you the same."

He sounded hurt. Was it an act? *Darn.* York's suspicions had rubbed off on her. She didn't want to doubt Lee. She closed her eyes briefly. "Let's talk about it on Monday. Gotta go." Jen slammed the receiver back in the cradle, wishing she didn't feel like such a traitor.

York joined her with a frown on his face. "I knew it. He's not coming, is he?"

"Car trouble."

"Likely story. He didn't show because somehow he knew I was here."

"You and your overblown suspicions!" Then the argument went out of her and she hurried on, no longer sure his doubts didn't have merit. "I didn't think you'd want to wait."

York gave her a long, searching look, then grabbed her arm. "Let's get out of here."

He led her to the car in stony silence. He tromped harder than necessary on the accelerator, and the T-bird roared to life. She watched his determined profile as they headed out of town.

After they entered the highway's smooth flowing traffic, he glanced in the rear view mirror. "Damn," he said. "Instead of us keeping tabs on Brock, he may have reversed the tables."

Jen stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"He could've been nearby watching. Might even be tailing us."

She fought a sinking feeling, remembering the darting shadow in the bar's parking lot. "Why would Lee do that?"

"If he's the strangler, he has unfinished business with you." Abruptly, York twisted the steering wheel and headed down the first off-ramp. He glanced in the rearview mirror.

Jen turned and looked out the rear window. "I don't see anyone." She sighed and righted herself in the seat. "I don't get it. With three other suspects, you still have Lee at the top of your list."

"Why not? He acts guilty—always disappearing, hiding from the police, and now a no-show. For a clincher, he refuses to give you his address or phone number."

"Lee couldn't be the maniac with the ax," she said. "He's not a violent man." A tendon along York's jaw line pulsed angrily as she made an effort to defend Lee again. But was she trying to convince him, or herself? "The whole time we were together," she said in desperation, "he never even raised his voice to me."

York winced, probably remembering all the times he'd raised his voice since meeting her. "The guy must be a saint," he growled.

"Not quite. But he is a laid-back guy. When I broke up with him he just shrugged and said it was for the best, that he'd been expecting it."

York glanced at her and when he spoke again his voice had changed, deepened. "I can't imagine a guy giving up on you that easily."

"He knows my career will always come first."

"Seeing you together, I can't imagine how you two ever got together in the first place. But if he loved you, he wouldn't begrudge you your career." York raked his fingers through his hair, looking stunned that he'd said that.

Jen laughed. "Wow. This from a man who insists upon a stay-at-home wife?"

He shrugged. "Maybe I've changed some of my ideas. I can't explain it. But tell me why the hell does that guy suddenly want back in your life?"

"He was never completely out of it. Once a friend, always a friend."

York tightened his grip on the steering wheel. "I admire your loyalty, but your blind allegiance to Brock is pure crap. You deserve someone who'll return your fidelity not some SOB with hidden motives. If you ask me, Brock wants more than just being friends now."

"Well, I didn't ask you." She folded her arms and stared out the window, hating that she agreed with everything York had said. But that didn't mean Lee was a killer.

* * * *

After a few minutes, York grabbed a Louie Armstrong jazz tape and shoved it into the tape deck. He turned the music low. It could have been blaring and it wouldn't have mattered. All he heard were the tumultuous thoughts slamming against the walls of his skull. At the bar Jen had banged down the phone. Could she still care for Brock without knowing it? What secrets lurked in her mind about that man?

Before returning to the highway, York checked the rearview mirror and satisfied himself that no one was tailing them.

Abruptly Jen turned and faced him. Feeling her gaze burning his profile, he glanced at her. Fire glinted in her eyes. "We have to talk about the other suspects, York," she said.

"At last, you got your second wind," he said, hoping to veer the conversation in another direction. He didn't have enough answers to effectively discuss the people involved in this tangled mess, but it wouldn't hurt to go over the suspects. Even if the discussion didn't come up with anything useful, tossing around names was better than her icy silence.

She ignored his delaying tactic and held her focus. "We saw Zombolas and Lorenzo together, and then Lorenzo showed up dead."

"The mayor gave Zombolas an alibi," York reminded her. "Unless you can prove the mayor lied..."

She frowned. "What about Tim Tormont? He argued with both Joel and Lorenzo."

York heard the mounting frustration in her voice and tried for a calming tone. "It's something to keep in mind, but we don't know that the redheaded man who argued with Joel was Tormont. Or if the argument had anything to do with his disappearance."

"Shouldn't you be questioning people, finding the connections? Isn't that what cops are supposed to do?"

York rubbed the back of his neck. "What the devil do you think I'm doing? That's what this whole damned weekend in Salem is for—to talk to Howard Hawthorne about Coble and get a solid lead."

"So you say. But maybe you just want to get me out of Boston while Ted follows up on your spoon-fed clues."

"Ted and I are a team. But this is my lead." York darted a glance at Jen. "Thought you'd want to be in on it."

* * * *

Jen sighed. The sincerity in York's tone was undeniable; warmth crept up her cheeks. Why was she acting so bitchy when he was only trying to do his job and keep her safe?

The answer came in a painful rush. Fear. Fear Lee could be a murderer, fear the person who wanted her dead would succeed, and fear she was falling for a man who wanted an old-fashioned woman so badly he put an ad on a billboard to find her.

Jen felt the blood drain from her cheeks. She swallowed, trying to face the most unsettling fear of all. That the man she wanted would leave her, discard her the way her sperm-donor father and

stepfather had, leaving her feeling more disconnected and fragmentary. Even Lee had mentally left her months before she ended it. *Stop it!* she told herself. She refused to give in to the fears, insecurities and useless self pity.

York reached over and gently touched her hand as if he sensed her turmoil. "We're going to get this guy, and you're going to get your story. But I have to keep you safe."

They passed a road sign, and Jen noticed for the first time that they were already on the North Shore Highway.

"I know you won't believe this, but getting the story in the strangler case has never been my main goal." Why had it taken her so long to realize that? "I want to expose Gordon's murderer, see that he's locked away forever."

"It won't help to get yourself killed."

Jen's heart quickened, sensing there was more than just a cop's concern in his tone. She touched her lips, branded forever by his kiss. Why was she torturing herself? Being with him was an impossible dream. After tucking away her feelings in that special place in her heart where love and gratitude flowed deep, she quipped, "Thanks for caring."

York sent her a masked look.

She cleared her throat. "When the strangler killed Lorenzo it proved the connection to the landfill story."

York glanced in the rearview mirror. "But did the information come from the mayor's office or Tormont's office? That's the question."

Their tires screeched on an S-curve.

Jen gripped the seat. "Do you have a death wish? Or is someone really tailing us?"

"A gray car's been following us. Seems to be hanging back. Don't worry, we'll lose him after the next curve."

After the curve, York swung abruptly onto a gravel fire road. With the overgrowth of foliage, Jen wouldn't have known it was there. Bushes scraped the sides of York's Thunderbird as they bumped along the ruts and rises, leaving the highway behind. He slowed. She glanced back, and sighed in relief. The forest had swallowed them.

York stopped the car in a small clearing. "We'll stay put here. Our tail won't realize he's lost us."

"Won't he just wait ahead?"

"It's almost dark. The odds of him picking up on us are slight."

"Can I count on that?"

York held her gaze. "This is our best option at the moment." He removed the keys from the ignition. "Since we have some time to kill, how about stretching our legs?"

He came around the car and opened her door. The smell of the forest, dampened from an earlier coastal shower, mingled with the salty air.

"There's a sea cliff just around that bend," he said in a deep voice. "It's incredible at sunset."

She accepted his hand, and his warm, strong fingers closed around hers, making her feel safe, yet oddly off balance.

As they walked along the winding path, holding hands like lovers, Jen wondered what it would be like to be loved by this man. Would he be gentle? Or would the intensity of their passion make him go a little wild?

York pointed at the stark marbled cliff highlighted by a tiger-orange sky. Her breath caught at the naked beauty. They moved closer to the edge and looked down, still clutching hands. Below, the tumultuous dark sea thundered in turmoil, angry, foamy. Wind swirled around Jen, whipping her slacks against her legs. She shivered and tried to brush back wisps of hair that refused to be tamed.

"Cold?" York drew her into his body heat. Grateful for the warm closeness, she looked up at him, suddenly longing for his kiss. He gazed into her eyes with indisputable desire, and she waited

for him to lower his head, for their lips to meet. Instead, he said in a thick voice, “We’d better get back to the car.”

She blinked. “What?” The depth of her disappointment stunned her.

“We need to get out of here before it’s totally dark.”

Minutes ago he’d said they had time to kill. Now he was in a big rush. *Damn the mixed signals*, she thought, remembering the way he’d held her, the huskiness in his voice, the way he’d kissed her that first time. Obviously, in spite of the chemistry sizzling between them, he didn’t want to get involved. From the beginning, he’d let her know the kind of woman he wanted, and made it clear she wasn’t it.

York kept his arm around her as they walked, sheltering her from the wind, torturing her with his nearness. “I hope you’re hungry,” he said. “Knowing Mom, she’ll have everything ready.”

He gallantly assisted Jen into the car, but this time he avoided looking into her eyes.

Fighting the knots forming in her stomach, she tried for a light tone. “Don’t worry, I’ll eat all my veggies so I can have one of your mom’s famous desserts.”

* * * *

York forced a laugh, pretending to buy into her smoke screen for real feelings. He’d hurt her, but dammit, he was fighting for his own salvation. God, when she had looked up at him, he knew he could search the world over and never find two such fathomless pale-green eyes. He’d found himself hypnotized by the enigmatic lights dancing there, teasing, promising a path to her soul—and to his destruction. He had no choice, but to leave fast.

He rounded the car and slid behind the wheel; his face felt like etched stone. He gunned the car to life and headed for the main road. Gravel pinged against the undercarriage, emphasizing the silence that had settled between them. He had wanted to kiss Jen so damned bad his throat ached and his body throbbed from wanting her. What would she have done if he’d swept her from her feet, carried her to one of the caves below, and made love to her to the sound of crashing waves?

York tightened his grip on the steering wheel. How could he even contemplate making love to a woman who’d made it clear her job came first? He wanted an old-fashioned woman, willing to stay home and raise his kids. *Damn*. As much as he wanted Jen, he couldn’t risk having a relationship with a career woman.

He switched on the lights as darkness closed around them. Jen sat silently, looking confused like an angel with clipped wings. He knew she’d sensed he wanted to kiss her, and he regretted his part in her bewilderment.

She’d been through too much already. He felt a curious pride swell in his heart. Both times she confronted the killer she’d kept her wits about her. He admired her intelligence and coolness under attack.

When he’d thought the killer had grabbed her, he realized he cared for her, a much too personal caring; she was no longer just the woman it was his job to protect. Kissing her had broken every rule of professionalism. He wanted to believe it was the relief of finding her alive. But it wasn’t that kind of kiss. He could still taste the sweetness, feel the moist heat, the smoothness of her delicate teeth as he probed the depths of her mouth. Blood rushed to his groin. He rolled down the window, needing the blast of air on his face.

Damn. It wasn’t just *the halo effect* of his first impression of her and the chemistry blazing between them, because the feeling hadn’t passed. When he realized he wanted his parents to meet her, he knew he was in trouble.

* * * *

When their headlights picked up the Salem city limits sign, Jen couldn't stand the silence pressing in on her a second longer. "At last," she said, "the setting of witches, whalers and white caps."

York laughed and countered, "The city's thirty-eight thousand or so residents are every day working people, but mention Salem and immediately folks think of the witch hysteria of 1695. It's a hard thing to live down, especially when the merchants play it up to attract tourists."

"Right, it's all about the dollar." Jen paused, her thoughts jumping forward to their reason for coming here. "Which is probably the puppet-master's motive for ordering the latest series of murders."

York didn't respond, so she sank into her own thoughts about the strangler, suspecting she'd triggered his thoughts about him as well. As they passed Gallows Hill, Jen began to understand the chilling echo from the past. She even thought she heard the collective sobs of the nineteen innocent women led to death's tree, one by one. The sounds must have been the wind coming through the trees, yet the cries seemed so real.

The heart of Salem was old. Many handsome houses were reminiscent of the eighteenth century seafaring days. Jen wondered at her mood. Even here, she heard echoes of the past in the moist sea breeze rushing through the open window: the high-pitched screams of the woman the town's people crushed to death—the moans of the five women who died in jail.

"Why so quiet?" York asked. "Are the ghosts of Salem getting to you?"

"If I believed in them, they'd be the least of my worries."

"If you're uneasy about our elusive tail, forget him. We shook the SOB. I guarantee it."

"Who said I was worried about him?"

His voice took on an amused tone. "Hey, you're not nervous about meeting my folks, are you?"

Now that he mentioned it, she realized the impending visit had a lot to do with her tension. Jen forced a laugh. "Should I be? Your dad's not a warlock is he?"

Without answering, York pulled up in the long driveway of a Georgian style home and killed the engine. Front windows glowed with a welcoming brightness.

Jen's mouth felt dry. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea." With thoughts of ghosts and worries that the strangler might be following them, she wasn't sure she could pull off the "cordial guest" bit.

York touched her hand, sending tiny vibrations up her arm. "Relax."

Easy for him to say.

He honked. The front door opened and York's mom rushed toward the car with outstretched arms. Two couples followed, waving their limbs excitedly. York's silver-haired dad came more slowly, but his wide smile made up for his slower pace.

Jen swallowed. His family. *Breathe.* Oh, God, why did she have to feel like a baby bird fallen to a cold, concrete world?

A girl and a boy of about seven or eight dashed from the well-lit backyard followed by a barking collie. Jen opened the car door and thrust herself to her feet, wishing she could disappear. York joined her, and placed a warm hand around her shoulders. He firmly guided her forward.

"About time you got here!" The gusto in the elder Wylinski's voice didn't match his too thin frame.

"Take a detour?" York's brother taunted with good humor. Although he strongly resembled York's dark good looks, the slight graying around his temples suggested he might be a bit older. "And who is this gorgeous creature?"

York introduced everyone, and they all hugged Jen as though she were part of the family. It felt so good that for a moment she forgot she was an outsider. This is what she'd missed all her life...

Jen's head spun with names: There was York's mom and dad, Patricia and Dick, his brother

Wayne and wife Vickie and their two children, Josh and Bailey.

She locked into the name Howard Hawthorne. He was the man she'd come to meet, the one who might have the missing link. Howard and his wife Lillian had deep tans and trim bodies. No revelation there; they were golfers.

It was York's mother who surprised Jen. The woman had the slender figure of a teenager, and considering the way she'd run toward them, a vitality to match. Her up-to-date gray pantsuit and sleek Italian-cut salt and pepper hair were anything but the picture of an old-fashioned mom.

York grabbed up the two kids in his strong arms and swung them around; they screamed with laughter. At the sound of a car coming, Jen looked up. Instead of headlights, she saw only darkness. An engine died. First they were followed, now a car without headlights stopped up the street. She couldn't stop the reflexive shiver.

York's brother, Wayne, came close and asked, "Cold? Or are you shivering from delight at meeting this noisy bunch?"

"Delight." She snatched another glance up the darkened street. Oh, God. In the midst of all this merriment someone could be watching...waiting.

Wayne grinned and offered Jen his arm. "Hey, why are we all standing around out here with good eats ready inside?"

Yes, she thought, gripping his arm, let's get inside. The sooner the better.

A large formal dining table waited, arranged to perfection with ten place settings, Martha Stewart style, in a color scheme of pink and rose. Aromas of roast beef and gravy came from steaming food bins on a side buffet table, loaded with everything from salads to desserts.

She relaxed a little, glad to be away from whatever evil lurked outside. Was the danger only her imagination?

Wayne handed her a plate. "Like sports, Jen?" Before she could answer, he began to praise York. "Did you know he was captain of the basketball team in both high school and college? He can run like the wind."

Jen smiled at his sales pitch. She should deny anything beyond friendship, but York could straighten him out. Even thinking about their nonexistent relationship hurt too much. Too bad there wasn't more between them; it would be a kick to have Wayne as a brother-in-law. Having a brother of any kind was something she'd longed for.

They all filled their plates and sat down at the table. Everyone clasped hands and York said a blessing in a deep voice that vibrated through Jen. The sense of unity and belonging brought an ache to her throat. She clung to York's and Wayne's hands, needing to stay grounded. Both men gave her hand a little squeeze. She blinked back puzzling tears.

At York's "amen," a flood gate opened and they all started talking and teasing. The gaiety of the household was like a three-ringed circus, with her trying to take in all the rings at once.

York looked so happy here. When their gazes met, he winked, and Jen thought her heart would leap right out of her chest. To hide her reaction, she took a bite of roast beef. York was right; his mom was a great cook, and from what Jen had seen, a meticulous housekeeper. But she wasn't here to admire her talents, or to get all emotional over the oneness of being let into this family for a little while. She had to find a way to get Howard Hawthorne off by himself to talk about Coble, the owner of the land rumored to be toxic.

CHAPTER NINE

Jen's stomach knotted. She planned to interview Howard Hawthorne at the first opportunity. But when was the right time? Would York's family consider it rude to question him here at the dinner table? She wanted them to like her, although for the life of her she didn't know why that had become so important. Maybe it was because she'd fallen for their warmth at first sight and wished they were her family. But would Hawthorne open up in front of everyone? And did *she* want an audience?

"Everything okay?" York asked as though sensing her turmoil.

When she smiled and nodded, he squeezed her hand. Jen sighed in relief when Wayne turned the conversation to York's mom. From what followed, she gathered that York's not so-old-fashioned mom had become a computer whiz, had her own web page and had set up her own nutrition mail order business. Didn't York see that his mom wasn't an old-fashioned woman anymore? Was she ever?

Then the conversation switched to Wayne. "Hear you made chief," York said.

Jen remembered York mentioning that the three men in his family were all in law enforcement. The men discussed the older brother's promotion then the conversation turned to York's case.

"We had a case like yours a few years back," Wayne said. "We chased our tails looking for the finger man behind the hits. You'll never believe this—the bastard turned out to be the partner of the cop assigned to the case. Your partner couldn't be a bad cop could he?"

Jen gasped. York gave her a sharp look. She managed a weak smile, but the comment had hit a nerve. A cop with a minister girlfriend would be a perfect cover. She watched York, barely breathing waiting for his answer. "I can rule that out with absolute certainty. I know him as well as I know you."

Wayne stared at him for several heartbeats, and then glanced at Jen as though measuring *her* confidence in York's assessment. Not wanting to ruin the whole weekend for York, she forced a smile and nodded as though she had no doubts about his understandably loyal and prejudiced assessment of his partner. She would discuss her qualms with him later.

York and Wayne couldn't seem to let go of the strangler story as if talking about it could generate solutions. Jen's eye twitched and her nerves felt like they were jumping under her skin. *Darn it*, she didn't want to go over old ground. She wanted answers. Hawthorne was just sitting there listening. She needed to get him talking.

So, what was holding her back? She'd done hundreds of interviews. Why was this one different? She didn't know. She knew only that if she didn't do it now she'd explode. At a lull in the conversation, she cleared her throat and leveled her gaze at Howard. "I'm the reporter working on the strangler story that York and Wayne were just discussing. I think perhaps together, *you and I* can put a new spin on this case. Are you willing to answer a few questions that might give things a new prospective?"

Howard chuckled. "I knew I wasn't invited here just for my good looks. But I only know what I've read in the papers, which has been sketchy at best. But I'll give it a whirl. Ask away."

"I understand that you play golf with Finstead Coble?" Her hands felt clammy.

"Several times a week for the past twenty years."

York grinned. "I told Jen you knew where all the bodies were buried."

Before Howard could respond, the phone rang. Everyone stopped talking, their gazes following seven-year-old Josh who raced to answer it. Jen suspected the tension had something to do with the fact that three policemen sat at this table.

After a second, Josh said, "It's Ted, for Uncle York."

A shiver of foreboding slipped down Jen's spine.

York listened a minute, his eyes darkening, then he said, "I'd better take this in the other room. Hold up on your conversation until I get back, Howard. Due to new developments, I need to hear your answers."

New developments. Her heart beat faster. She wanted to get up and pace, but that would call too much attention to herself. She picked up a fork and tapped the table, then stopped when she realized everyone was looking at her.

When York returned, his face was an unreadable mask.

"Everything okay?" his mom asked.

Although he said it was, Jen noticed a new tightness around his eyes. His words, *new developments* repeated in her brain, taking on a more frightening significance each time it replayed. "What is it, York?"

"Give me a few minutes," he said with his gaze fixed on his dad.

York's dad rested his head in his hands. He looked pale and tired. After a moment, he excused himself to lie down. York's mom left the room with him. "Back in a jiffy," she said.

"Mom likes to help Dad get settled," Wayne said. "He's recovering from colon cancer. Had an operation a few weeks ago."

Now Jen understood why York had never been home when she tried to catch him there for the billboard interview. He stared worriedly at the doorway, his gaze following his parents until they disappeared from view. She closed her hand over his. It was a big supposition to make, but she thought she understood now why he had put up the billboard—the fear that his dad might not live to see York's children.

Wayne clapped York on the shoulder, his eyes glistening. "Baby brother was here every second he wasn't working," he told Jen. "His neighbors probably wondered if he'd moved out."

It hit her—the main reason York had come here this weekend was to visit his sick dad. Because he had to protect her, he'd brought her along. It wasn't just to interview Hawthorne. And the kiss had nothing to do with it. Warmth crawled up her neck. She had thought...

"Dad gave us quite a scare," York said. "But he's getting stronger."

The concern in York's voice, and the friendship between the brothers sent a pang of sympathy to Jen's heart. The courage of this family facing this crisis together underscored the emptiness in her life. Never had she felt so adrift as if she belonged nowhere. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Just coming here with me helped," he said, sounding like he meant it.

Howard's wife, Lillian, moved to a chair closer to Jen. "Is your family nearby, dear?"

"There's only my mom and she lives in Florida." Jen hoped no one heard the wistfulness in her tone. Distance wasn't actually the problem. Her mom flitted from one man to the next, never finding one who would stay for the long haul. Dealing with Mom's string of short-term bed-partners who wanted to rule the roost without earning the right wasn't worth the hassle. So Jen had left and threw herself into her career.

Everyone drifted away from the table, and when York's mom returned, Jen followed her into the kitchen to help. Patricia began to stack the dishes. "Do you like children?"

Jen's mouth dropped open and she stopped wiping the counter. She could barely breathe. "I adore them, but marriage is a long way off for me."

Patricia met her gaze. "I thought you and York—"

Jen shook her head. "We're working on the same serial murder case. Nothing more." Her face felt like it was on fire.

"Oh... When I saw how you two looked at each other, I thought..."

Jen looked away and studied the family photos on the refrigerator door, one a grade school picture of York. She outlined his smiling face with a trembly finger. His sons would be handsome, too.

Patricia came over and put her arm around Jen. "York is a wonderful son and a loyal friend; he's kind, generous to a fault and dependable." She sighed, her eyes glowing with love and memories. "Always there when we need him."

Jen closed her hand over the one Patricia had around her shoulder and smiled. "He told me he had a great childhood, and that you were always there for him as well."

Patricia gave Jen a little squeeze, then returned to the job of scraping the dishes. "That's what mothers do."

"York believes you and your husband have always been so happy because you were an old-fashioned woman."

"I was a stay-at-home mom, but I don't think I was ever old-fashioned. Certainly not in my thinking." She winked. "But that's our little secret."

Jen laughed. "York wants to marry someone just like you." *Now she understood why.*

"I know," Patricia said. "That's the reason I thought—"

"What's going on in here?" York asked as he strode into the room. "Let's get some production into this project. Jen, I'll rinse and you load the dishwasher." He untied his mom's apron, and gave her a gentle shove toward the door. "Lillian wants to see your new computer. And I need to talk to Jen alone."

She wanted to talk to him too. She looked out the window into a night cloaked in shadowy darkness and rubbed her arms. "I wanted to tell you something earlier, but we were never by ourselves and I didn't want to worry your family. When we arrived, a car pulled up with no headlights and—"

Howard opened the door part way and stuck his head in the kitchen, looking a little hesitant. "Wayne said you wanted to finish our talk now."

Jen tamped down her building frustration. Her concerns about the car could wait. This was more important.

* * * *

York gestured inward with his arm. "Come on in." Best to get this over, he thought as he poured a fresh cup of coffee for each of them. "I think Coble might be somehow mix up with the recent serial murders."

Howard laughed. "Coble a serial killer? He couldn't kill a fly. Now if you said he had his hand in the till, I might believe it."

"People who hire hitmen are often motivated by money." York raised his voice to be heard over the churning dishwasher, then pushed a button to interrupt its cycle so he wouldn't have to compete with it. "What can you tell me about the gas station site?"

Howard rubbed his jaw. "Coble was worried about a petroleum spill of some kind. Then a few months ago when I asked about it, he said the problem was gone. I pressed him, but he wouldn't say more."

"Did he mention the mayor's office or the refuse director?" Long shots often paid off, York thought.

"He frequently talked about Boston politics, but I didn't pay much attention. Salem's where my loyalties lie."

"Do you know Vincent Zombolas?" Jen asked, leaning forward.

"Sure. He dated Coble's daughter for a while. Coble didn't like it and sent her to stay with an aunt in England."

"Did Coble ever mention Tim Tormont?" Jen asked.

"No. But I met him once. He was having lunch at the club with Zombolas. Coble got all

flushed-faced over the Greek and Tormont being so chummy.”

The Greek and the refuse director, York thought. Things were starting to jell.

Jen gripped his arm. “That reminds me of something Sniffles told me.”

York braced himself for the emotional jolt as he gently put his hand over hers. “What?”

“That garbage men and Greeks made strange bedfellows,” she said. “It made no sense at the time, but now—”

“You’re thinking about Tormont and Zombolas?”

Howard stood. “Look, I’ve told you all I know, and it sounds like you folks have some things to mull over.”

York nodded, appreciating the older man’s quick grasp of the situation. After Howard left, York got up and paced a few steps, wondering how to tell Jen about the latest murder.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, with wide eyes. “Is it something Ted told you?” The strength in her voice amazed him, but how would she hold up after hearing about the killer’s latest attack?

York nodded. “They found Joel strangled.”

Jen gripped the edge of the table. “Oh, God, not him, too.”

“I’m sorry to cut our weekend short, but I need to get back to Boston. I have a meeting with the chief in the morning.”

She was quiet a moment then said, “Of course. No problem.”

He wished she were a little disappointed, but why should she be? She’d accomplished her trip goal; she’d questioned Howard.

York resumed pacing, pounding his palm with his right fist. He stopped and stared down at Jen, wishing he didn’t have to tell her the rest. But for her safety she had to know.

“There’s more, isn’t there?” she asked softly, looking so damned vulnerable that he had to fight himself to keep from taking her into his arms.

He held every muscle in his body stiff. “It’s bad. The strangler broke into a small toy store run by a man and wife. It was just after they’d closed, and the man had gone to make a bank drop. When he returned, he found his wife strangled.”

“Oh, no. How horrible for him.” She lowered her gaze and stared at the floor. After a moment, she raised her chin. “If only Joel hadn’t disappeared, we could have gotten Sniffles’ journal from him and maybe saved Joel’s life and—the woman’s life...”

“There’s more. The husband found empty packaging for a doll called Reporter Barbie, and a Barbie-sized redheaded wig.”

Jen’s face paled and she seemed to shrink. “Does that mean what I think it does?”

Her whispery soft voice reached down deep inside York, tearing at his guts, and he wished he could deny the significance. He shrugged, not wanting to get too specific until he evaluated her reaction to the rest of the news. “It gets worse, Jen.”

Jen closed her eyes briefly and pressed her lips into a fine line, as though preparing herself. When she lifted her lashes, he could see that she’d overcome the dread with raw courage. “Worse than Joel and a woman murdered?”

York swallowed, fighting the constriction in his throat. “The killer carved the letters JEN into the woman’s forearm.”

* * * *

Driving home York said, “Something besides the latest killing is bothering you, right? Was it my brother’s far-fetched speculation about Ted?”

She knew York was just trying to distract her from her fears. And she played along. “Maybe,” she said, feeling disloyal to a man who’d shown her only kindness.

“Wayne knows some reporters are hungry for sensationalism. His groundless hypothesis was a test to see if you’re one of those vultures. And you came through like a champ.” York sounded prouder of her than she deserved. “If we’re to believe anything Sniffles said,” he continued, “the guy behind everything is a big wig, not some homicide detective who has proven a hundred times over that his whole life is about getting killers off the streets, not ordering hits.”

Jen smiled. “I don’t know why I needed to hear you say that. But I feel better now.” It was only partly true. She never been more scared, but she kept it too herself. York had enough on his mind.

* * * *

An hour and a half later, Jen followed York into the lighted foyer of his Beacon Hill home. York flipped a main switch, turning on additional lights throughout the house. Jen knew it was to make her feel safer. But would she ever feel safe again? *She was the strangler’s obsession....*

She trembled.

York dropped their bags and pulled her close. “It’s going to be all right, Jen. I won’t let anything happen to you. From now on I’m your Siamese twin.”

She wrapped her arms around him, never wanting to let go, seeking his warmth, his strength. She kissed his neck and undid a few shirt buttons. When she pressed her lips to his chest, he backed away and cleared his throat. Feeling off balance, she looked up at him.

“This probably isn’t a good idea,” he said. He stroked her sides and she felt him harden against her thigh.

She stared up at him, trying to tell him with her gaze that it didn’t matter. She wanted this—needed it.

“Anyone ever tell you that you have incredible, and very seductive, green eyes?”

She shook her head, lost in the huskiness of his voice. That deep hum vibrating through her and his throbbing arousal clarified beyond a doubt that he was no longer just trying to distract her from her fears. He desired her. She continued to stare at him, knowing if they crossed this line, she’d never be the same. Could she *really* accept that he didn’t want her for keeps?

He stepped back as though sensing her hesitation. “Come on,” he said, snagging her bag. “I’ll walk you to your room.”

They didn’t talk as they headed up the stairs. It felt right to have his arm around her waist. At the bedroom doorway, he stopped short as though the door was barred. He glanced inside at the soft glow coming from the lamp on the night stand. Did he feel its beguiling pull beckoning him to step over the threshold? His gaze flicked to the bed. He took a deep breath and set the bag down. He turned her toward him.

She looked up at him and moistened her lips. *Oh, God.* She wanted him so. The grandfather clock in the hallway ticked off the seconds as they stared at each other; she sensed his indecision. She tightened her hold on him, wanting him to understand that the latest assault by the strangler had taken its toll, and she wasn’t ready to be alone. “A reporter doll...plus a red wig...a replica of me.” She didn’t try to conceal the fear in her voice.

York traced her cheekbone. “Jen don’t...”

She grabbed the front of his shirt. “Kiss me, now. Block the horror from my mind, just for tonight. Please.” With regret in his eyes, he lifted her hand and pressed a light, lingering kiss to her palm. The pressure of his lips and the warmth of his breath was more than she could endure. To hell with pride. She wasn’t above begging. “Stay here with me,” she whispered. “I need you to hold me.”

“You’re just scared. You’ll regret it tomorrow.” His voice was hoarse and thick with desire.

“I *can’t* be alone tonight. I keep seeing my name carved into the poor woman’s forearm.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have—”

She put her fingers to his lips. "No. You did the right thing. Don't ever hold out on me." Jen took a fortifying breath, and forced a small smile. "Honestly, I can handle it with a little help from my favorite cop."

York stared at her for what seemed like an eternity. When he finally drew her toward him, she sighed in relief. He cupped her face in his hands, and lowered his mouth to hers so slowly she thought she might die before he brushed a kiss lightly across her lips. The light touch, sweet with the taste of coffee and desire, stole the steadiness from her legs. She swayed against him and entwined her hands behind his head, needing that lifeline. She grabbed a breath, and he kissed her again, deep and searching, making her dizzy with wanting him. His hands slid down her back to her waist, pulling her closer. She felt his arousal, harder now. His throbbing readiness heightened her excitement.

"If we're going to stop..." he murmured against her lips.

"We're not," she said a little breathlessly. *His old-fashioned woman would.* But she wasn't that woman. Never would be.

He swept her from her feet, and kissed her as he carried her to the bed. As he gently lowered her she pushed away the spread, letting it slip to the floor. Too eager to stay put, she rose to her knees and drew him onto the bed. Facing her with the softest expression she'd ever seen, he undressed her slowly as though his only need was to study her in lingering detail. The delay was unbearable.

Nude, she tugged at his shirt, frenzied for the touch of his bare skin. She yanked off his belt, sent it flying across the room. She unzipped his zipper.

He grinned. "Let me help."

His gaze remained on her face as he undressed, tossing trousers and briefs across the room. He returned to the center of the bed, faced her and waited.

His shoulders were so wide and bronzed that she couldn't resist. She pressed her mouth to his hot, salty, wide shoulders, his rock-hard cop chest. "Give in to it, darling," she murmured, moving lower to his steely abs, then even lower, thrilled by the persistent swell of his arousal. "Let me set you on fire—"

He laughed deep in his throat. "Slow down, tiger." He grabbed her wrists and sat her back on her heels.

Jen stayed very still. Her rush of eagerness had astonished even her. *Oh, God.* His old-fashioned woman would have never have been so aggressive, would never have said the things she'd said. *From now on it'll be his call.*

He twisted and leaned over, showing a firm bare butt, and grabbed a bottle of lotion from the night stand. "I hear some woman like to start with a back rub."

"Now?" York might be a patient lover, but she wasn't...wasn't at all.

"You'll love it," he said.

Okay, she thought. Since it was his call, she'd go with it—for a while.

He laid her on her stomach atop a sheet that smelled like cotton and her perfume from the night before. She glanced over her shoulder and watched him pour out some lotion and rub it vigorously between his hands. "I want this to be warm for you," he said. He massaged her back...her waist...her behind. He smoothed the lotion, lower and lower, curving the line of her buttocks, sliding his hand between her thighs, getting nearer and nearer to her pulsing core. His gentle touch left her weak. "Please," she murmured, forgetting her vow to be patient.

"Not yet." His words were low and spoken as slowly as his long, sensuous strokes. He turned her over, caressing her as if he had the rest of his life to do this one splendid thing. He lingeringly spread the fragrant lotion over her breasts, her belly, moving ever so slowly toward her damp tangle of hair. "I'm supposed to be protecting you, not..."

"Don't you dare say that now!"

"Then don't you dare regret this."

"No regrets...for heaven's sakes...no regrets!" She wanted to shake him to speed him up.

York had warned her to guard her heart. Now he was murmuring something else as he stroked her, but she could only feel waves of ecstasy, clouds of sensations...

He slid his hand lower and with long, gentle fingers he slid between her thighs and found her wetness. She groaned in readiness. He straddled her and hovered there with such incredible caring in his eyes that she knew that, for this moment, he loved her. And as unwise as it was, she loved him.

She tried to pull him down to her, but he shook his head and continued stroking—deeper and deeper, tightening her nerve endings, heightening the sweet torture until she could only arch her hips against him. "Please," she murmured.

He pulled a foil packet from the night stand drawer and she took it from him and leisurely rolled it over his hot, pulsing shaft, watching his smoldering eyes.

She lay back, opening herself to him. He didn't enter her. He persisted in his unhurried game, rubbing the inside walls of her slick canal with strong fingers, bringing her to the point of shattering.

Then, at long last, he lowered himself, coupling in a perfect fit and thrust deep inside her. They moved in an age-old rhythm, made unique by their pooled sense of beat, increasing faster and faster until they rocked as one. She grabbed his buttocks and cried, "Don't stop...don't stop" as he swept them both toward release. Eruptions rippled over her in electrified waves while they clung to each other, breathing hard, hearts pounding, bodies melded in a slick, hot sweat.

Finally spent, he lay on top of her breathing hard. After a moment, he kissed her all over the face. "Jen, Jen...my sweet Jen..." He slid his lips down the column of her neck, suckled her nipples, kissed the dewy sweat from the valley between her breasts.

She couldn't move; she was still coming down, slowing as if in a silky parachute. When she finally landed soft and secure, he turned her on her side and tucked her, spoon-like, close to his body. "How do you feel, my love?" he whispered against her hair.

"Safe," she purred, and fell asleep in his arms.

* * * *

York woke up with a stiff arm, a shameless hard on and full-blown anger at himself. An image of he and Jen in the heat of passion flashed in his mind. How could he regret something so beautiful? He'd taken it arduously slow, wanting to make a memory that would last a lifetime. It only made him want her forever, and forever wasn't possible.

She could have stopped him at any point. He knew she wouldn't. It had been unwise and unprofessional for him to take advantage of her vulnerability. More than that, he had opened them both up to a great deal of pain, and the last thing he wanted to do was hurt her. He gritted his teeth, loathing himself. He could blame the memories of their first kiss, the long hours together, undeniable chemistry, heightened danger. Excuses didn't make him feel any better.

In spite of how much they wanted each other, under normal circumstances she wouldn't have asked him to stay with her. He should have been the strong one.

The chemistry had started on day one. He had to continually remind himself that he was a cop and she was a reporter and an important person to the case. He was too good a cop to step over the line with a woman he was supposed to protect. So why had he jeopardized the case, even his career?

Something deep inside his soul told him that what they shared was more momentous than just the best lovemaking of his life, and well worth whatever it cost him. What about her?

Perhaps if he hadn't taken her to meet his parents, who had welcomed her like family... Hell, why wouldn't they? Other than her damned job, she was everything they could want in a daughter-in-law. His dad had asked him if a marriage was in the wind. York hated to disappoint him. He knew

how badly his father wanted more grandchildren. His illness had brought an intensity to his desires. York wanted to give him what he wanted but...

He felt a tightness in his throat. There would be time. Mom said dad was getting stronger every day. York shook his head. Mom had sure changed. When did all that happen? She'd become this modern woman he didn't recognize.

He laughed without humor. Now Mom and Jen were alike, both thoroughly modern women. Dad didn't even notice the changes in Mom. He was proud of her accomplishments, and as always, reveled in her unwavering loyalty. That was the virtue both women shared, staunch, unyielding loyalty. In Jen's case, her unyielding loyalty could be her undoing, more precisely, her loyalty to that Janus-faced Brock.

A primal desire to protect Jen tore at York's gut. He couldn't let anything happen to her.

Jen, Jen, what am I going to do about you? It was so damned wonderful to hold her in his arms all night, to wake up still holding her.

* * * *

York shoved away thoughts about what happened between them last night and eased out of bed. From now on his focus would stay on the killer. He looked at his watch. They'd slept too late for breakfast. They'd have to get something at work. Just as well, he wasn't sure he could face her over the breakfast table. It was too damned domestic. Besides, Jen wanted to leave for work by seven and they both needed to get into the shower. Alone, he thought with regret. He'd take his quickly, then get the hell out of her way. The less contact, the better.

Forty-five minutes later, he escorted Jen to her desk and posted a cop outside her office door. Other than saying she felt like the one in jail, she accepted it. Then he risked a light kiss on the forehead and headed for the Police Department for his emergency meeting with the chief.

He had a hunch that he had all the pieces to the puzzle and only needed some quiet time to put it all together. Maybe he'd find a clue in the service station report he'd borrowed from Tormont's office. But he needed an hour or so to go over it thoroughly. The weekend trip to Salem was supposed to give him time to reflect and step back from a case he'd gotten too close to. Because of the latest killing all his plans got scrapped. Jen's plans, too. She'd been so silent this morning, perhaps scared speechless. Or was it regret?

Ted stuck his head through the doorway of York's cubicle and said, "The chief wants to see you in his office before the big meeting. Alone. Hope you're wearing your flak jacket."

York groaned. He knew what this was about. He headed down the hall and tapped on the closed door.

"Get your ass in here, Wylinski," Chief Sharpe growled.

"Morning, chief." York slid into the chair everyone called the hot seat.

Sharpe raked his premature gray hair. York knew he was responsible for at least some of the graying. "What the hell's going on between you and that reporter?" he barked.

"Following orders." The chief had made it York's personal responsibility to see that Jen's boss, Dirk Hudson, didn't lose another news hound to the strangler. "Jen Lyman is the reporter assigned to the strangler story, the reporter he wants me to protect." Guilt warmed York's neck. Hudson hadn't asked him to take Jen to his bed, or to care so deeply for her.

Sharpe's nostrils flared and he leaned forward with fire in his eyes. "Since when do you take your work home with you?"

York met the chief's bug-eyed scrutiny. "Since the strangler became obsessed with her, dammit. You know what happened at the toy store."

"When you took her to your house, you stepped over the line, Wylinski. In my department, cops

and reporters don't talk, and they sure as hell don't wrinkle the sheets."

York forced himself to maintain eye contact with the chief without blinking. If he tried to deny that they'd made love he'd only add fuel to the fire. "Jen Lyman is the key to this case. Tie my hands and I'll take leave and follow up on my own. I'm too close to breaking this wide open to get bogged down in department crap."

"The mayor's spitting fire—"

"I'll bet. Especially since he may be in this up to his fat ass."

"Got proof?"

"Let me do my job, and I'll give it to you."

"Until you have something concrete, keep the mayor's name out of it, hear?" Sharpe lowered his head an inch and glared at York like a bull ready to gore the matador. "You have seven days to clean up your act. In the meantime, keep that reporter out of your bed, and don't let anything get into print until we've nailed this maniac."

* * * *

Jen glanced toward the door at the husky, potato-nosed cop York had assigned to guard her in his absence. He tilted back in a chair. Hanging around this office watching her on a Sunday morning had to be boring. He smiled, and she returned the courtesy. Her fingers tapped a tattoo on the desk. Thank God this togetherness wouldn't be for long. It was a bitter pill—the strangler roamed the streets free as a bird, and here she was a virtual prisoner. Jen pulled out the strangler file and, after typing up the information on the latest killing, she added it to the folder. She rubbed her arms. If only she knew the identity of this psycho.

She'd been so scared last night. Then she forgot her fear in York's arms. After spending the night, warm and cuddly, with him curled around her, how could she ever go back to sleeping alone? Being with him had felt so right. Yet, if she hadn't been brazen, last night probably wouldn't have happened. York wanted her, but he wasn't the one to push it. What did that say about her? It only proved to him that she wasn't what he wanted in the long term. Nothing about her behavior had been old-fashioned. She hadn't held back anything, recklessly showing her hunger for him. Why couldn't she have been more demure like the domestic goddess he wanted? Not that he'd complained. Far from it. But York was the cop protecting her. When it was over, he'd be protecting someone else. He would move on, and even though it would tear her heart out, she would have to as well.

York said he'd be back at 2:00 P.M. and they'd have a late lunch, then check out some leads together. What leads? Did it have something to do with the service station report?

Maybe if she searched Gordon's desk and his computer files again she could come up with leads of her own. Now was the perfect time. The building was almost deserted on Sundays. Her editor was probably cleaning out his garage like he'd been planning to do, and Dory and her husband Clark were driving up the coast to see his parents. Jen sighed. She could've had her own little get away if the killer hadn't struck again.

With the watchdog cop on her heels, she went to Gordon's cubicle and turned on his computer. The cop paced the room. Jen shook her head. "You might as well get comfortable. I'll be here a while."

He dropped into a chair near the door. This was horrible for both of them, but it couldn't be helped. She flicked through Gordon's computer directories, hoping something would catch her eye. Nothing did. Rifling his desk produced zilch as well. Maybe Connie...

Jen called Connie at her home and told her about the latest killing. "Until now the victims were connected to the toxic waste story, or the strangler story," Jen said. "But that woman last night—"

"You think my boss had something to do with it, don't you?" Connie asked.

"It's possible. A computer hacker named Joel claimed to have Sniffles' journal, and he was ready to sell it to me. Then he disappeared after meeting with a tall redheaded man."

"Look," Connie said, "if Tim's guilty, boss or not, I'd be the first in line to throw rocks at him, but—"

"If you doubt Tormont's guilt, explain this: Sniffles said Greeks and garbage men made strange bedfellows."

"Pardon the pun," Connie said, "but that's all Greek to me."

Jen couldn't even drum up a courtesy laugh. "Listen, you have to help me, here. I'm tired of coming close then hitting a blank wall. I know it's reaching, but did Gordon keep a work diary or chronicle at his apartment?" Connie was his fiancé and should know.

"He liked to keep everything with him in his briefcase," she said.

Jen knew he had a mini computer like hers in his briefcase. "What happened to the hand-held computer where he jotted memo entries?"

"Cops said it wasn't on him. Maybe the killer took it."

"If Gordon transferred the info daily into his office computer, I can't find it. I tried the obvious, memo, calendar and so forth." Jen doodled some spirals and spider webs on a note pad. "Any ideas?"

"You need one of those computer geeks. If something's there, they can dig it out."

Excitement danced on Jen's nerve endings. "Hey, I know someone like that. I'll call you if I come up with anything."

She hung up and redialed. Shelly Draker came on the line sounding breathless. Kids shrieked playfully in the background. When Jen told her what she needed, Shelly agreed to come down.

While waiting for Shelly, Jen called York at the police department. He was still in a meeting and couldn't be disturbed. Ted was in the same meeting. That only left her other cop friend. Jen lowered her voice so the guard by the door wouldn't overhear who she was calling.

"Like to help you, Jen," her friend said, "but the chief's muzzled everyone. Nothing to reporters, period."

Jen rubbed her aching head. "I just need to know what personal belongings were found on Gordon Michaels. What could that hurt?"

"Try me when things cool off," he said.

Jen gritted her teeth. She wanted to slam down the phone, but reporters never burn their bridges. After hanging up, she gave Gordon's frustration-mobile a big spin.

The watchdog cop shifted in his chair. "Problems?"

"Know anything about the Gordon Michaels case?"

"Ouch. Been muzzled on that one. Sorry."

"Thanks, anyway." For nothing. She paced a few steps. Was all this secrecy coming from the chief? Or did it come from higher up—like the mayor. He was good at manipulating and deceiving. Maybe he'd muzzled the whole department. Was he capable of violence? Or ordering it? *Damn*. She had a tiger by the tail and couldn't let go.

Twenty minutes later, Shelly showed up carrying a black leather bag.

"See you brought your doctor's kit," Jen said.

Shelly laughed. "Yeah. Where's the patient?" Looking like a teenager in jeans and T-shirt, no one would guess Shelly was a computer specialist. "Got here as fast as I could," she continued a little breathless. "A lady from church is watching my kids." Shelly withdrew a diagnostic disk from the bag. "There'll be lots of stuff. What should I look for?"

"Go by instinct. Messages, emails and journal entries, especially from the mayor or Tim Tormont, the refuse director."

After two hours of digging through computer files, Jen offered to order a pizza. She had a lunch date at 2:00 P.M. with York, but a little something now wouldn't hurt.

"Just get us some Cheetos and Pepsis. I think I've found something interesting."

Jen rushed to get the snacks from the vending machine in the hall, her watchdog cop right behind her. Although she didn't have a clue about most of what Shelly was doing, she didn't want to miss a thing.

Shelly popped a few Cheetos in her mouth and took a swig of Pepsi. "I found some trashed emails from Kessler's.com. Appears to be threats. Also a memo calendar with appointments. It looks like Gordon had meetings scheduled with the mayor and Tormont. Nothing confirms the meetings though. He has a notation that he met with Sniffles once." Her eyes glistened and her voice sounded choked. "My Sniffles sure got around." She was silent for a moment. "I printed out the pertinent stuff. Maybe the dates will tell you something." Jen was looking over the printed data when York strode into the room. Her heart beat faster at the sight of his broad shoulders and confident stride. She hadn't paid any attention to his clothing this morning. Her mind was too full of how he'd looked the night before, his spectacular male body glistening with sweat. Now she noticed that he wore his usual gray tweed jacket and a paler gray tie.

"I got your messages," he said, his blue-eyed gaze probing hers intently. "Is there a problem?"

She forced herself to breathe evenly to regain her composure. "I just wanted to know what personal belongings your men found on Gordon Michaels. But Shelly has uncovered some interesting dates and notations on Gordon's computer that you should see first."

CHAPTER TEN

Jen handed York copies of the retrieved trashed emails and appointment calendar from Gordon's computer. York scanned them briefly. "I'll compare these dates with my files," he said, tucking the papers in an inside jacket pocket. He turned to the watchdog cop and told him he'd take over, and then stood behind Shelly. "What else ya' got?"

"So far trails to nowhere." Shelly didn't even look up. Her gaze remained riveted to the screen. "The inside of a computer is a tough place to collect evidence." She bit her lip in concentration. "Lots of places to hide stuff."

York nodded as though he understood. Jen moved closer to see better, although she had no idea what she was looking at. York started to put his arm around her. Then, as though she were the hottest edge of the sun, he yanked his hand back. She looked up into his eyes, dark as stormy waters and their gazes locked. His pupils retracted, and emotions she couldn't read deepened the intensity of his stare. She didn't get it. He'd kissed her when he dropped her off at work this morning. Now, it seemed, he couldn't even let himself touch her. What had changed?

She held his gaze fiercely, fighting to hang onto the connection. After an agonizing moment of green eyes probing blue, he slid his hand around her waist and, with seemingly defiant energy, left it there. She exhaled and gave him a satisfied squeeze.

Shelly punched some keys. "This machine has 128 megabytes of RAM, and more than 20 gigabytes of hard disk space, roughly the equivalent of 3.5 million pages of typewritten text. It would take me days or even weeks to search it effectively. Time I don't have with my kids and job."

York frowned. "Time is a key issue. With the clock ticking we can't let this drag out."

"I can work on this for a while today, but after that you'd better get one of your PD data recovery consultants to comb this bugged for you. Lucky for you, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to do this stuff anymore. And it's worth the hassle. Even if the search doesn't turn up exactly what you need now, you may need some of the buried data for court once you get a conviction."

A warning rang in Jen's head. Had she opened a can of worms? "I had no idea this would be so complicated. Since this is *The Globe's* computer, we'll have to talk to Dirk about bringing in others."

York pressed her waist reassuringly. "He's promised full cooperation, but if necessary, we can get a court order."

"Bingo!" Shelly said. "Here's something to get your blood flowing—a threat!"

* * * *

Over Shelly's shoulder, York and Jen leaned forward and squinted at the screen, him as aware of Jen as the venom-filled email message blinking at them. Shelly read it out aloud, dramatizing the fury in a feigned, male-like gruff voice, "There is no strangler story! If you come nosing around again we'll tack you up at the range for target practice!"

"Well, well," Jen said. "The plot thickens. It seems *your boss*, Police Chief Sharpe, has just become one of your suspects."

York shook his head. "The message is unprofessional, but—"

"How about *unbelievably* unprofessional?" Jen asked, seeming to enjoy the irony. York met her flashing green eyes as she shifted at his side, sending a tantalizing, light floral fragrance spiraling around him. His gut tightened. "The chief's note isn't anything. You know that. He's just passing down the heat from the mayor. Granted the chief's not a friend to the press, but—"

Jen made a sound between a laugh and a scoff. "That's an understatement if I ever heard one. He told me practically the same thing to my face."

York cursed under his breath. He knew this would happen. To avoid public panic, the chief had

ordered everyone to stick to the story that all the murders were random events. Now the lie was backfiring and making the department look bad. But he couldn't let office politics stop him from getting at the truth. With this message lurking in the hard drive, there could be others that would lead him to the killer.

The sooner he called in the Data Recovery Specialists the better. "I'll give the DR boys a call now." York crossed the room to a phone, hit nine for an outside line, and then punched in the number for the DR department. The retrieval might give him a connection to tie Gordon to Brock—and Brock to the player behind the scene, or as Sniffles liked to call him, the *puppet-master*."

And, if the DR boys could link any of it to the mayor, York felt sure he could get Judge Gray to authorize a search warrant to inspect the mayor's deleted hard drives. If any incriminating evidence was there, as Sniffles had claimed, things could jell fast. York felt pressure building in his chest. After Gordon's murder when he'd scanned the reporter's computer files he should've made the parallel and considered the deleted files

"With your guys on the job, you won't need me," Shelly said. "Besides, I gotta get home to my kids."

She hugged Jen and slipped out the door. Edging past her, a skinny, freckled-face UPS delivery man in a brown uniform stuck his head in the doorway. York studied the guy. A Sunday delivery?

The name tag on his shirt said Josh Pendelton. "Security said I'd find Jen Lyman here," he said, gesturing with a package big enough to hold men's size twelve work boots.

Jen wrinkled her forehead. "I'm Jen."

As she reached for the package, York dropped the receiver and lunged for her. "Hold up." He met the delivery man's startled gaze. "Who's it from?"

The delivery man read the company tracking label. "Joel Ferguson."

Excitement lit up Jen's face, and she tried to shake free of York's hold. "I'll bet its Sniffles' journal!"

York studied the package in the delivery man's arms. "Size wise it could be, but it doesn't feel right." Joel was dead and this package suddenly turns up on a Sunday. York's gaze rested on the word *personal* printed in big, black letters. His heart pounded. Clearly, the sender intended for it to be opened by no one but Jen.

The delivery man's face paled. "You act like it's a bomb." He swallowed, causing his Adam's apple to convulse. He darted a frantic look at the door. "It's not, is it?"

York forced a calm tone. "Very gently, put it down on that desk." He felt Jen tremble under his grip.

"The strangler's never used bombs," she said with a quiver in her voice.

"Never used an ax until it suited his purpose." York regretted the wide-eyed look of horror that flitted across Jen's face, but this was no time to pull punches.

Slowly, with shaky hands, the delivery man lowered the package to the desk.

"I don't think it's a bomb," York said, not seeing any suspicious signs other than it was marked personal, "but to be on the safe side, I want the bomb squad to check it out." When he grabbed the phone, the delivery man turned to leave. "Hey, stick around. I have more questions."

The guy stopped in the doorway, looking like a trapped mouse.

York got busy on the phone with the emergency team. When he finished, he turned back to an empty doorway. "Where'd he go?"

"The word bomb spooked him." Jen stared at the package. "Is all this caution necessary?"

York stepped between her and the desk. "Curb your curiosity, reporter. It might kill you if you don't."

"The package looks harmless to me," Jen said.

York knew if he hadn't been here, she'd have yanked off the wrappings without a second

thought.

"If it is the journal, it could be the break we need. And here we are wasting time."

"Patience isn't your strongest trait, is it, Jen?" he asked.

She threw up her hands. "Not around you. You'd wear down the endurance of a saint."

Fifteen minutes later, the squad leader painstakingly checked the wrappings and said there were no suspicious signs like uneven corners, lumps, bulges, wires or surface stains. To be certain he ran an X-ray scanner over the package, did a swipe test for traces of foreign material, and partially unwrapped it.

After one more thorough scan, the leader smiled and handed the box to York. "It's safe to open," he said, then gathered his gear and left.

Before York could stop her, Jen yanked the box from his grasp and moved quickly away. "It's addressed to me, in case you forgot."

Sensing an unwelcome surprise, York called in a ragged voice, "Jen, don't..."

* * * *

Jen ignored him, unable to contain her impatience and curiosity a second longer. *Let this be the journal*, she prayed as she tore away what was left of the brown paper and slipped the lid off the box. She gasped. A redheaded Reporter Barbie Doll with fishing line wound tightly around its neck stared up at her; its face had been painted a light, breathless blue. The letters etched into the doll's wrist in red ink spelled JEN. She felt the box slipping from her fingers, watched it tumble to the floor and spill out its contents into a still, deadly heap.

"Oh hell," York said, "I was afraid of this." After taking two long strides, he pulled her into his arms. Her gaze remained locked on the twisted doll. He lifted her chin. "Don't let it get to you. The strangler just wants to scare you."

Jen heard the unsteadiness in York's voice. "It's working," she said softly. She knew it was only a doll, but with its red hair and oversized reporter briefcase, they both knew it represented her. The fishing line cutting into its neck, and the blue cast to the face looked too real. "What if that psycho's out there somewhere watching all the commotion?" she asked.

"Without proof of that and some sort of description of the guy who sent the package, ordering SWAT teams to search blocks of Boston office buildings would be futile." He drew Jen closer as though trying to still her lingering tremors. He looked down and met her gaze. "But if we knew he was in a specific building, I'd do it in a heartbeat."

"I know," she said, barely above a whisper. She took a deep breath, then squared her shoulders. "I'm okay now. Really. Seeing the doll just threw me for a moment."

York gave her a little squeeze. "That's my girl."

Jen opened her mouth to respond, but the phone rang and she reluctantly left the warmth and safety of York's arms to answer it. She lifted the phone to her ear, wishing he'd meant what he'd said. *His girl*.

"I saw you drop my little gift on the floor," rasped an electronically altered voice.

The devouring sensation of eyes fixed on her was as real as the metallic taste in her mouth. She glanced through the glass wall overlooking the sea of surrounding buildings.

"Didn't you like the Jen doll?"

She'd thought she heard a child sobbing in the background, but hoped it was a radio or TV. She started to motion to York to get on the line with her until the killer added, "Don't tell the detective it's me or your little friend Buddy dies."

With her heart thundering in her chest, she turned to York and forced a smile. "May I have a moment of privacy?" She marveled at the steadiness of her voice. "It's my gynecologist." It was all

she could come up with on short notice. She didn't cover the receiver, wanting the killer to hear her cooperating.

York studied her face a moment, then apparently satisfied, stepped out into the corridor.

"Do you think he believed you?" the killer asked. "It's a little far fetched."

"He has no reason not to believe me. I'm not in the habit of lying."

The killer let out a snicker. "The detective's more gullible than I thought. What's with the bomb squad?"

"I think you know the answer to that. Now let the boy go."

"Not just yet. I like little boys. Such an adorable dimpled darling. Such pinchable soft skin."

The child screamed in pain. *Oh, God. It was Buddy!* Jen clutched the receiver so tightly her fingers ached. "Don't hurt him."

She closed her eyes, praying for the right words. "I'll forget the story, whatever you want."

"I want you...your life for the boy's."

There was no question that if necessary, she'd give it. But she didn't want to die. Especially now. Being part of York's family for a little while, and seeing the love in his eyes when he made love to her had shown her what she wanted in her life. But first she had to get Buddy away from that psycho. "Let Buddy go. When he's safe, I'll come to you. Wherever you say."

"Sure you would." The hissing sarcasm in the killer's voice echoed over the lines like a chorus of rattlesnakes. "I'm not as gullible as that cop."

Nausea washed over her. If she hadn't asked Shelly to come here the young mother would've been home with her children and the killer wouldn't have had the opportunity to grab Buddy from the church grounds. Going to the killer was suicide, but Buddy's life hung in the balance. "Just tell me what to do."

"Ditch the cop. When you're alone, I'll show up."

"What about Buddy?"

"You and I will drop him somewhere nice'n safe."

"And I'm supposed to trust you?"

"Do you have a choice?" He laughed evilly and the line disconnected.

* * * *

From the closed office building across from *The Globe*, the strangler held his high-powered binoculars steady and focused on Jen. She stared at the phone rubbing her arms, weighing her options. But she'd do exactly as instructed. Bleeding hearts always sacrificed themselves for children. The anxiety in her voice proved she had a special place in her heart for this rug rat.

It would be worth the struggle to keep him alive to see the horror in Jen's face when he strangled the boy before her eyes. Then she'd die—and with her, the story.

He leered down at the sobbing boy tied to a high-backed desk chair. "You cry good, twerp." He gave him another sharp pinch and the boy cried harder. He laughed. "No one can hear you, even if you scream at the top of your lungs."

Still, no sense taking chances. He forced the boy's mouth open and stuffed in a rag. Big tears trickled down the boy's cheeks. The killer chuckled and slapped on some tape.

Things were going well in spite of the surprises. He hadn't expected the detective to be there when the package was delivered. Only someone with police training would've called in the bomb squad. Sending explosives had never occurred to him, and it was satisfying and enlightening to know he could stir things up with a simple package.

When Jen opened the box and dropped it to the floor, it was exactly the reaction he'd hoped for. He lifted the binoculars again from the strap around his neck and studied the scene unfolding across

the plaza. Wylinski had his arms around Jen. Had she said something about the call? No, she wouldn't risk the boy's life.

Hmmm. The detective cared for her. That made this new plan brewing even better. Two troublemakers snared with one tiny hostage.

Wylinski was the brains behind the investigation, the one who kept Jen out of his reach. He'd never matched skills with a more cautious or tenacious opponent. Wylinski had almost captured him several times. Luckily, he never knew it.

The safe option would be to seek contracts elsewhere, New York, or Los Angeles. But leaving before the job was over was out of the question. He'd never reneged on a deal, and considering who his boss was, now wasn't the time to start. Besides, he wanted payback. The feisty reporter had outsmarted him once. That wouldn't happen again.

* * * *

York lifted Jen's chin and tried to search her eyes. She lowered her thick lashes, closing him out. He knew he'd been duped. He'd given her the privacy she wanted, but her reactions didn't fit. But he trusted that she had a good reason. He'd seen her trembling before, felt her trembling now. God, he hoped she didn't think he was that dumb. What doctor called on a Sunday? And how would her gynecologist know she was at work and in Gordon's office? But York decided to let her play her game and see where it would lead. "Bad news?"

"No," she said with a quiver in her voice. "Just routine."

Lie on top of lie. Why? "I think we should visit the refuse site," he said, letting her think he accepted her fairy tale. "One of the workers was among the strangler's earlier victims. At the time, I saw no connection to the other murders, but if Tormont is involved..."

Jen swallowed. She gripped York's arm. "You think Tormont is the strangler? Does that mean Lee's off the hook?"

"Nobody's off the hook. But the dead man's coworkers could shed some light on his murder."

Jen rubbed her head. "You'll have to go alone. I have a tremendous headache. Drop me off at my place. I need to lie down a while."

"Staying anywhere alone is out." His gaze probed hers. "This won't take long. Besides, you probably just need some food. We'll grab a couple of corned beef sandwiches and colas from the deli down the block, and eat on the way."

* * * *

After they picked up the sandwiches, they headed across *The Globe's* parking lot. Jen tensed. What was she going to do? She needed time to think this through. There wasn't much chance that the killer would let Buddy go. Especially if the boy had seen him. Jen bit her lip. She couldn't successfully barter for his life. The only sensible option was to trust York to find a way out of this.

What if the killer was watching her now, reading her actions, York's actions? "York, no matter what I say, please don't react, don't do anything, just continue walking toward the car."

York stiffened and gripped her arm tighter, but he didn't stop.

When they reached his Thunderbird, he held the door for her, then calmly rounded the car. He slid behind the wheel and started the engine, but instead of driving, he sat there letting the motor idle. "The call was from the killer, wasn't it?"

"He has Buddy." She wanted to go into York's arms and have him tell her it would all work out. If she was being watched she couldn't show any emotion.

York reached over and squeezed her fingers. "How do you know that?"

"I heard him crying." She wanted to press her hand to her mouth to fight the tears pushing at the back of her eyes, but she only clasped her hands more tightly in her lap. "He sounded so scared." Jen closed her eyes until she'd regained her calm center. "The killer might be holding Buddy in one of the nearby office buildings. I think that's where he was when he called."

York didn't glance around, but the tension radiating from him told Jen he wanted to. "Why?" he growled.

"He knew the bomb squad came, that I dropped the doll."

"So he's somewhere with a view of Gordon's office. That's any one of a number of buildings. What were the background sounds and his exact words?"

As she related the sketchy details, York put the car in gear, and pulled out into the traffic.

Her heart pounded. "Why are we leaving? He's here somewhere."

"Somewhere is the operative word. I know your reporter's zeal makes you want to stay—"

"This has nothing to do with my job! Don't you know that?" Electrically charged air vibrated around them, closing in on her. She grabbed the door handle. "I can't leave Buddy. Let me out."

He jammed down on the master door lock control, imprisoning her. Then he leaned over and touched her hand. "Trust me. We have to do this right. We need to try to get a description. And we need help from SWAT."

York got on his cell phone and set up a SWAT search of all buildings with a view of Gordon's office. When he finished he said, "It'll take them a while to organize and move in. And it may be useless. Chances are he's already left the area. On the positive side, if he has to drag Buddy around, it'll slow him down."

"Not if he ties him up, and tosses him in the trunk of his car." Sobs pushed at the back of her throat. "Oh, York, Buddy won't survive in a trunk in this August heat."

"As long as he needs the boy, he won't harm him."

"You don't know that." She couldn't keep her voice from breaking. "We're talking about a psycho."

"But an obsessed psycho with a goal." York's words came out husky and ragged. His jaw twitched, but otherwise he appeared calm. "What did he tell you to do?"

She took a deep breath. "Ditch you."

His eyes narrowed. "Then what?"

"He said he'd be watching and would show up. If he thought I told you..."

"It's okay. You did the right thing."

She prayed that was true. "But I have to make it look like I'm playing along and—"

"We have to control this, not react rashly." York increased his speed, zigzagging in and out of traffic. "SWAT will be more effective with a description. Maybe we can get that at the church." York paused and glanced over at Jen. "The babysitter or someone else might've seen something."

Jen's heart pounded. "But Buddy's alone with—"

"Don't lose it, reporter. We'll let that psycho think you're just waiting for a chance to take off."

Right now she couldn't function like a reporter, she was thinking like a mother who loved her child. "Fat chance he'll think that with us fleeing the area."

"He'll believe anything he wants to believe. And he'll want to believe that he's in control—especially of you, the object of his obsession."

Jen couldn't argue anymore. Buddy was out there somewhere with a clock ticking away the remaining moments of his life.

York parked in a rust-eaten metal carport across the alley from Pastor Loraine Stuart's church. "We won't be here long," he said. "Then we'll head back and check on the SWAT operation."

Jen bit her lip. Would it be too late?

York took her hand as they left the carport. She wanted to trust the strength of his touch, the

sense of unity, but every time she thought of Buddy the panic started building again. They cut through a vacant lot to get to the church grounds. People milled about, combing the area.

"We're looking for a missing boy," a gray-haired man said in a sober tone. "Seen him?"

"No," Jen said in a choked voice. In the distance, she saw Shelly and Pastor Loraine Stuart. "There's Shelly," she told York, gesturing with her head.

"We need to talk to the boy's mother," York said.

He gave Jen's hand a squeeze. "I'll break the news to her."

"No!" Jen withdrew her hand from York's. "I have to do it. If I hadn't called Shelly to my office, Buddy wouldn't be missing."

Swallowing past the huge lump her throat, Jen approached Shelly.

Before Jen could speak, Shelly said, "Buddy's wandered off." She rubbed her arms. "Probably hiding, and laughing at the trouble he's causing. Wait'll I get my hands on him, the little imp—"

"He's not hiding." Jen couldn't keep her voice from wavering.

Alarm glinted in Shelly's eyes. "How do you know? Have you seen him?"

Jen took Shelly's arm. "Let's sit down."

Shelly's frightened gaze bore into Jen's. She clutched Jen's arm. "I don't want to sit down! What's wrong?" She'd gone pale, as though she already knew.

God, *how can I ease the blow of this?* When York came up behind Jen and his warm hand settled gently on her shoulder, she drew courage from his touch. She took a fortifying breath, hating the words she had to speak. "Buddy's been kidnapped."

Shelly curled her hands into fists and shut her eyes for a moment, her thin body stiff. "No! It's not true!"

Jen's throat ached. She'd just ripped out Shelly's heart, and felt like it was her own. "The strangler has him."

"How do you know that?" she screamed.

Jen forced out the words, "I got a call. I heard Buddy."

Shelly glared at York. "What are you doing about it?"

"I've called in SWAT and—"

"Why the hell are you here?" She pulled at her hair like a crazy woman. "Why aren't you out looking for him?" Shelly whirled away, gripping herself as if to keep from falling apart. She paced a few steps, then jerked around to face Jen and York. "Every time I get around you people, something terrible happens."

"We're going to get him back for you," York said with a husky voice. "But we need some information."

"Your damned need for information is what started all this."

Shelly waved her arms wildly. "Get away from me and my children. And stay away."

Jen closed her eyes, feeling Shelly's pain and anger to her bones. The merging stories—strangler and toxic waste dumping—had gotten too personal, and Jen felt she'd completely lost her reporter objectivity.

Pastor Loraine rushed up and put her arms around Shelly. "What's happened?"

York quickly explained, while darting glances at Jen as though he was acutely aware of the courage it had taken for her to give Shelly the bad news and knew her guilt was tearing her apart. "I need to talk to the babysitter," he said.

Loraine gestured with her head. "Plump woman in the purple and white flowered dress. Name's Agnes."

With tears in her muddy brown eyes, Agnes said she'd placed baby Lissa on a blanket on a picnic table to diaper her. When she looked up Buddy was gone.

York questioned the others in the search party. They hadn't seen any strangers hanging around.

“Don’t give up,” he told Jen. “Let’s talk to Jeffy.”

“Saw a gray car,” the boy said. “Going real fast out of the parking lot.”

“Did you see your brother?”

Jeffy slowly shook his head, and tears pooled in his eyes. “Did the bogeyman with the ax get Buddy?”

The tremor in that small, scared voice squeezed Jen’s heart. York’s eyes looked pained and she knew he wished he didn’t have to answer that. Her heart fluttered when York squatted down and drew Jeffy to his chest and patted his back. Over and over he proved that he had the kind of special bond with children that would make him a fantastic father.

She hated to break up their moment, but time was ticking away. York looked up and their gazes locked. Moisture glinted in his eyes. *Oh. My God.* This forceful man she counted on to defeat a ruthless killer had this incredibly gentle, caring side. Although she’d known he was kind, the full impact hit her now like the second rush of a tsunami wave.

Jeffy turned. “Hi, Jen.”

Her heart pounded. He looked so much like Buddy, the same soft brown hair, the same wide, trusting eyes. Pain slashed through her skull—Buddy was in the hands of a psycho. The fiend’s eerie voice echoed in her head, warning that only she could do something about it.

She swallowed. “Hi, Sweetie.” Her heart pounded. “York we have to—”

He put a finger to his lips and gestured with his head toward the boy. “Shhh. Little ears. Let’s take Jeffy back to his mother, then we’ll talk.”

Forget talk. She wanted action.

When York returned the boy to Shelly, the young mother started ranting like a wild woman. York took her cursing blows for a moment, then, in a very low voice, said they could discuss his heritage later, after he saved her son. Jen’s heart cheered. Shelly merely whirled away from him into Pastor Loraine’s arms.

Jen shifted her weight. *Come on. Come on. There’s no time for this.*

Loraine met York’s concerned look over Shelly’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. I’ll help her get through this.”

York nodded, his face grim.

Jen bit her lip. “York—”

He raised a hand in a stop gesture. “Hold on one more minute—” He stepped over to the policewomen who had just arrived, and asked her to protect Shelly and her family until the officer assigned the job showed up.

Suddenly, the hair on the nape of Jen’s neck prickled. She felt sinister eyes on her, riding her already twitching nerves like fingernails on a blackboard. She glanced around and moved closer to York. “The killer is nearby,” she whispered. “I feel his eyes on me, waiting for me to make my break. Get set. I’ll draw him out in the open. You grab him.”

York scanned the area, then seized her arm. “No way! There’s no plan. You’re not wired.”

With Buddy’s tearstained face flashing in her mind like a neon light, Jen yanked free. “I have to go!” With long, swift strides, she ran toward the busy street beyond the parking lot. All that mattered was Buddy and drawing out the psycho.

“Stop, Jen. You’re not thinking straight!” York was hot on her heels.

Okay, make this look good, she thought. Easy enough. She’d gotten a letter for track in high school, stayed in shape. *Burn muscles, burn.* Where was the killer? *Come out, you lowlife.* She was leaving York in her dust. *Come on York, get with the program. Your hotshot brother bragged that you were a top athlete, a runner. Show me your stuff.*

Her breathing was good. She poured on more speed.

When she reached the four-lane street, she zigzagged between steadily moving cars. She glanced

back. A stalled bus blocked her view. Then she saw it! A Goodwill truck speeding toward her. The driver wasn't slowing down. *Oh. No.* He wasn't going to stop. If only she could make it to the center parkway. *Go legs, go. Oh, God.* She couldn't out run the truck; it was coming too fast.

Footsteps thundered behind her. Strong arms closed around her, lifting and propelling her out of the way. The flying tackle took her to the grassy, center parkway. York's chest curved protectively around her back as they rolled in a tangled spool of force and momentum. When they came to a stop, they were both gasping for breath. He turned her over to face him. His sunlit blue eyes glinted down at her. "Dammit, Jen, didn't you hear me shout stop?"

Her breasts rose and fell against his chest, their heartbeats merging. "I had to draw him out."

Without releasing her, York flipped open his cell phone and called for a nearby squad car to stop any Goodwill trucks in the area. "Probably won't locate him in this traffic." A dark, wavy lock fell over York's forehead. "This was the craziest stunt yet. What got into you? What are you, a marathon runner?"

She brushed a leaf from his hair, conscious only of the hardness of his body, his heat. He held her as though he'd never let her go. She didn't want him to. Ever.

"If you hadn't pushed me out of the way..." She couldn't stop trembling. "You saved my life."

He touched her face. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine." It was bizarre. They were just lying there on the wide, grassy strip of the median, holding each other as cars sped by on both sides. He shifted, and his thigh pressed against hers, sending a warm tingle to her core. Incredible. She had just faced death, yet she'd never felt more alive.

Steeling herself against the untimely surge of desire, she asked, "The driver of the truck was the strangler, wasn't he?"

"Taped over plates," York said. "Driver bundled up like January in August? Definitely."

"Taped over plates? Then you didn't get the license number?"

"No, dammit. And you almost got killed for nothing."

York helped her to her feet and brushed lingering grass from her knit top and slacks with gentle fingers. She trembled from his touch and cursed her inability to keep desire at bay. Her throat constricted. "What'll happen to Buddy now?"

* * * *

York clenched his jaw. How typical of Jen. She was almost hit by a truck and her concerns were only for the boy. "I don't know. You tried to ditch me. And your flight was sure-as-hell believable. But thank God, I foiled the psycho's plan."

Jen's face paled. He gripped her arm, and using the crosswalk this time, urged her back across the street toward his car. "I was looking for a gray Honda," she said. "Not a truck."

"No doubt it was stolen. But somehow the Honda fits into all this. At first I thought it was a rental car. However, after the break in at Shelly's apartment Ted checked with the local agencies. No one rented a car with the Honda's description. And Brock rented a red Mustang."

"Then Lee is off the hook."

Her loyal, hopeful tone twisted in York's gut. "No one is," he repeated like a mantra. "Brock could have stolen this truck and he probably has access to a gray Honda."

"Other than his bullet wound, you have no reason to think he's the strangler."

"Call it instinct." All he knew for sure was the suspicious Honda on the street the afternoon of the ax man's attack was the killer's car. And then he'd grabbed a Goodwill truck.

York tried to help Jen into his T-Bird, but she shook off his hold.

Her green eyes sparked fire. "Admit it. You want Lee to be the strangler. But you can't tie him

to the car, the murders, the mayor or any of the other suspects, and it gripes your suspicious soul.”

He rounded the car and lunged behind the wheel. She was right. He couldn’t tie it all together, but he wasn’t willing to give up on Brock as a suspect.

“Look,” Jen said. “I just want this to be over. Tell me how to get Buddy back home.” Her voice broke. “I still hear his cries.”

York felt like someone had kicked him in the stomach. He knew the longer a child was in the hands of a psycho the less chance of getting him back alive.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Earlier, when the SWAT pigs started their six-block search, the killer left the area quickly in the Goodwill truck he'd hot-wired and snatched earlier from the GW parking lot. Now, across town, he cruised through an abandoned industrial area purchased for a tunnel right-of-way. The deserted buildings had become a hangout for street people and his temporary home.

The road curved past a crumbling parking structure and over rusty railroad tracks that led nowhere. He stopped in front of *his* building. His heart pounded. He'd been here before, killed here before. Earlier he'd sawed off the state's heavy-duty padlocks and replaced them with his own. Rigged with pilfered electricity, the place had all the comforts of home. He pressed a button inside the pedestrian door and the twenty foot high bay rumbled open. He drove inside and parked next to the Honda. Later, he would ditch the truck.

He carried the boy over his shoulder, rolled up inside the Oriental rug he'd copped from an executive office in the building across from *The Globe*. Getting the kid out unseen turned out to be almost too easy. He laughed, and shook his head, seeing a soothing yellow brightness to his world. Who could explain it? The seemingly difficult was easy and the simple troublesome.

The yellow glow in his mind faded. He gritted his teeth as blackness gripped him. Why was it harder to control his moods lately? Had he taken his medication? He kicked an empty wine bottle out of his way, and let out a string of expletives, each cruder than the one before. Temptation, momentary insanity and fickle fate had allowed the stubborn reporter to slip through his fingers! He had the bait to bring her to him. But he'd gotten too excited. He'd seen her break free from the detective and estimated where she'd cross the street. He'd intended to stop in front of her, flash his gun and order her into the truck, but when he got her in his sights, he pressed the gas pedal all the way to the floor. It was such a powerful adrenaline rush to decide the moment someone would die.

A trickle of sweat slid down his back. The hit and run should've gone without a hitch. But the bus in the other lane moved ahead, allowing the detective to charge onto the scene and ruin everything.

The killer swore again. It was Jen's fault that he didn't follow the plan. Her fault. Not his. He had to remember to take his medication. The job required cold, rational control. His boss didn't know about the blackness, the loss of self-control. The killer shifted the load on his shoulder. Was the kid still alive? The rear of the van had been a furnace. Dead bait wouldn't work.

In an open area next to the boiler room, he dropped the rolled carpet to the floor and gave it a kick. It unfurled, dumping the tiny, limp body onto the concrete. Something about the child lying there touched him. There'd been another boy—a boy who'd been abused and beaten and left for dead. His heart pounded. "You can't die." He ripped the tape from the boy's mouth and yanked out the cloth. The boy was him—he was the boy. The killer placed his mouth to the boy's, and pinching his nose, he gave him rhythmic blasts of air, giving him the CPR he'd learned in the medical corps before the bastards kicked him out. A loose cannon, they'd called him. "Breathe, dammit!" The killer's trembling voice echoed back at him as the tiny chest began to rise and fall.

* * * *

Desperate for news about Buddy, Jen matched York's quick pace as they hurried up the steps to the cordoned off building. A SWAT leader with a butch haircut stood sharply erect, waiting for them in the lobby. His grim look killed any hopes that his team had found the child.

"The strangler got away," he said flatly. "But we found the office where he camped out." The SWAT leader bent and pulled a plastic bag from his evidence case. "The killer's calling card."

Jen knew the coiled contents contained exactly a two-foot length of fishing line. The killer was

obsessive about that. She rubbed her arms. *And about killing me.*

York drew her closer as though he needed the contact as much as she did. “Any idea how he got the boy out unseen?”

“The SOB stole an Oriental rug from one of the exec offices. Must’ve rolled the boy inside.”

“Any witnesses?”

“A janitor, but he ain’t talkin’. Strangled.”

“Fingerprints?”

“Gloves, as always.”

York stared at the bag holding the fishing line for a moment. “I want to check the office where that was found.”

The leader gave the floor and suite number, then joined his men. Jen heard him say, “We’ve done all we can do here.” She closed her eyes briefly at his futile tone.

“Don’t give up,” York said huskily in her ear. He took her elbow in his warm grip and guided her to the elevator.

They rode up in silence. He slid his arm around her waist and she looked up at him. He stood tall, his chiseled features hardened in fierce determination. How could he do this job, day in and day out? It had to take its toll. Jen fought the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. It seemed they were always a step behind. Battling her sense of helplessness, she vowed to find a way to turn it around and gain the upper hand.

Inside the office, Jen noticed the sun-faded areas outside a rectangle on the carpet where the Oriental rug had lain. All the furniture was pushed to one side of the room and stacked in a pyramid. “Our strangler is not only big, but he’s strong,” she said. “Strong enough to carry a nine by twelve carpet with a small boy rolled inside.”

“It would be a bit unwieldy, but not all that heavy for a guy who stays in shape. Brock and Zombolas are both big apes, probably strong too. Any guy their size could manage it.”

She knew Lee was strong; he could bench press 225 pounds, but her bet would be with Zombolas. He looked like he was born in a gym and he had the pit bull reputation. The reality of the situation hit her. The fishing line, the missing rug, Buddy’s cries on the phone... Tears welled in her eyes. *Stop it.* She’d be no help if she crumbled. *Get busy. Stay busy.*

While York searched for overlooked evidence, Jen called in the *missing boy* piece to *The Globe* hotline. She had a job to do—every paper and news station would be breaking the story. There was no chance of keeping it quiet with SWAT teams crawling all over a six-block city area. She didn’t mention the strangler. York’s orders—he’d made a point of saying that a guy with an egomaniac personality might kill the boy for the notoriety.

When she finished, Jen stared out the window and picked out *The Globe* office where she’d been standing just a few hours ago. Her breath caught. It was directly across from here. *Oh, God.* With a rifle, the killer could’ve picked her off.

Fighting the horrifying wave of awareness, she glanced down. Glistening in a beam of afternoon sunlight was a strand of blond hair. Zombolas had black hair. Her throat tightened. What was she thinking? It probably didn’t even belong to the killer. It could belong to the guy who worked here, even one of the SWAT guys. Let the lab decide. “York, look at this.”

With tweezers, he picked it up and slipped it into a clear plastic bag. To his credit, he didn’t mention it was blond. “Good eyes, Jen,” was all he said. He paused and looked at her with probing eyes. “Unless this hair pans out, there’s nothing here to identify the killer, or to help us locate Buddy. We need the killer to contact you again. And he will.”

“Let’s go to my apartment and make it easy for him.”

York rubbed his jaw. “We’ll set up a look-alike female officer to take your place.”

Jen massaged her tight neck muscles. “How long will that take?”

"I'll get right on it." He grabbed a phone.

She pressed down on the disconnect button. "There's no time to find someone else. I have to be the bait."

"Not again. No way!"

Jen held his squint-eyed gaze, keeping her finger firmly in place. "You know I can handle this. I can shoot. Run. Think on my feet. Please, York."

He removed her hand from the button. "You're capable, but you aren't a trained and experienced cop."

"We can do it smart this time. Wire me. Take all the precautions."

He put the receiver back in the cradle and stroked her arms. "Look, Jen. I want two things: to keep you alive and save Buddy, but—"

"The killer said if he doesn't get me, Buddy dies."

"And if he gets you, you'll both die. Accept this, Buddy's the bait to get *you*. We can let the killer think it'll happen. But he must never get you." York's tone deepened to throaty a whisper. "Never."

* * * *

Jen stared at the mysterious equipment bag York had dropped on the floor beside her couch, curiosity bursting inside of her. "Okay, York. Show me your gadgets!"

He had stopped at the PD equipment room to pick up what he needed before she'd insisted that they stop at the grocery store. He unzipped the massive burlap bag, showed her the call-tracing and wiring devices, and explained the process.

She stiffened, reminded of why they were here. "What do you want me to do?" Fighting her inept feeling, she joined him on the couch.

York briefly put his hand over hers, sending heat through his fingers to her cooler skin. "Follow orders and stick close to me. Each time you step out the door you'll wear a wire." He unscrewed the mouthpiece from the phone. "I have men in the field tracing all incoming calls and running down our suspects."

"So that's what you were up to at the PD when you left me in your office to cool my heels and drink that acid you called coffee."

"I had to set some wheels in motion. I ordered an all points bulletin on Brock."

She bit her tongue to keep from saying anything. Lee's disappearance made it look bad for him.

"Ted's trying to reach Tormont," York continued. "Got an undercover man watching the mayor, but Zombolas has disappeared. He was supposed to go with the mayor on his yacht but didn't show up."

Jen sighed. Any discussion about what that might mean would be pure speculation. She briefly watched York use a delicate tool to adjust a tiny screw on the phone's innards. "Well, while you play with your cop toys, I'll make us a couple of sandwiches."

"Good. We need to keep our strength up for what lies ahead."

She needed more than food to get through the next hours. If only she could bury herself in York's arms and forget everything for a while. But all her concentration had to focus on doing whatever was necessary to find and save Buddy.

In the kitchen, Jen looped the apron over her head and secured the ties around her waist. She hadn't realized how much she needed to be around her own things, and live like a normal person if only for a few hours. Still, it felt wrong to be doing normal things with Buddy in the clutches of a killer, but if she didn't stay busy she'd climb the walls.

When this was all over she wanted to make York a real home-cooked meal. With the possibility of the killer's call coming at any time, she'd resorted to soup and sandwiches. However, it seemed

important to make the dessert from scratch for York before she faced the killer. She shivered. Just in case she never got the chance again...

As Jen assembled what she needed, she heard the CD player come on; it was Stevie Wonder's "*I Just Called To Say I Love You*." One of her favorites, but it sent a shiver down her spine. If the killer called, it wouldn't be to say I love you.

* * * *

While Jen worked in the kitchen, York attached the call tracing device to her phone. Considering the death threats and attacks, she'd held up well, he thought. However, the tension of waiting for the killer's call might be the straw that tipped her scale out of balance. He had to try for some lightness between them to make waiting easier.

The smell of baking chocolate floated from the kitchen, teasing his senses and making his stomach growl in anticipation. His first encounter with Jen's near-empty refrigerator and bare cupboards convinced him she couldn't cook, but maybe he'd been wrong.

On the way here, she'd thrown him a curve when she insisted upon stopping at the grocery store in the middle of setting up this trap. Thinking about it now, it made sense. They needed to eat, and she needed to stay busy.

He'd been so intent on attaching the call-tracing equipment and talking to the field crew that he'd sensed, more than saw Jen setting the dining room table. York glanced at his watch. Everything was ready to close the net. He started to dial Ted's cellular unit, leaving Jen's phone free for incoming calls.

"Can you take a break to eat?" Jen stood in the doorway of the kitchen, looking adorable and deceptively domestic, a smudge of flour on her cheek. Her upbeat tone didn't fool him, but he admired the hell out of it.

He forced a light tone. "You bet. Something smells great."

York held her chair, noticing the stiff way she moved, her darted glance at the phone. He sat down next to her, amazed at her courageous efforts to proceed as if she wasn't coiled tight waiting for the ring.

He took the soup she passed to him, grazing her finger with the nail of his thumb. "How did you whip all this up so fast?"

Jen's face flushed, making her even more beautiful. "I have my little secrets."

"Intriguing." He groaned at the desire-driven huskiness in his voice. He knew they were no longer talking about food.

She was putting up a good front, but worry lurked in her eyes. God, she was a trooper. The longer he was with Jen the more he thought he'd like to share the rest of his life with her. He'd known he loved her from their first kiss, but no way would she ever give up her career.

"Have you always wanted to be a reporter?"

"Since the third grade. That's the year my teacher, Mrs. Knight, told me I was going to be a writer, and her words stuck. By the time I entered college I knew what I wanted."

He sniffed the chocolate in the air. "To major in homemaking?" he teased, hoping to relax her a bit.

"No, wise guy. Writing. I got a Bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Southern California, with additional studies in English and liberal arts."

"Then you joined *The Globe*?"

"Not right away. I had to pay my dues. I worked as a copy girl for *The Sun* newspaper in San Bernardino, California. Then finally an opportunity opened up on *The Globe* for a staff reporter."

York felt a twist in his gut. "You really worked hard to get where you are." He could never ask

her to give that up. He'd been selfish and arrogant to even consider it. He wanted her, and he wanted a stay-at-home wife to care for his kids. It looked like he couldn't have both. It was a damned no-win situation. He touched the slight scar over her eyebrow. "Get this falling off the jungle gym?"

She shook her head. "Got it chasing a story."

"Don't you mind living dangerously?"

"It goes with the job... No different than being a cop."

York shoved the last of his sandwich into his mouth. He found it difficult to swallow it. This beautiful, talented woman he loved would never have a normal home life. How could he bring kids into a situation like that?

Jen rose and headed for the kitchen. "Since you saved my life today, you deserve a special dessert."

Seconds later, she paused at the door. His heart pounded. The dessert was the brownies she'd written about in her letter while pretending to be his old-fashioned woman.

She sat down with her own chocolate square and waited with expectation on her face.

He took a bite and warm, fudgy chocolate, bits of nuts, and peanut butter melted in his mouth. "Ummmm. You didn't exaggerate. You make the best brownies in Boston! Probably in the world!" And she'd made them just for him.

"I've wanted to hear you say that since—"

"Since you told me in no uncertain terms to get my blasted sweets at the doughnut shop," he said, remembering the spunky fire in her eyes. Now, there was something else in them, a look he couldn't quite identify. An overwhelming urge gripped him, and with the wonderful rich taste of chocolate still exciting his taste buds, he leaned over and kissed her. He groaned at the warm, softness of her lips—the chocolatey sweetness of her mouth. He loved this woman so much he thought his heart would burst.

The pager at Jen's waist went off. They jumped apart, exchanging looks that conveyed their shared question. Did the killer know her beeper number?

* * * *

Jen didn't recognize the out-of-area-code number. She grabbed her cellular from her tote bag and punched in the digits with tense fingers. York watched, narrowing his eyes in concentration. When the caller answered, she let out a sigh of relief. "It's Dory," Jen told him, covering the mouthpiece with her hand. York nodded and began to clear away the dishes. Weak-kneed, Jen took the cellular with her to the couch, and sank down in cushions with one leg tucked under her.

"I've been worried," Dory said. "Is your weekend in Salem going okay?"

"I'm home." Jen filled her in on the latest murder and their unexpected return to Boston. They talked about Buddy's kidnapping until tears burned the back of Jen's eyes. "What about you?" she said, needing to change the subject.

"We're having a ball. But there's something else... While Clark and I browsed a gift shop, I spied this neat black and white photo of an underground tunnel, dark with lots of shadows. It reminded me of the last talk I had with Gordon. He was really uptight. Probably your cop friend already knows this but—"

Jen gripped the cellular tighter—the thread of her patience shredding until there was nothing left. "For God's sake what bothered Gordon?" She bit her lip, immediately sorry for her outburst. Dory had worked as photographer on a number of assignments with Gordon and was familiar with his some of his stories.

"Take it easy, kiddo. I'm getting to that. Several bodies showed up at the same place, like the

killer had a favorite spot, as if something about the location drew him back.”

Excitement bubbled in Jen. “I know the place you’re talking about.” The *repeat* murder- site was an abandoned warehouse where the state had bought the right-of-way for a proposed underground tunnel.

“Hope the information helps. Clark and I will be praying for the boy’s safe return.”

“Hey, I’m sorry I got testy,” Jen said. “I’m just so darned worried.”

“Don’t fret about it. And stay safe.”

After the call, Jen turned to York, her mind on fire. “Remember the building where all those bodies were found?”

“Yeah.”

“Dory said Gordon had zeroed in on that place, working on a theory to explain why the strangler was drawn back in spite of the greater risk.” Jen tapped her lips thoughtfully. “Maybe it was just the familiarity, or perhaps the location excited him some way. Or he lived in the area.”

“We checked former employees and nearby residents but came up empty. We staked out the building for weeks, but he didn’t come back. It was as though he knew we were waiting.”

“You shouldn’t have given up. Gordon might still be alive if your department hadn’t dropped the ball.”

“Looking back, we made some mistakes.”

“You’re still making them. Your chief won’t even admit there’s a serial killer on the loose. Now more people are dead.” Her voice broke in spite of her efforts to control it. “And that maniac has Buddy.”

The ringing phone stopped her tirade. They both stared at it. Jen swallowed, then grabbed up the line. “Hello,” she said with all the calmness she could muster.

“Say hi to the nice lady,” the electronically altered voice said.

Trembling, Jen jabbed the speaker button.

“I want my mommy.” Buddy’s cries echoed around the room, bouncing off the walls like ricocheting bullets.

York was at her side in an instant and squeezed her shoulder. Jen closed her eyes briefly. *Thank God Buddy is still alive.* “Don’t hurt him.”

“You disappointed me. I told you to ditch the cop.”

“I did. I did exactly what you said. Why did you try to run me down?” Jen fought her anger. It wouldn’t be wise to provoke this maniac as long as he had Buddy.

York tapped his watch. Jen nodded, understanding she was to keep the killer on the line long enough for the police to trace the call.

“Forget it,” the killer said. “Timer’s on, so listen. If you want the kid, walk outside and wait. I’ll send a taxi.”

Jen listened for background sounds. There was a whirring, like a thousand fans. “A taxi?”

“Don’t try to stall me. If you’re followed I’ll slip fishing wire around the kid’s scrawny neck. One quick jerk—”

Jen shivered. *Say anything—just keep him on the line.* “Which taxi company?”

“City Cab. The kid’s life is in your hands.”

“Wait! I have something important—”

At the sound of the loud click, Jen met York’s gaze. “Did I do it?”

“Takes time for Operations to verify a trace.”

“Did you hear the whirring sound?”

“Maybe freeway noise. The warehouse where those bodies were found is by a freeway.” York opened the sliding glass door, stepped out onto the terrace and looked down at the street.

“See Ted?” Jen knew it was too soon for the taxi.

"Not yet. Clever of you to peak the killer's curiosity with the *important- thing-bait*."

"I..."

The phone rang.

"Get ready," York said. "I'll lay you odds that's him calling back right now."

Jen took a breath before lifting the receiver. She could do this. Didn't she brag that she could think on her feet? "Hello," she said in a strong voice.

"What's important?" the killer demanded.

She shivered. York came close and started to put his arm around her, but she shook her head and held him away with a firm hand. She needed all her wits to keep the killer on the line.

"You're missing a once-in-a-lifetime break," she told him. "You should help me write the strangler story and grab your fifteen minutes of fame."

The killer's laugh vibrated across the phone lines, slithering through her, quickly finding its way to her spine, where it lodged and twisted like a dull needle.

"Think I'm nuts? You expect me to lay it out for the cops who are too dumb to catch me without help. Is that it?"

"Stay anonymous." Her tone was much braver than she felt. "Just be *THE STRANGLER*. It's perfect. We'd both get what we want. Not even the first Boston Strangler terrorized a city like this. You have a powerful story here. I'll tell it your way."

"Your idea is moronic."

Moronic. Jen shuddered. The day before she'd broken up with Lee, he'd said one of her ideas was moronic. While she couldn't condemn him based on a word... "Think about it. Fame is heady stuff. That's why movie stars—"

"Taxi's on its way. Get in it, or the kid dies." He laughed maniacally. "We'll talk about my fame when you get here."

The line disconnected.

She placed the receiver in the cradle with a shaking hand and faced York. "Did I keep him on the line long enough this time?"

York exhaled. "Is that what you were doing? It sounded like you'd lost your mind."

"Not quite." She headed for the bedroom. York followed, looking puzzled. She yanked open the night stand drawer, withdrew her gun and checked it. It was still loaded.

York reached for her. She sidestepped him. "You *have* lost your mind!"

Jen whirled around and ran to the living room.

York stayed right behind her. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Taxi'll be here any minute. Gotta go."

"I won't let you."

For a fleeting moment, she thought of pointing the gun at him to keep him away. She couldn't. The gun handler's code played in her head: *Don't point it unless you plan to shoot it*. "You can't stop me."

He walked toward her slowly. "Give me the gun, Jen. You're not thinking straight."

"I am. Never straighter." An image of Buddy's frightened tearstained face flashed in her mind. Her own tears broke loose and ran down her face. "It's my fault the killer has him."

York came close. She put the gun behind her, keeping it out of his reach. He brushed away her tears with his finger. "Think, Jen. Then he'll have both of you. That won't help Buddy. We'll get a policewoman to go as you."

Something tightened in Jen's chest. "Dammit. Where is she? Not here. The taxi's on its way. The clock's ticking on Buddy's life and I'm the only one who can stop it."

"How?" York gave her a small shake. His voice was husky. "I won't let you commit suicide."

Jen met his gaze with eyes blurred by tears. "Then come up with a plan. Quick. Didn't you hear Buddy's cries? We don't know what that madman might be doing to him."

* * * *

York tightened his jaw. She was using his worst fears against him—his need to save everyone. The absurd part was: he wanted to give in to her because he loved her, and knew he couldn't for the same reason. "This isn't open for negotiation."

"Wanna bet?" She thrust out her chin, looking so damned stubborn. "Figure out how I can do this safely, or I'll muddle through alone and make it up as I go along. I mean it, York."

He didn't doubt her resolve for a minute. *Lord*. How could he fight the echo of Buddy's cries, her tears, and that heartbroken tremor in her voice? York rubbed his aching head. He'd lost all professionalism, and for sure, his mind. "I could wire you, follow you, get Ted and a radio team into the act. It's risky as hell. You'll have to obey my instructions to the letter."

"Just wire me, and let's get this show on the road."

"Slow down. If we're going to do this, we have to cover all the bases."

He checked with radio dispatch and learned they had traced the call. When he hung up, he turned to Jen. "The call came from a pay phone about six blocks from the warehouse in the tunnel right-of-way. The SWAT team is positioning to close in. We won't need you."

"If I don't get in that taxi, that fiend will kill Buddy."

York paced a few steps. "If I didn't see a way for this to work—"

* * * *

Jen heard the misgivings in his voice. It was costing him to allow this. "You won't be sorry."

"I'm already sorry." York dropped his equipment bag on the table and began laying out what they would need. He wired her carefully, giving instructions as he worked. She fought the tiny bursts of desire set off by his touch. "I'll be with you every minute." His deep voice made her heart skip a beat. "Back-up will be nearby. The killer won't let Buddy go, but if you can separate them—"

She pushed away wisps of hair from her flushed face. "What do you mean, you'll be with me every minute? The killer said—"

"He may think he's running this show. But he's not." York met her gaze. "Keep this in mind. Your goal is to separate Buddy from the killer not have a shoot out at the O.K. Corral."

* * * *

York knew he couldn't leave anything to chance. He got Ted on the phone to arrange a little surprise for the killer, then he went out on the terrace to watch for the taxi. He wiped the sweat from his upper lip with the back of his hand. In spite of all his precautions, something could go wrong. If anything happened to Jen...

York rubbed his forehead. *Damn*. Pushing the killer against the wall was like lighting a stick of dynamite. He had to believe in the plan. It was the only way it would work. Jen was strong and smart. She'd already proved she could react quickly to danger. He had to trust her and himself.

* * * *

Jen joined York on the shadowy terrace, and forced a smile when he gave her waist a little squeeze. "Ted just pulled up across the street," he said. "Get set."

She took a deep, cleansing breath, and looked up into the dark sky, searching until she found the brightest star. "Star light, star bright," she murmured under her breath, "let me have this wish

tonight. Please, no hitches to this rescue.” Impulsively, she added her secret wish: *Let me find out that I’m wrong, that happy families do exist, and let me live to be part of one.*

“Sure you want to go through with this?” York asked.

She nodded, afraid to trust her voice. A few minutes later, she walked out of her apartment, wired, and with her gun in a shoulder purse. York lagged behind, ducking into shadows. An uneasiness pressed around her as if the air were a vice, squeezing tighter and tighter. Her hands felt clammy, and her knees shook.

City Cab came slowly around the corner and stopped at the curb. On cue, she tripped and fell. The driver got out and came to her aid. She sighed in relief. It wasn’t Lee.

Ted made a U-turn and skidded to a stop along side the taxi. He leapt from the car. Flashing his badge to the driver, he hustled him into his unmarked car. Over his shoulder, he called, “Get in the taxi, Jen.”

She slid into the back seat and rolled down the window. She didn’t know the whole plan and wanted to hear what Ted was saying to the driver. She couldn’t make out their words, but they were arguing.

She hadn’t seen York approach the cab, but suddenly there he was. Ted reached out the window and handed him the cab driver’s cap and jacket.

Low and in the shadows, York put them on. “What’s the deal?” he asked.

“Some guy with a hat low over his face and wearing dark clothes paid the driver fifty bucks to take Jen to Old Town on the North End,” Ted said. “She’s supposed to get out at the corner of Hanover and Richmond and walk toward Salem Street. A limo will be waiting curbside.”

York nodded and slid behind the wheel, rocking the taxi with his weight. “Remember, no matter what, don’t get into any other vehicle.”

As York started the engine, Jen glanced around. It had taken them about twenty minutes to set this up, plenty of time for the killer to get here, too. Was he nearby watching? If so, they’d just signed Buddy’s death warrant.

She hoped that wariness had kept him away, but that his obsession would make him reckless at some point.

Fifteen minutes later, at Hanover and Richmond, she slipped her purse strap over her shoulder and got out of the cab and walked quickly toward Salem Street. The sense of being watched scraped across the back of her neck. She felt a low-frequency vibration skimming along her nerve endings. If she could just stop trembling...

Jen knew the plan was for York to park the cab and join Ted in his unmarked car. A police van with tracking equipment was parked nearby. It was comforting to know she was a constant green blip on a watchful cop’s screen.

Besides the tracking device, she was to keep in touch with York by talking into the tiny one-way microphone attached to the underside of her blouse collar. Cars whizzed past. Loud music throbbed from a passing van. Exhaust fumes mixed with the aroma of garlic and tomato wafting from an Italian restaurant up the street.

The North End was Boston’s oldest neighborhood and different from any other in Boston. Even at night the streets and narrow alleys rang with constant banter and laughter of residents and visitors. She should feel safe with all these people around. But with all the noise, would anyone hear her if she screamed? York would. It felt good knowing he was out there protecting her, and a new revelation to know how deeply she wanted him to care about her. “Just checking,” she murmured into the microphone. “But I know you’re there.”

* * * *

"I'm here, all right," he said, frustrated that she couldn't hear him. He'd heard the tremor in her voice, and longed to reassure her. He glanced over at Ted who shrugged, looking sympathetic. They hadn't released the cabby for fear he might tip off the killer. The irate taxi driver grumbled about the fares he was losing.

"Pipe down." York didn't want to miss anything Jen was saying.

* * * *

Secure that York could hear her if she called out, she walked a little faster. Everything was going according to plan and she had the best protection possible. So why was her stomach in knots? She passed a colorful poster advertising a baseball game. "Go Red Sox's!" she said as much for her own peace of mind as for York's. She wiped her damp hands on a tissue and drew her cardigan tighter against a chill that had nothing to do with the warm August night. Her stomach turned at the scents of garlic, sausages and espresso drifting through the air from the restaurants and cafes.

The bell from Old North Church rang out. She flinched. *Calm down*, she told herself. "I just passed the Paul Revere House," she whispered into the microphone. "No limo in sight. Not that I expected to see one. The killer wouldn't mark himself like that. Hey, this is the pits, talking and getting no response."

She wondered what the killer had in mind. Would he just walk up and stick a shiv in her back? So far all his victims had been strangled. Victim. She hated the word and refused to be one. But how could she fight someone she couldn't see? "Show yourself, coward," Jen said under her breath. Her throat was dry. In a silent mantra she repeated, *relax, relax*. She passed a poster advertising an all-Mozart program featuring bass baritone Thomas Quasthoff. "Classical music is my bag, York. I'll bet you're into jazz and the sound of sweet sax, all of the cool groove stuff." Had she made him smile?

* * * *

York's heart wrenched at some of the things Jen had said. She was right-on about his love of jazz. He admired her sense of humor given the situation. She was the bravest woman he'd ever met.

"Oh, wait!" Jen said with excitement. "A car just pulled into a metered space ahead. Might be gray. Hard to tell for sure in night light. Could be silver or light blue."

A metallic taste rose in York's mouth when she mentioned it might be a gray car. "Is it a Honda?" But she couldn't hear. *Dammit*.

"Should I just keep walking toward it?" She gave a nervous laugh. "What else?" she continued, answering her own question. "I have to force the killer to show himself, don't I?"

* * * *

York wiped the sweat from his upper lip. He kept her in his sights, not daring to blink. It was tough with the crowds. She passed an alley. A drunken group of men wearing Shriner hats lurched toward her.

All of a sudden he couldn't see her anymore. "Ted. I've lost sight of her! Sound's gone dead!" York leapt from the car. Over his shoulder he shouted, "Radio the van. Drive the block. Help me find her!"

He ran up the street toward where he'd last seen Jen. He pushed through the crowd, brushing people aside. *God, don't let me lose her!*

CHAPTER TWELVE

York raced down the street to where he'd last seen Jen. A gray Honda with its license plates covered with mud skidded into an illegal U-turn, knocking over a fruit cart. Apples and oranges rolled in every direction. The vender shook his fists at the car as it sped off.

Two people rode in the front seat; the woman's head drooped forward like a wilting rose.

York ran after the Honda until its taillights disappeared into the maze of traffic. "Jen!" *My God. I've lost her.* "No!" His cry raged above the street pandemonium and echoed back at him, savage, tortured. People turned and stared. He slammed a fist into his palm. His heart hammered against his ribs. "Anyone get the description of the guy who got into that gray Honda?" he shouted.

A teenager with green spiked hair said, "It was a bearded dude in a white turban and Jesus robe."

The teen's three cohorts nodded in agreement. "His wife fainted," the one with pierced nose added.

Fainted, hell! York's heart thudded. The killer had done something to Jen.

He flipped open his cellular and ordered the cops in the area to tighten their circle, then he called dispatch, snapping his words. "Need assistance from North End patrol units. Stop the gray Honda with mud covered plates going west on Hanover. Unidentified male driver in a white turban kidnapped the woman passenger. Name's Jen Lyman. They're probably headed toward H-93. Driver's armed and dangerous. And get me a helicopter!"

"You got it," the dispatcher said. "One's airborne near Fan Pier."

York hit the disconnect button, and started to punch in Ted's autodial code when his partner screeched to a stop near the curb. York yanked open the passenger door. Ted stepped out and slapped on a portable light, and both men leapt back inside. "Go. Go!" York ordered.

Ted nodded and activated the hidden siren. "Heard dispatch's call. Highway 93, right?"

"Affirmative." York noticed the cabby was no longer in the back seat.

Ted swung into an illegal U-turn and headed southwest on Hanover, siren blaring. "What happened? What about Jen's wire?"

York fastened his seat belt. "Don't know on both counts."

Warm night air blasted through the open windows. They sped through the tangled web of congested streets, running stop lights.

"Why couldn't the damned city engineers design a direct route to H-93?" Ted asked, obviously forgetting his vow to stop cursing. When drivers failed to pull over fast enough, he let loose with a litany of cruder words.

York got a glimpse of a gray car speeding up the freeway ramp and another going straight. "Two gray cars ahead." Both looked like Hondas. "If the killer's headed for the warehouse—but if he's going somewhere else—"

Ted gripped the steering wheel, knuckles white. "Dammit, which is it?"

York's heart pounded. In another second it'd be too late to make the ramp. "Freeway!"

Ted swerved onto the ramp. York's body lurched to the right, the seat belt digging into his chest. The escaping car passed under a light pole, revealing a glimpse of gray. "There ahead! Fast lane!" Evening darkness made it impossible to count passengers, or zero in on any details, but the driver's speed and wild lane-to-lane zigzag assured York he'd pegged the right car.

Ted floor-boarded the gas pedal, but the Honda outdistanced them.

York wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "Keep him in sight." York gave the Honda's location to Dispatch. "Where the hell is the helicopter?"

"We needed your fix," the dispatcher said calmly.

When York gave the pilot their location the guy repeated it and then said, "Be overhead in a jiffy."

York flipped closed the radio, and concentrated on the chase. The Honda sped past the off ramp to the warehouse. York narrowed his eyes. Had he been wrong about the killer's destination? "Don't let that bastard get away!"

Their siren cut the air, rising shrilly above the freeway noise. Cars pulled over, but not quickly enough. The Honda blended into the far distant traffic, hiding itself in the maze of red taillights.

They passed several exits. None of the cars they passed were gray with mud covered plates. Five miles later, York forced himself to accept that they'd lost the gray Honda. "Head back."

"Dammit," Ted muttered. "If the other cars had pulled over like they were supposed to the SOB couldn't have out-driven me."

"Keep your adrenaline pumping. We aren't giving up." York checked with dispatch. The other police units and the helicopter had come up empty, no trace of the Honda or its occupants. No trace of Jen. "Try the warehouse."

Ted swung off the highway, then on again, headed back toward the warehouse exit.

During York's years as a cop, he'd prided himself on his ability to stay cool, but tonight he'd exploded and let fear devour him. Now, he had to focus, or Jen was doomed.

Hang on, Jen. Hang on.

* * * *

Jen battled her way out of the fog to escape the bad dream. Memory flooded back. Not a dream—a living nightmare.

She'd been walking down the street in Old Town: Something sharp jabbed into her arm. Her throat constricted; she couldn't cry out. Her head spun like a runaway carousel. She fought dizziness. A spinning darkness closed around her as strong arms swept her from her feet.

"My wife fainted," a vaguely familiar voice said. "Clear the way. Gotta get her to a hospital. Now."

The man slung her into the passenger side of a car and propped her up with a seat belt.

No! she cried silently, then sank into an abyss.

* * * *

Time passed. She had no idea how much. Now she was here. Where? Jen tried to open her eyes. Her lids felt like lead. She tried to shift, but she couldn't move; her hands and feet were bound to something. Sweat trickled down her back. It was difficult to breathe the oppressive air. The place smelled of oily rags. And death.

Oh, God. She remembered the nauseating bile odor now. She was in the warehouse where the strangler had dumped seven dead bodies.

She blinked and squinted at the glare of a bare light bulb hanging from a cord that disappeared into the darkness of a high ceiling. Beneath the light was a wooden table with her purse in the middle of it, belongings spilled in a heap. A lot of good her gun and cell phone did her over there.

A white robe and a turban lay draped over a chair—also a dark, hairy beard. The sense of a sinister presence touched her like icy, phantom fingers. Hair rising on the nape of her neck, she lifted her gaze slowly.

A dark silhouette stood beyond the light, its shadow looming enormous and evil on the concrete block wall behind it.

"Well, Princess. Awake at last."

Her heart pounded—that voice, that nickname. "Lee!"

He stepped from the darkness into the light and sat on the edge of the table.

"Oh, God. It *is* you. I prayed it wasn't."

"You care." His voice dripped sarcasm. "I'm touched." His halo of sunny hair, disheveled from the turban, gave him a boy-next-door look, while underneath pulsed a brain twisted with evil.

Jen's mouth tasted metallic. "Where's Buddy?"

"See that small lump of rags in the corner? It's not rags."

Her breath caught. "Is he dead?"

"Drugged."

Jen was appalled at his matter of fact tone. But Buddy was alive. Drugs could be handled. That is, if he didn't die of an overdose. She doubted Lee would consider the small boy's weight before giving him anything. "You promised to let him go."

Lee laughed and began to pace. "I am the boy. The boy is me." He waved his arms like a preacher. Then he began to mumble unintelligibly. She remembered the out-of-control way he'd wielded the ax. She trembled. Lee was two killers rolled into one—a cool hit man, and an insane, serial killer, and she was caught between both terrifying personalities.

Suddenly he seemed to cycle out of his craziness. He struck a match and lit a cigarette. Flames and evil glinted in his glacier blue eyes. "Never could keep promises," he said, picking up the conversation where they'd left off without missing a beat. "You wouldn't know that, of course. You never knew the real me."

She swallowed. She had to play the game with him and ignore his insanity. "I thought I did. We were friends." Fighting to keep her voice controlled, she glanced down at her collar. *York, are you hearing all this? Is my wire working?*

"You were my cover," Lee said. "My normal life between jobs."

She fought terror, rage and a searing sense of betrayal. No time for those emotions now. Just keep him talking. She'd dealt with people with mental problems often enough at the Crisis Center. *Stay calm, and above all keep him calm.*

Jen took a deep breath. "Is the mayor involved?" She worked her hands, trying to loosen the ropes cutting into her wrists.

"The mayor? Are you kidding?" Lee blew a smoke ring. "He's too stupid to run a city. That's why Zombolas runs the show. Zombolas and Tormont have a deal going."

Lee began to mumble again. "Control...have to..."

"Lee," she said, trying to bring him back from his lunacy. "A deal? You said a deal?"

Lee blinked, then poured some liquid from a thermos and tossed back two pills from a prescription bottle. When they were together, she'd asked about the pills. He'd said they were for migraines. What were they really? Would they calm him, or send him completely over the edge?

"You know, payoffs, favors," he said. It frightened and fascinated Jen how he could go in and out of sanity without losing his former train of thought. "Coble forked over big bucks for the quick cleanup of the leaking tank at his gas station. But then you already knew that. It's what got you in trouble."

She stared at Lee, quivering inside as the total revelation hit. "You killed all those people...you're a serial killer, for God's sake." It was incredible that she could have ever had feelings for him.

He raked a strand of hair from his forehead with steady fingers. The gold friendship ring she'd given him on his birthday glinted in the light. "I prefer hitman," he said. "I'm well paid, and damned good at my job."

"Hitman?" she repeated. In a way, it wasn't all that much of a surprise; her doubts had been mounting. Now his trips, the whispered phone calls. They all made sense. She wished it had been other women.

Lee laughed. "You think I'm just some crazy random killer? Everything was planned. And as long as I take my medications I can control my urge to kill until the time is right. Zombolas marked

the victims and I deleted them like worthless files.”

Jen winced. Lee had always been a bit taciturn, or pretended to be. Now he seemed to enjoy bragging about his callous acts.

His beeper went off. He took a long drag of his cigarette, then dialed. When someone answered, he said, “Count down time. Have the last installment ready.” He mumbled something about the warehouse, then hung up.

“Zombolas checking on you?” She immediately regretted her sarcastic tone. *Don’t make him mad, for God’s sake.*

Lee came very close. He stroked her throat and whispered, “Don’t make me modify the plan.”

Tension crackled in the air between them. If she wanted to live through this she’d have to curb her smart mouth. She lowered her eyes. Her mock docileness succeeded, and he backed off. As she worked her hands, the rope cut deeper into her wrists. Strained silence hung in the air until she couldn’t stand it. “Why the fishing line?”

“Zombolas’s idea.” Lee rubbed his jaw, looking amused. “I used guns in other cities. Here I’m The Boston Strangler. Been a kick.” His laugh was hysterical.

She had to keep talking, drag this out and give York time to find her. He would. She knew it. They’d talked about this warehouse, and it followed that the killer might bring her here.

“Wait a minute,” she said. “I want to get this all down. Untie me and let me scribble some notes.”

He gently touched his nicked and scabbed ear. “You forget, dangerous lady, I know you—and what you’re capable of.”

She moistened her lips. “No. No. Remember, we talked about rekindling The Boston Strangler’s fame. Only you will know it’s you. Could be your biggest kick ever.”

Lee gave a snort. “I’ll get my kicks and make history, too, but you won’t write it.”

If she had to play this insane game to stall, so be it. “How many people have you killed?”

He arched an arrogant brow. “Here in Boston? Or in my life?”

“Both.” Unblinkingly, she stared at Lee. She didn’t know this man at all. Their two years together were a complete lie. “Twenty here.” He stubbed out his cigarette on the edge of the table and lit another.

“Why did Zombolas want all those people dead?”

Lee looked at her, or perhaps through her, his color darkening. “Like you, they were nosey. When they learned too much, it was over.”

She cleared her throat. “Like Kenny Duncan?”

“Ah, yes. Sniffles. Coble hired him to repair his computer. He intercepted one of Zombolas’s messages to Coble. Since it came from the mayor’s office, Sniffles got the wrong idea. But he would have figured it out—”

Jen’s heart pounded at the sound of a helicopter overhead. “What about the victims outside Boston? Were they connected to the toxic waste problem as well?”

Lee shook his head. “Freelance contracts with reasons as varied as the faces: A wife wanting to ice her hubby for insurance...a husband who didn’t want to pay alimony...a young woman’s parents who wanted revenge against her stalker...”

“Why didn’t I see this side to you?” she asked softly. Would she be asking herself this question for the rest of her life? She closed her eyes. If she had a life.

He laughed and came very close again. He slowly ran a finger from the hollow in her throat down to her cleavage. “Did you forget how hot we were in the sheets? And you’ll have to admit, I can be a damned charming guy.”

Bile rose in her throat. She’d slept with an insane man...a hitman...a serial killer.

* * * *

Driving slowly, York and Ted circled the warehouse, shining the car spotlight into every obscure place. They passed SWAT vehicles parked in the shadows, looking dark and ominous. Scattered teams of men with nerves coiled tight waited for a signal. A helicopter scanned cone-like beams over the area.

“No sign of the Honda or any car other than our units,” Ted said. “Any other ideas?”

York dropped his head in his hands. “It’s my fault. I wired her. I let her walk right into a trap.” He groaned. “It’s my fault she’s going to die.”

“You checked the wire, right?”

York pounded the dashboard. “Yes, dammit. It was working!” What was he doing? There was no time to flog himself. *Focus*. “If the killer took another exit ramp—”

York stiffened at a report coming over the police radio. A blue and white had pulled over a gray Honda. York’s heart pounded erratically. He was about to check it out when a second call canceled the report. It was the wrong car.

Ted cursed. “Now what?”

“Drive the area again.” After circling the building several more times, York reluctantly admitted the Honda wasn’t in the area. It was time to end this. The killer must have taken her somewhere else. But where? He only knew that he’d comb the whole damn city until he found her—or her dead body.

* * * *

Jen’s heart pounded at the faint sound of helicopter and car engines. Keep stalling. Help’s on the way. Thank God for the wire. York was hearing every word. It was almost as if he were here by her side.

Buddy stirred. He had to be miserable trussed up like a turkey with that tape on his mouth. At least she could talk. Words were her only weapon. “How did you meet Zombolas?”

“Internet.” Lee knelt down and opened a briefcase. He removed neat little bundles wrapped in plain brown paper.

Jen bit her lip, upset with what she was seeing...thinking.

“Zombolas advertised on a classified web site,” Lee continued, “promising a killer of a job. I got the hidden message. Then, voila, we teamed up.”

Jen prayed for a steady voice. “What are you doing?”

Lee gave her a sly sideways glance. “Detective York and his bomb paranoia gave me this idea. I’m not an expert, you understand, but I’ve managed to rig something up that’ll do the trick.”

A bomb! She was right. He planned to set off a bomb! She inhaled. *Be calm. York will get here in time.*

Whistling *The Star Spangled Banner*, Lee laid out wires around the perimeter of the room as if they were strands of Christmas lights. When he finished, he waved a small unit that looked like a garage door opener. “You’ve always liked modern gadgets, Jen. You’ll appreciate what this little jewel can do.”

Her throat felt dry. Show no fear. “Let me guess. It ignites things.”

“That, and much more. It also detects radio frequencies, like the wire you’re wearing.” He paused for effect. “And disables them.”

In spite of the August heat captured in the stifling, tightly closed building, her blood turned to ice. York hadn’t heard their conversation. Perhaps he didn’t even know she was here. The engines she’d heard before had faded to nothing. She was totally alone in this.

Hang tough. Show no fear. “Just curious,” she said. “Who owns the gray car?” York had told her that Lee rented a red Mustang not a Honda.

Lee kept stringing the fuse wires around the room. “My current playmate. She’s a generous wench. And she isn’t married to her job.”

If he thought the put down would matter with a trail of explosives around her... “Where’s the car now?” If it was parked outside, York would see it.

“Drove it right into the building through the cargo door.” He held up a padlock key. “No one knows we’re here. Yet.”

His chilling word “yet” sent a shiver down Jen’s spine.

“I’ll give the detective a call after I’m out of here. He’ll rush to your rescue. Then, I’ll press this button and all my problems will go boom and disappear.”

“Whatever you do, save Buddy. You have the power to do this merciful thing. I’m begging you. Just this one thing.”

He snickered. “Prove to the world that I’m not all bad. Is that the deal? I couldn’t be, or you wouldn’t have cared for me. Am I right?”

Damn him. First, he ridiculed her sense of loyalty, and now he mocked her pleas for Buddy. He finished what he was doing, and came and stood beside her. His expression softened, deceptively. “I’m proud of you, Jen. At last you got what you wanted, the big story.” He laughed. “Too bad you won’t be around to write it.”

* * * *

Panic stormed through York like a flash flood. “A woman and a boy’s lives are at stake and we’re in the wrong damned place!” He swallowed. “Let me see that map again.”

The SWAT leader smoothed the wrinkled map out over the hood of his van and Ted pointed the heavy-duty flashlight at it. When the phone call came in from a phone booth six blocks away, they had plotted all vacant buildings within a mile radius. If not here, where? It had to be close by and near the highway. Because the killer had killed here before... “Dammit, this is the most likely location.”

He turned and faced the warehouse with its high truck bays near a series of loading docks. The building was dark and quiet. But if the killer was holding Jen and Buddy in one of the windowless interior rooms...

With no cars in the area they had assumed no one was inside. York’s neck prickled as an image flashed before his eyes. The padlock on this warehouse wasn’t like the heavy-duty commercial ones used on the other condemned buildings and the no trespass seal was missing.

He whirled and faced the SWAT leader. “Secure all the doors. Get men on the roof.” He headed for the warehouse and called over his shoulder. “Cover me, I’m going in.”

* * * *

Jen twisted her hands, but the rope binding her wrists refused to give and cut deeper into her flesh. Lee referred to an instruction sheet as he worked. This was a nightmare. She closed her eyes and tried to find a calm center. To stall, she had to use his ego against him. “Hmmm, impressive—gun expert and a bomb specialist, too.” She was amazed at how steady she held her voice.

“Downloaded the info from the Internet. Anyone who can read can make a bomb.”

Yeah, right. If he was green at this, he could accidentally set it off. Was he really an amateur or just playing games?

Lee stopped laying out the colored wires and came and stood over her, leering down with a

domineering smirk. She hated him for making her feel so small, so trapped. He crouched at her feet. When he touched her face, she flinched and turned away, but he caught her chin and made her look at him. He ran his thumb along her jaw line.

She jerked back. "Don't touch me."

He grabbed her by the hair, sending needles of pain to the roots. "Tough talk, lover, for a woman in your spot." Every instinct in her wanted to shout *go to hell*, but it wasn't in her best interest to fuel his anger. He held her gaze, with bright, crazed eyes. "Did you know I detested your job?"

"You told me often enough."

"Journalism," he spat, "the working slob's quick-fix literature." His voice gentled deceptively, and he said, "It could've been different, Jen. I even hoped for a while..."

Jen groaned inwardly. Liar. Still, the shred of hope that she could reach him on some level was all she had. "What? Tell me what you hoped." His silence encouraged her. "This isn't the real you," she said, her words coming faster. "Turn yourself in and I'll help. You've had some kind of break down...you know...temporary insanity or something."

He stared at her, his face stony.

"None of this makes sense, Lee. Don't you see that? If you get rid of me another reporter will be assigned in my place. *The Globe* won't give up on a big story like this."

He shot to his feet. "Then I'll blow the whole damned agency out of existence!"

His violent outburst sent a jolt of terror through Jen. She swallowed. *Don't give him the satisfaction. Keep the fear hidden, your voice steady.* "There are other newspapers."

He laughed. "You don't get it. Thanks to York, I've found a new toy. And I'm having a hell of a good time."

He was crazy. And she was crazy for talking to him, but she wouldn't give up, not as long as she had breath. Lee moved about the room, laying the small bundles of brown wrapped explosives at even intervals.

Her mouth was dry. "All this to kill one woman and a small boy?"

"It's overkill. But I've always been a thorough man. Besides, it's not just you and the boy. Wylinski will be at this party, too."

"York?" *Oh, God, no.*

"He's the thorn in my side. He won't quit until one of us is dead. This will end it."

A cry of protest strangled Jen. She gritted her teeth to keep her protective shell from cracking. "How does this device work?" She had to slow his progress.

He twisted a white and black wire together. "Always the reporter. Always full of questions. Bright women are a royal pain in the ass. But since this is your last day..."

Lee slowly, almost reverently, lowered a small black box attached to a bunch of wires around her neck. Her breath caught as the box stilled between her breasts.

"The countdown is triggered by this transmitter and timing device."

She listened. No ticking. She began to breathe again. "Which gives you time to escape," she said, fighting the persistent constriction in her throat.

"Right. I'll be far away in Lexington, eating waffles and syrup at my favorite all night diner when the big bang shoots fireworks into the sky."

A vision of severed body parts flying in every direction flashed in her mind. Thank God York would never know that his cop paranoia about bombs had given Lee this idea. Maybe being exploded into a million pieces would be less painful than being strangled. *No, don't give up. Hang on.*

Buddy moaned and shifted position. She longed to hold him. "I don't get it. Zombolas won't pay you to kill a harmless four-year old child, so what do you have to gain by killing him?"

"It ups the ante to draw Wylinski here. It's the perfect lure—a beautiful woman and an innocent kid. What red-blooded cop could resist a rescue like that?"

Jen's stomach knotted. None. Especially a man like York.

She'd wanted him to rescue them, prayed for it. Now she wanted the opposite. *Don't fall for his ploy, York. Stay away.*

* * * *

York sensed Ted following on his heels, both of them creeping forward silent as cats. The warehouse's truck bay loomed before them. The two questionable padlocks hanging from the hatch appeared secure. But when York gave one a twist, it opened. The second followed. "Bingo," he whispered.

The lock on the pedestrian door wasn't engaged either. He stepped inside and flashed his light around; he sucked in his breath. "Double bingo," he said, looking at the gray Honda parked in the bay. He radioed their position to the SWAT leader. "Need backup now," York whispered.

York knew the layout of the warehouse. With his .38 special drawn, he motioned to Ted to circle left as he headed right. They had the strangler cornered. York felt a trickle of sweat roll down his spine. He wanted to take the SOB alive, but if necessary to save Jen and the boy, he wouldn't hesitate to blow him away.

York swallowed, trying to down the rusty taste in his mouth. His hands remained steady while anxiety coiled around his gut like a slithering python. He followed the murmur of voices, still too distant to identify—one was a woman's.

Jen, I'm coming.

* * * *

Lee had just finished setting out the explosives when he froze and listened. Jen heard it, too, the low rumble of the bay door opening. Hope and fear twisted inside her, tangled as the wires Lee had strung on and about her.

Alarm glinted in Lee's eyes. "Early guests have changed things." He grabbed Buddy by his waist, lifted him high and slung him over his shoulder. "Looks like I'm forced to grant one of your wishes. The boy goes with me."

"Be careful with him. He's—"

A deranged look contorted Lee's face. "He'll be fine. Fate willed it this way. After all, I am the boy, and the boy is me."

"What are you talking about?" She despised her fear-thinned wail.

Lee picked up the transmitter that resembled a garage door opener. "Don't worry, you won't feel a thing." He paused and winked. "No hard feelings, princess."

As Lee left the room, Buddy's eyes opened and met hers, looking wide and frightened. Then there was only silence, and the quickened beat of her heart.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Something moved ahead. York aimed his gun at the silhouette framed by the lighted doorway. "Freeze."

"You won't shoot."

The familiar voice sent a surge of blood to York's brain. "I knew it was you all along, Brock."

"Give that man a cop's shiny merit badge." Brock shifted something in front of him. "I have the boy. Clear the way." He came forward, looking smug.

With adrenaline pumping rapid fire through York's veins and his finger steady on the trigger, he watched Ted circle behind Brock with his gun drawn. "The kid's chances are zip if I let you take him outta here," York said. "Put him down or I'll shoot."

"You might hit the kid."

"But I won't," Ted piped up. "Got a direct shot to the back of your slimy head."

From York's rear, the SWAT leader shouted, "I've got a clear shot, too. Just say the word."

Brock smirked. "Big hero. Holding all the cards." He dropped Buddy to the floor with a thud. "Except one. And you get the credit, because you gave me the idea."

York heard a click as Brock pressed a button on something in his hand. "Too, bad. Now we all have to go boom."

"York!" Jen screamed from inside the room Brock had just left. "Get Buddy and run. I'm rigged with a bomb!"

York grabbed the transmitter from Brock's hand. "How do you abort this?"

Brock laughed. "You can't stop it."

Ted twisted Brock's hand behind his back. "Tell us, or I'll break your arm."

"Forget it," Brock said. "We're all dead."

"How many minutes?" York snapped.

"Should've already blown," Lee sneered. "Think I did something wrong?"

"Ted," York yelled. "Get the boy out. And get a bomb squad in here." He ran through the doorway, heading for Jen.

"Stop," she screamed. "Don't come any closer."

"I'm getting you out of here."

"No! Touch me and everything blows."

He stopped. Sweat broke out on his upper lip. "Okay. Stay calm."

"Take Buddy and go," Jen cried.

"Buddy's already out. There's just you."

"And you," Jen whispered.

Ignoring the impact of her words, York focused. "Brock hit the transmitter button to start the countdown. How many minutes do we have?"

"He said it'd be instantaneous," Jen said with a tremor in her voice.

"Perhaps it was supposed to be." Maybe this psycho was a damned amateur, and maybe he wasn't. He didn't respect the man, but he sure as hell respected the bomb.

"Lee got the instructions off the Internet," Jen said. "He was looking at them as he worked."

York glanced around. "Where are they?"

"His shirt pocket."

York rushed out, then returned with the instructions in hand, feeling his own internal clock ticking in cadence with his pulsing heart. "Okay, let's see what we have here."

York scanned the sheet, his eyes alert for numbers. "I've got it. It has a fifteen minute failsafe delay."

"How many left?"

Maybe three had passed—better estimate five. He hoped he'd masked his fear before she locked in on it. He swallowed. "Plus or minus ten."

She closed her eyes briefly. A small moan escaped her trembling lips.

He cursed himself, and stepped over the tangle of wires and crouched down beside her. Their gazes met. "Plus or minus?" she said barely above a whisper.

"It's enough."

He felt her studying him.

"You're staying to the end, aren't you?" she asked softly.

"Absolutely."

"I love you for it," her voice wavered, "but I don't want you to die."

"No one is dying."

Without touching anything, York examined the tangle of wires on and around Jen. He wished the bomb squad were here with their robot and disarming gun, their protective gear. Although he doubted that any of that would help with the quantity of explosives in this room, he'd feel better with an expert in on this. "Ted," he shouted. "Is the bomb squad on the way?"

"Yeah, but—"

York's squelching look stopped his partner before he spilled the news that they might not make it in time.

"Brock's getting nervous," Ted said. "I cuffed him to a support in the next room, and one of the SWAT guys is watching him. That arrogant psycho's demanding to be taken out of here."

"Forget him. Got tools?"

"SWAT gave me this."

York took the toolbox and quickly rummaged through it. "Timing will be close. Get everyone out now. Including you."

"I'm staying," Ted said.

"Don't be stupid. Loraine needs you alive." York shot Ted a sharp glance. "Now go. I don't have time to argue."

Jen moistened her feverish lips. That meant she and York would be alone—to live or die together. Whatever the outcome, she realized with a strange absurd calm, she felt safer with him than she would with anyone else.

York wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve, and studied the jumble of wires. "Is Brock good at following instructions, or does he like to change things?"

York knew Jen didn't know this man any better than he did, but talking relieved tension.

"Lee didn't make a move without checking and re-checking the instructions," Jen said with a tremor in her voice.

York scanned the circuitry. The works looked straight forward. But Brock liked to play games, so he could've been putting on an act. "Did he hesitate at any point?"

"No. He seemed to follow the directions from A to Z. He was quite intent on what he was doing. Does that matter?"

"Yeah, a lot. Changes my options. I can make an educated guess that what I see is all there is. But we're talking about a crazy man." From working the strangler case, York knew Brock was careful, methodical. And egotistical. What if he decided he could improve the instructions, take shortcuts? Throw in a surprise? York glanced at his watch.

"How long?" Jen asked softly.

He cleared his voice. "Maybe seven minutes."

Above them, the hanging single light bulb cut a shaft of white through the shadows that lurked about them like death. Jen's breathing went shallow, and she bit the corner of her lip.

Tracing back from what looked like the beginning, he checked each connection. One unsteady

movement...

York heard a helicopter overhead. Sirens. Was the bomb squad here? It didn't matter. They'd be too late. He was alone in this.

He followed the lines back to Jen. He didn't see any extra wires, parts or signs of cover ups. Didn't see anything that didn't belong—anything that might prevent him from disarming it. "Think it's as simple as it looks." He crouched in front of her. "The guts seem to be routed into this relay." York gestured to the small unit dangling around Jen's neck.

He leaned over to get the pliers from the toolbox and his pen fell from his breast pocket and bounced noisily to the floor, breaking the silence.

Jen blinked, but she didn't flinch. Thank God, York thought. The smallest movement was all it would take to set this hair trigger device off. "You okay?"

She gave a small smile. "Just peachy." Her voice was breathless.

"We're going to make it."

* * * *

Jen's heart pounded. She had to ask. "How much time?"

"Five minutes," he said without glancing at his watch.

Was he counting the minutes in his head? Or guessed?

"If you left now—"

"Don't say it. I'm not leaving."

"Have you ever disarmed a bomb before?"

He laughed without humor. "I'm a quick study. Trust me."

She fought the threat of tears. "I do."

York swallowed, looked heavenward, then removed the plastic cover from the relay around her neck. He gently positioned the pliers' jaws to cut.

Their gazes met. "I love you," he murmured.

In spite of her effort to hold them back, her tears came and ran down her face freely. "I love you, too."

She stiffened at the loud snap.

Silence.

For a moment they didn't move, holding their breaths for what seemed forever. Then he was removing the wires, untying her hands and feet. While she rubbed the circulation back into her wrists, he massaged her ankles. After a moment, he rose and pulled her to her feet, and right into his arms. "Thank God," he murmured, briefly touching his lips to hers. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"Wait." Jen grabbed up the items spilled out of her purse and stuffed them back inside.

York took her arm and together they left the room still scattered with wires.

Outside, the world was a circus of flashing lights from emergency vehicles: fire trucks, bomb squad, SWAT, and police cars.

Instantly York and Jen were surrounded by a mob of emergency crew chiefs all wanting to know the bomb's status. York shouted out the details.

News vehicles were driving up. Jen pulled her cell phone from her bag. They weren't beating her to the punch on this. York was busy with his job, and she had hers. She moved to a less noisy spot by a light pole to call in the biggest story she'd ever had.

Two officers hauled the cuffed Brock toward a squad car.

Shots rang out.

A bullet whizzed past her head. A man cried out in agony. Someone had been shot. Don't let it be York.

But he was at her side, pulling her to cover.

Chaos reined. Men from the emergency teams found shelter and returned fire. Several fell to the ground clutching their wounds. No one had expected an air attack.

SWAT marksmen fired too late at the unmarked helicopter that had swooped low and took off again after riddling the area with bullets.

Lee lay on the ground by the police car, blood everywhere.

Jen knew without being told. He was dead.

She rubbed her arms. The danger wouldn't be over until all the players in this case were in jail. "Zombolas is the one behind Lee," she told York. "Must've been him and his henchmen in the helicopter."

York shoved her into a squad car and told the cop behind the wheel to get her out of there.

She boomeranged out of the car. "No. I'm staying. This is where the story is." Their gazes locked in silent battle. "I'm a reporter, dammit. This is who I am, what I do."

"You're a witness in need of protection," he growled.

The SWAT leader forced back the other news vehicles, making them leave the immediate area. Okay, so she wasn't being singled out. She'd try another approach. "Don't you want my statement?"

"I'll get it at the station. Now, get her the hell out of here!" he ordered.

He was back to being the cop. And she was merely a witness, and worse yet, a troublesome reporter... She blinked back tears. It hurt to accept that the whispered words of love they'd shared while facing death had taken a back seat to their jobs.

* * * *

At the Police department, York led Jen to a room with a table, two chairs and a telephone. An interrogation room, no less. Well, she had some questions of her own. "Why'd you bring me here?" She hoped he didn't hear the tremor in her voice.

"Right now it's the safest place."

Her legs felt wobbly and she sat down. York remained standing. He gestured with his head toward the phone. "Make some calls, or just relax."

From a cart holding a coffee machine and paper cups, he poured her a cup of coffee. Fighting to hold it steady in her icy hands, she took a sip and shuddered at the bitterness. "How's Buddy?"

"He's okay. They took him to Boston Memorial for observation. Strictly routine. He's been sedated. His mom's with him. You can see him in the morning."

She closed her eyes. *Thank you, God.*

"I have to take care of some things." York squeezed her shoulder. "Will you be all right alone for a while?"

Jen forced a small smile. "Fine. We're alive."

With a confident stride that was familiar and endearing, he disappeared out the doorway.

Jen stared after him a moment, then called the hospital to check on Buddy herself. She reached Shelly at his bedside, and sighed in relief to learn York hadn't held anything back.

She made some notes, then called *The Globe* with her update on the deadly hit on Lee. She shivered. The flying bullets could've hit her or York. *We're alive*, she repeated to herself.

After about thirty minutes that seemed like forever, York returned. "Everything's set."

"What's set?"

The phone rang. York grabbed the receiver, and gave a curt hello. Something flickered in his eyes. His jaw tightened. "On my way. I'll meet you there." He slammed down the phone.

"Bad news?"

He studied her face. "It's personal."

Jen winced. She didn't get it. After what they'd said to each other while disarming the bomb, and their forever link to the breath-stopping moment, how could he close her out? This was the man who'd saved her life at great risk to himself. The man she loved. Who loved her back. But maybe not enough. "What could be too personal to share with me?" she asked.

York rubbed the bridge of his nose. Fine stress lines had deepened at the corners of his eyes. "Later, Jen. Officer Hankins will be here in a minute."

"Who's Hankins?"

"One of Boston's best."

"I'll wait in the outer office," she said softly.

"No! Hankins is for you." York's voice rumbled with tension. "She'll stay with you in a safe house until all the suspects are in custody."

Jen's stomach knotted. "What's going on, York? Up to now, you've insisted upon being my Siamese twin"

He looked at her, his silence speaking volumes: that was before he'd said he loved her. It was okay to tell a woman you love her when you both might die, but now that the immediate danger was over...

"You'll be safe with Hankins," he said.

Adrenaline shot through her. "That's not what I asked you."

He folded his arms and leaned against the table. "That's my answer."

"Was it seeing me in action and going after the story that reminded you we want different things from life? Why am I surprised? You made it clear what you wanted from the start."

"Now isn't the time for this discussion," he growled. "Your life and the lives of others are still in danger."

"I don't hear you denying that my job is a problem for you."

He looked at her, his gaze hard, troubled.

Okay, if being a reporter was this insurmountable stumbling block, she'd focus on her job. "I'm not leaving until I get the full story, York."

His face darkened. "Write all you want about the strangler and the kidnapping. The rest is off limits until we round up the suspects. If we're lucky that'll be tonight. If not..."

"Don't tie my hands, York. Every other reporter is speculating on what I already know, and they sure as hell won't hold back."

He gave a weary sigh. "Don't push this, Jen. Not tonight."

Something in his voice touched her. For a moment she wanted to back off.

"Play your cards right and the chief'll give you an exclusive with—"

"The chief! The chief has never given me diddly-squat."

York shifted his weight and glanced at the doorway. "Then forget the chief. You have my word. Be patient and you can have it all."

But not you. She was only the woman he loved—not the old-fashioned woman he wanted to share his life with.

She got up and paced the floor, feeling York's gaze on her. Somehow he'd managed to move on. She must do the same.

Tying her stories on the kidnapping and the capture-murder of the Boston Strangler to three of the city's big wigs would give her the story of the year spiced with famous names.

She stopped pacing and faced York. "Exactly what are you offering?"

"Everything. No holding back. Look, we're bringing in Tormont, Zombolas and Coble. I'll call you when they're in custody. Okay?"

She rubbed her aching head. She detested having her wings clipped, but he was bending over backwards to be fair, and she was acting like the barracuda type reporter he hated.

A tall, muscular woman about her own age entered the room carrying an overnight bag.

Obviously her new protector. Jen had no doubt that the officer could do the job. But it hurt that she was no longer important enough to claim York's time.

Jen and Officer Louise Hankins headed for a hotel. The street's blinking neon lights mocked Jen with their gaiety. If York wanted to, he could be riding next to her, the one protecting her instead of this policewoman with the Prince Valiant haircut.

Jen looked down at her clenched hands. It wasn't just her job that stood in the way. York wanted the whole concept of his ideal woman—the kind of woman she could never be. If he couldn't accept her as she was, why had he turned her life upside down and shown her a glimpse of his world?

She'd always wanted to believe that a happy family life existed. But never having experienced one, she feared that if it did exist, she wouldn't even recognize it. And until she met York's family, she'd convinced herself that the whole idea of a happy family was pure fantasy. But it wasn't, and she wanted it for herself.

* * * *

York paced the hospital waiting room. His brother and mother stood by the window, staring out as dawn broke over the Boston sky. He couldn't take much more. First, Jen was tied to a bomb, and now his father had started hemorrhaging. He rubbed his stinging eyes. When he'd gotten the call that his father had been taken by ambulance to Boston Medical Center, he'd felt like a punctured balloon, deflated, empty. For hours, he'd prayed and walked. Walked and prayed. *Let Dad live.*

How many promises had he made to God in the last twenty-four hours? First, he'd prayed for Jen's life, now for his dad's.

If he'd told Jen about his dad she would have insisted upon coming along. As much as he wanted her here with him, after what she'd been through, she needed rest, not more problems.

She wouldn't see it that way. She believed she was like a damned Ever Ready battery and could keep going and going. But she was a flesh and blood woman. No one knew that better than he, and he wouldn't pile this worry on her, too.

* * * *

When the sun came through the hotel window, Jen awoke feeling optimistic. Last night's trauma had skewed her thinking. She and York had both been tired, and both had jobs to do. Today, after having a night's rest, they'd be ready to talk.

On the way to *The Globe*, Jen and Officer Hankins stopped briefly at the hospital. Jen laughed with mist in her eyes when Buddy gave a small, dimpled smile and said, "I'm going to be a cop like Detective Wylinski."

The doctor assured her that although Buddy might have a few nightmares, they would fade.

Minutes later, as Jen and Officer Hankins headed for *The Globe*, the officer got a call on her cellular. The suspects in the strangler case were in custody and her bodyguard duty was canceled. "Back to the PD and the old grind," she said as she dropped Jen off at work. "Keep in touch."

Jen nodded, and sighed in relief. It was over. Everyone was safe. Now she could write what she damned well pleased.

Back at her desk, she called York. He wasn't there, and the officer in charge said he'd taken indefinite leave. Her heart thudded. "Leave? Are you sure?"

She asked to be transferred to Ted's line. "York questioned the suspects in the strangler case, wrote up his report, and left," Ted said.

"Where did he go?" she asked softly.

"Beats me. He left a note on my desk saying he had some personal things to attend to."

"Did he leave a message for me?" She forced the words past the lump in her throat.

"Yeah. Now that all the players are behind bars, you can go ahead with the full story."

She mumbled her thanks.

Big deal! She slammed down the receiver. *Damn York*. He'd left a message for Jen Lyman the reporter, but what about Jen Lyman the woman he loved? Well, if this was what he wanted, she'd make it easy on him. No sad goodbyes. Quick and final; that was her style.

She wiped at a tear tracing a warm path down her cheek, and grabbed her tote bag. She still had an important interview with the mayor.

* * * *

The interview turned out better than Jen expected, and she hurried back to her office to type up her notes. The mayor admitted he'd given Zombolas too much power. He'd allowed him free rein to handle the toxic waste problem because of the crisis with the strangler. A cursory review of accounts turned up irregularities. The mayor believed Zombolas planned to take pilfered funds and leave him holding the bag. To put things right, the mayor ordered an independent investigation.

Jen printed out the interview and set it aside. Now for the heavy stuff. Last night, from the warehouse, she'd called in a brief summary of the facts on the bombing story, and now she wanted to tell the whole story while it was fresh in her mind. Her fingers flew across the keys.

She saw it as a series. No other reporter could tell the strangler story her way. She'd lived it. Images were stuck in her memory forever: finding Sniffles' dead body, the ax attack in Shelly's apartment, Buddy being kidnapped. She shuddered, remembering the bomb fuses wrapped around her shoulders.

It might take a trial to bring out who had ordered the hit on Lee. But Zombolas had her vote since the fly-by helicopter belonged to him. Jen shook her head. As usual, she had a glut of material. She got busy cutting, digging out key facts and putting together a draft for Dirk's review.

Dory appeared in the doorway. "Geez, Kiddo," she said with a catch in her voice, "I can't leave you alone for one weekend without you getting in trouble."

They rushed into each other's arms, clinging tightly. After a moment, Dory held Jen away a little. "I heard Wylinski saved you. Maybe he's one of the good guys after all."

Jen's throat tightened. She couldn't discuss York now.

Dory shook her head. "Imagine. Lee a serial killer..." She searched Jen's eyes. "Are you okay?"

She couldn't talk about Lee either—not yet. Jen swallowed and gave Dory another squeeze. "We'll talk later, okay?" She gestured with the papers she just printed and forced a brave tone. "I have to get this to Dirk now to make deadline."

* * * *

Days passed. Jen used her voice mail to screen her calls at work and at home. A half dozen were from York. Eventually, she'd have to talk to him, but it was still too soon. If she talked to him now she might make a bigger fool of herself than she had the last time they'd talked.

At least the ordeal with the strangler was over. While writing the series, she'd gotten the journalistic high of a lifetime. She'd written about the mayor being duped by Zombolas and Tormont's involvement, and about wealthy Coble who had started the ball rolling with his payoff for the removal of the toxic waste. But even before it was all in print, the high faded, and she was left with her hunger for York's hands touching her again, his body sinking hotly and deeply into hers...

Good grief. She was a mess.

The rough times were at night when she went home to her empty apartment. She knew now that she wanted more than her job. She wanted York, and a little boy like Buddy, or a girl like Lisa, or both. Too bad, she couldn't be an old-fashioned woman. In an especially bad moment, some wistful part of her drew her to make brownies. Afterward, feeling foolish, she froze them for the guest who would never come.

She clicked on her computer. She'd become a workaholic, putting in as many hours at home as at the office. It kept her from thinking, and the extra work had made her a star with Dirk. He'd strutted around the office, saying her series was the best of her career. Now it was time to write the ending. Interest in the dead Boston Strangler would soon fade.

At lunch the next day, Dory handed her one of the tabloids. "Have you seen this?"

Jen scanned the article and frowned. "Oh, no!" The scum rag had romantically linked her with both the strangler and the detective in charge of the case, giving names. The trumped up scandal was a double edged sword—embarrassing to her and York, but good for *The Globe* because it rekindled interest in the strangler story.

"You'd better call Wylinski and smooth things over," Dory said.

"No way. This just proves his opinion of reporters."

"Don't be surprised when he comes storming into the office with fire in his eyes."

But he didn't come, and Jen was glad when Friday night finally rolled around. She left work early and escaped to her apartment.

While she showered, she listened to her favorite positive thinking tape. "Just get over it, and move on," the man ordered. Platitudes. But they helped—a little.

She dried off, sprayed on White Shoulders to pick up her spirits, and put on the old-fashioned dress she'd worn when she'd first met York. She'd known from the start that the dress wasn't her, never would be. Still, some tender part of herself wouldn't let her take off this poignant reminder that their love was impossible.

Funny, she knew he loved her. Too bad he hated her job. Her skill as a reporter was the one thing she could count on.

York, York. Tears welled in her eyes. So she loved him, and he loved her. But he didn't want her. She touched the bodice of the dress. He wanted a woman who would feel at ease in this lacey creation with its full skirt and tiny pearl buttons. *Forget him.* She groaned. As if she ever could.

Her door bell chimed, followed by annoying repeats. York? Had he come to chew her out for the tabloid article? Dammit, she wasn't about to take his flak for something that wasn't her fault.

A surge of adrenaline sent her stomping across the apartment. She swung open the door and stared into York's intense blue eyes. Her heart did a double skipping thing that made her head spin. She gasped for breath. He had a newspaper under his arm, but to her surprise there was no anger in his face.

The white and beige V-neck knit shirt he wore exposed a hint of dark chest hair and emphasized his broad shoulders. White jeans showed off his narrow hips and long legs to a mind-boggling advantage.

"Hi," was all he said, then stood there waiting.

He looked her up and down and gave a half smile, revealing a glimpse of a dimple. The stupid dress probably gave him the wrong idea. She tried to speak, but couldn't get the words past the constriction in her throat. The silence charged the atmosphere with ions that slammed against her whole being.

His imposing height and fit body with that iron-man stomach made her feel fragile and far too vulnerable. She cleared her throat. "What are you doing here?"

He just stood there looking at her. "I wonder," he said in a husky voice, "that is...got anything

sweet to eat?”

She blinked in surprise, then stepped back and gestured for him to enter. “Maybe.” Trying to hide the sly smile that stole across her lips, she whirled and headed for the kitchen. York followed and eased into a chair at the table, filling the room with his magnetism.

She put the coffee on, then with trembling hands removed the brownies from the freezer. She felt York’s gaze on her as she warmed them in the microwave. Chocolate wafted in the air.

When she placed a steaming square in front of him, he smiled. “Expecting me?”

No way would she admit that she’d made them hoping he’d come by. She joined him. “Is this visit about the case?”

“Nah.” York sipped his coffee. He held her gaze as though trying to figure something out. His eyes darkened. He took a deep breath and remained silent for several seconds. “I read your articles. Great stuff. You were meant to be a reporter.”

Meant to be a reporter, not his old-fashioned wife.

She wished she could’ve been both. Somewhere along the way, she’d even begun to consider ways to stay home long enough to start a family. There was always freelance work. But... “Coming from you that means a lot,” she said softly. She couldn’t tell him about the sleepless nights, the tears, how she’d thrown herself into her work like a drowning woman.

“I’m sorry you had to go through the aftermath alone. But I—” Pain flickered in his eyes. He covered her hand with his.

She should withdraw from his touch but it felt too good. Jen looked at him, wanting some sort of explanation for his disappearance, but knowing he owed her none. She shifted in her chair. “I was surprised to learn you’d taken leave.”

“My dad took a turn for the worse—”

Her hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, God, no!” In all her imaginings, this was never part of the scenario.

“It’s okay. He made it. But I couldn’t leave him or Mom as long as he was critical. I tried to call—”

“I’m sorry. If I’d known I would have come.”

“I know.” He picked up the newspaper he’d placed on the table. “Thought you might have missed something in here.”

He handed her the classified section. One of the ads was circled in red pen. *Wanted: Thoroughly Modern Woman, Jen Lyman. No others need apply.*

Hope flooded her heart. “But I thought—”

“Since the moment I set eyes on you, I knew you were the one.”

She touched the full skirt of her dress and gave it a swish. “This dress isn’t me, never will be.”

“We’ll discuss the dress later. Right now I need to tell you something before I lose my courage.”

“You? Lose your courage?”

He gripped her upper arms and gave her a very gentle shake. “Listen, will you? This is important stuff. I’ve learned to love your independence, your stubbornness.” He grinned. “Your brownies. And to appreciate your fierce loyalty. I didn’t want to. I thought I wanted a plastic woman who never existed.”

Her heart pounded. “But, you want me to give up my job?”

“I don’t want you to give up anything. Just add me to your life.”

“What about your stay-at-home wife?”

“We’ll work it out. Hire a housekeeper, a nanny. Anything you want. You do want children, don’t you?”

Her pulse fluttered in her throat. She nodded. She was afraid to believe her dreams were coming true.

He laughed, and she smiled at how happy he sounded. “Good,” he said. “We’ll make terrific kids together. Smart, loving kids.”

Jen stepped into his arms. They closed around her, solid and warm. She buried her face against the soft knit of his shirt and whispered under her breath, “I didn’t know it at first, but this is where I’ve always wanted to be.”

York’s hand brushed at a tear of joy that slid down her cheek. He lifted her chin, and she stared at him. His eyes riveted on her mouth. He lowered his head slowly, his heart thundering against her breast, matching her own wild heartbeat.

“Mmmm,” she murmured at the familiar touch of warm lips to warm lips. He tasted so good, like chocolate and coffee. Like coming home. She feasted on his tongue sliding slowly and deeply inside the hungry cavern of her mouth. He slid a hand between their bodies and began to slowly unbutton the tiny pearl buttons on the bodice of her dress.

He stopped kissing her and met her gaze with mischievous eyes. “Like you said, this dress isn’t you, so let’s take it off.”

She laughed and tugged his knit shirt up over his pectorals. He bent a little to help. They slipped away one another’s clothes, hands trembling with eagerness, their bodies, growing hotter with each caressing stroke. Her delicate, sensitive core tingled and grew moist in anticipation.

When they stood naked before each other, their breathing quickened to eager gasps. York swept her from her feet and headed for the bedroom.

Jen laughed. Never again would she wonder where she belonged. It was right here in his arms.

EPILOGUE

Six months later, her belly swollen with a symbol of their love, Jen smiled as she read about herself in the morning edition. Jen Lyman-Wylinski, *The Globe's* own star reporter took the city by storm with her Pulitzer prize winning Boston Strangler-Toxic Waste story, documenting corruption and collusion between the mayor's assistant, Diego Zombolas, the Director Of Refuse, Tim Tormont, and wealthy businessman, Finstead Alexander Coble.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynde holds a Masters degree from the University of California and is the author of fifteen novels and several novellas, including MIDNIGHT DESTINY with Amira Press. Her novels are mostly romantic intrigues with several paranormal and fantasy intrigues. Publishing credits include: three 75,000 word E-books; four anthologies; and a cowboy trilogy with Triskelion Publishing. Has a 4th book coming out with Amira Press soon. Release date to be announced. She is presently working on a romantic intrigue that promises to be an intense thriller. Her passions are her family and writing. She is an avid dancer, skater, and walker. And she wishes you rainbows in your life.